

Mennonite Machiavelli?

Ross Thomas Bender

1929-2011

An appreciation by Ross Lynn Bender

Ross T. Bender was many things in his life – teacher in a one-room schoolhouse, pastor, principal of a Mennonite high school, professor, scholar, marriage-counselor, dean of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, moderator of the Mennonite church, president of Mennonite World Conference, husband and father. I used to joke with him that he was sort of the Mennonite Machiavelli of his generation, since he understood how things worked -- all the ins and outs of Mennonite institutions, power structures, and how to manipulate them – for good ends, of course. He also knew where all the bodies were buried.

Dad had an excellent sense of humor, right up to the end. He thought about my suggestion, then decided that rather than the “Mennonite Machiavelli” he would rather be known as “a humble Mennonite churchman.”

Ross Thomas Bender, humble Mennonite churchman, was born in an Amish Mennonite farming community in southwest Ontario in 1929. His parents were Christian and Katie Bender, fourth-generation descendants of Jacob and Magdalena Bender who had emigrated from Germany around 1830. The Amish Mennonites of Ontario were a small community who did not unite with the mainstream Mennonites until 1960 – in this they were much more conservative than

Amish Mennonite communities in the United States, who merged with the Mennonite church in the early twentieth century. As a boy, Dad sat through sermons in High German, and the community preserved their Pennsylvania Dutch through his generation.

Ross was the first in his family to attend high school. He early on decided he wanted to be a teacher rather than a farmer, and after high school took some training in teachers' college. His first assignment was in a one-room schoolhouse in Hickson. He also decided very early on that he wanted to marry Ruth Eileen Steinmann, over on another Amish Mennonite farm in New Hamburg. Ruth's father, Abe, had some doubts about the prospective son-in-law, doubting that he would ever make a good farmer and provider. According to my Steinmann uncles, he was heard to observe about Ross – "That young man would rather sit in the cool shade of a tree and read a book all day instead of doing some hard work."

My mother, Ruth, succumbed to his charms at the tender age of 19. She also was the first in her family to attend high school, and must have been swept away by the sophisticated and articulate young schoolteacher. They were married on December 22, 1950. At that time it was common for Amish Mennonite couples to be married around Christmastime, when the farms were deep in snow and all the harvesting had been done.

Feeling the itch for higher education, Ross and Ruth went south to Goshen College in the early fifties, where he earned a BA and a BD at the Goshen Biblical Seminary. They lived in a basement apartment in Howell House on Eighth Street, where Ruth tended their two children. According to Mother's account, Ross came home from seminary one day all excited by the lectures of John W. Miller on the "Simple Life." Mother's response was: "If John W. Miller wants to live the simple life, he can let us live in his big house on Eighth Street, and he can move

into our basement apartment.” One of Mom’s many virtues was that she provided a practical balance to some of Dad’s wilder enthusiasms.

Moving back to Canada, Ross began teaching at the new Rockway Mennonite High School, where he soon became principal. He also served as part-time pastor at Erb Street Mennonite Church with J.B. Martin, a venerable old man with a long white beard. His passion for higher education led Ross to spend long summer days driving around the farms in rural Ontario canvassing for students, trying to persuade doubtful Amish Mennonites that Mennonite high school was a good thing, and not a source of evil, pride and corruption. In his history of Rockway titled *Lead Us On*, Sam Steiner called the chapter on Ross’ tenure “The Golden Years.”

At Goshen, Ross had studied under Harold S. Bender, who, it is very important to note, was NO relation. After Ross succeeded Harold as dean of the seminary, people assumed that the father had passed on the role to his son, as was so common in the nepotistic culture of Goshen. But in fact Harold S. was from a line of American Benders, who had assimilated and become much more sophisticated than the Benders who went straight from Germany to Canada to be humble farmers.

At any rate, Harold S. was a talent spotter, and had his eye on Ross as either a future college or seminary professor. Harold S. Bender, sometimes known as “The Mennonite Pope” of his generation, had a way of determining his disciples’ futures for them. He wanted Dad to go to some Baptist seminary in Louisville, Kentucky for further theological education. Dad thought this over for awhile, decided “On the whole, I’d rather go to Yale”, and so he did, as a Rockefeller and Lilly Fellow.

So Ross and Ruth moved their family, which now comprised four children, south to the “Excited States”, as one of my uncles called it, just as the exciting sixties were getting underway. Dad completed his Ph.D. in religion at Yale in 1962, and the commencement speaker was President John F. Kennedy. The joke at Yale was that it marked the first time ever that they had invited a Harvard man to speak. Of course the next year JFK was shot, and the decade of the sixties grew more and more violent, with wars and assassinations and riots. It often occurred to me that it was not a very auspicious time to move a Canadian Amish-Mennonite family down to the Excited States. And it has often occurred to me that Dad must have had some strange sort of sense of mission, of bringing civilization to a barbarous empire.

So the family moved to Goshen, and Ross took up a teaching position at Goshen Biblical Seminary. The following year he was assigned to be the first joint Dean of what was to become known as the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. “Joint Dean” referred to the fact that he was the Dean of both the Old Mennonite Goshen Biblical Seminary and the General Conference Mennonite Biblical Seminary. In many ways that assignment was the defining mission of Ross’ life – the work of reconciling two schismatic factions of the Mennonite church, and helping to heal a rift that was a century old.

The Mennonite Biblical Seminary had been located in Chicago, and it was only after extremely difficult negotiations that the General Conference agreed to move their campus to Elkhart. Erland Waltner, President of MBS, was a powerful mover in this first step toward reconciliation. It may seem odd in retrospect that the two seminaries would not simply unite on the Goshen campus. But it is testimony to the bad blood between the two denominations that this did not happen. In part it was because of some extremely strong antipathies to the Mennonite Pope, Harold S. Bender, who was viewed as something of a dictator by the General Conference

Mennonites. In part the bad feelings among the two groups went back to a painful time when Goshen College had been shut down by a fundamentalist wing of the Mennonite Church in the 1920s.

At any rate, after a few years when students commuted between the two seminary campuses in Elkhart and Goshen, the two were united on the Elkhart campus as Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. Ross was the dean, while the two denominations each appointed a separate president.

One of Ross's first major initiatives was called the "Dean's Seminar." Inspired by a contemporary initiative at Yale to reshape curriculum, the Seminar comprised three professors from Goshen Seminary – J.C. Wenger, Millard Lind, and John Howard Yoder – and three from MBS – C.J. Dyck, Leland Harder, and Bill Klassen. The purpose was to examine and reform the seminary program in light of the revolutionary changes taking place in American society and church life, and, as a sort of byproduct, to integrate the curricula of the General Conference and Old Mennonite schools. Ross was a relatively young man at the time, in his mid-thirties, and had the unenviable task of contending with older, more sophisticated scholars with enormous egos. One of these in particular, John Howard Yoder, a rich kid, bully boy and sexual predator, posed interpersonal and administrative problems for Ross and the seminary for many years.

A major component of the Seminar was a three-month study trip to Africa and Asia labeled "Contacting Younger Churches." Ross secured a Lilly Grant for the project, which was to reach out to the Mennonite churches in Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Kenya and Ghana, some of which were very new, only decades old. A major task was to listen to what these churches were asking for in terms of leadership education, and to help the Elkhart seminary to

provide this. The result of this mission was Ross' book *The People of God: A Mennonite Interpretation of the Free Church Tradition*, and a major reform of the seminary curriculum. Also, more foreign Mennonite students were encouraged to study at AMBS. Robert Ramseyer, a missionary anthropologist who had been living in a small hut up in the mountains of southern Japan, was invited to develop a missions study center at the seminary.

From the beginning of his career, Ross' scholarship was deeply practical. His Yale dissertation was titled "The Contemporary Family in Christian Nurture: A Theological Interpretation." On sabbatical at the University of Pennsylvania 1970-71, he studied in the Division of Psychiatry in the School of Medicine and received training at the Marriage Council of Philadelphia, becoming a licensed family therapist.

In a sabbatical a decade later in Geneva, Switzerland, he attended lectures on the work of Jean Piaget and also served as an associate in the Office of Family Education at the World Council of Churches. He worked with the director, Masamba Ma Mpolo, on an international project, "Family Power." Ross delivered the Conrad Grebel Lecture of 1981, which was later published as *Christians in Families: Genesis and Exodus*.

Another of Ross' assignments was as Moderator of the Mennonite Church. The Mennonite Assembly at Bethlehem, PA, in 1983, was the first such meeting which both the General Conference and the Old Mennonites attended. At the initial session, he and the General Conference moderator, Jake Tilitsky, took the symbolic step of putting down large stones on the stage, to symbolize the foundations for a joint Mennonite church. In another symbolic action, they moved their microphones from the edges of the stage to meet in the middle. At that

Assembly Ross also predicted that the Mennonite Church would have a female moderator by the year 2000.

The Assembly was also historic in that it addressed a serious potential rift in the Old Mennonite church. George Brunk II, dean of the Eastern Mennonite Seminary, had written an inflammatory pamphlet titled “A Trumpet Sound: A Crisis Among Mennonites on the Doctrine of Christ” accusing Mennonite professors at Goshen College and elsewhere of liberalism and heresy. This was one occasion where Dad was at his Machiavellian best. As he told me later, Brunk, who was a very large person with a booming voice, had wanted to address the entire assembly in the main arena. Dad arranged for his address to be moved to a more intimate venue. The result in part was tearful hugs and partial reconciliation between Brunk and some of the accused parties. As they were leaving the meeting, Dad reported, Brunk observed gruffly that he felt like he had been in a courtroom. Dad’s response was, “No, it felt like we were in church.”

Ross loved the church, and loved to tinker with its institutional framework. Another of his projects was the formation of the Congregational Board of Ministries, which he served as executive secretary from 1972-74. After retiring from 15 years as Dean, he served for several years in the 1990s as Director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies at AMBS. (I used to joke with him that it should be called the Institute for the Study of Mennonite Institutions.)

In 1984 Ross took a leave of absence from the seminary to pastor a relatively young church, Glennon Heights of Lakewood, Colorado, which had been planted by First Mennonite of Denver in 1962. His leave from AMBS stretched out for five years. One of the church’s initiatives during that time was to invite an Evangelical Formosan church to share their building and children’s Sunday school. At the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France in 1984, Ross was

elected to the supreme leadership post in the institutional Mennonite church, that of President of MWC.

Serving as MWC President involved a good bit of travel around the world, travel in which Mother could also take part and which she enjoyed greatly. Mother, by the way, was making a career for herself as a reference librarian for a law firm in Denver. After raising five children, this farm girl and child bride had gone back to college, receiving a BA at Goshen, and then to graduate school, earning a Master's degree in library science. The period from 1984-1989 in Colorado was a happy time for her, with all the children out of the house, grandchildren beginning to arrive, and her professional career blossoming.

In addition, it was her opportunity to see the world, attending MWC meetings in Taiwan and Paraguay. One time she traveled down to Paraguay by herself to join Dad, who was in Asuncion at a meeting. Dad told me later, "I was so proud of her for flying down by herself. She walked into the church while I was preaching, and I went down the aisle and gave her a big hug." In 1988 they went together to Moscow for the millennium of Christianity celebrations.

The twelfth Mennonite World Conference in Winnipeg in 1990, over which Ross presided, was a big and strenuous moment for him. He preached the opening sermon, but later in the week began experiencing chest pains. Saturday night he was taken to the emergency room. I remember sitting there with him while he lay on the gurney in the hallway, wondering if this was goodbye. Marlin Miller, who became the first joint president of AMBS that year, came and sat with us. Eventually he was flown to the Mayo clinic where he had quadruple bypass surgery. It just happened that he had a cousin, Arthur Kennel, who was a cardiologist there. The bypass served him well, and he lived for 21 more years.

One of Ross' actions during his tenure as MWC president was hiring Larry Miller as executive secretary. Larry was living in France, and so for the first time in recent memory MWC had an executive secretary based outside of North America. Larry was Marlin's younger brother, and I often wondered whether it was Dad's esteem for Marlin that led him to make this choice, the only hint of nepotism in his career. Marlin had been president of GBS, but in 1990 the Associated Seminaries finally took the big step of appointing a joint president as well as a joint Dean. It was another of those tiny steps of cooperation between the two denominations that led to the final great leap of official union in 2002.

In his final years at the seminary, Ross worked on a number of ecumenical projects, including one with the Baptists and one with the Reformed. The latter project resulted in a 1991 book, co-edited with Alan Sell, titled *Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions*. In 1997 the Institute for Mennonite Studies published a collection of Ross' work titled *Education for Peoplehood: Essays on the Teaching Ministry of the Church*.

Ross retired from AMBS as Dean Emeritus in 1996, having served a total of 26 years, 15 of them as Dean. The following year my mother died of cancer, at the age of 67. She came from a long-lived family, her mother having lived almost to her hundredth birthday, and we had all expected that she would outlive Dad. In addition to heart trouble, Dad had accumulated a host of ills, including diabetes and Parkinson's. His last publication, which my sister Lenore helped him to edit, was *Tending and Mending the Creation: My Experience with Parkinson Disease* (Pandora Press).

The thriller film titled *Witness* starring Harrison Ford premiered in 1985. At the beginning of the movie a wide-eyed young Amish boy walks into the 30th St train station in Philadelphia, looking

with amazement at the strange people milling about. (Of course, he also witnesses a murder in the men's room.) Dad used to tell me that he often felt like that little Amish boy, coming off the farm in a sheltered German-speaking community and seeing all the wicked English. Both Mom and Dad were the first in their families to go to high school. They were also the only ones among their siblings to leave the home community and venture down to live in the United States. In many ways Ross was an outsider, dealing with strangers in a strange land his whole life. Perhaps that gave him special insights into how American church institutions functioned. If not a Mennonite Machiavelli, he was certainly an accomplished and skillful churchman.

Ross Lynn Bender

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