

# LEADERSHIP CHANGES IN THE (AMISH) MENNONITE COMMUNITY IN ONTARIO FROM THE MID TO THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY -- THE EAST ZORRA EXPERIENCE

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## The Way it Was

As far back as people's memories allowed them to go, leaders in the Amish Mennonite constituency in Ontario had been chosen from within the congregation. When a member of the existing leadership died or became incapacitated, the elderly or remaining leader(s) would request that additional leaders be chosen to assist or replace them. Even before the organization of the Conference, congregations were likely to seek the assistance of leaders of other congregations in the ordination process. After the organization of Conference in the early 1920s, Conference Executive members were those called on. All members of the Conference Executive were ordained, although they were not all bishops.

Leaders were chosen by vote of members of the congregation. By the twentieth century the use of the lot in choosing among those who received a substantial number of votes was considered the only acceptable way to make the final selection. This may not always have been so. Several manuscript copies of "Minister's Manuals" found their way across the Atlantic and none of them mention the use of the lot. They simply state that the one receiving the highest vote was to be given the charge.(1)

The ordained leadership in a congregation consisted of deacons, ministers and a bishop. Although there was probably no such rule, it had also become customary to ordain new leaders as deacons. When ministers were needed, the deacons would be given the ministerial charge. In this case the lot would not be used. A bishop would be chosen from among ministers -- by lot unless there was only one candidate. In East Zorra, Jacob M. Bender replaced his father-in-law Joseph Ruby by acclamation in 1887. This was likely accomplished by a congregational vote.

The accepted procedure during the first half of the twentieth century for ordaining congregational leaders was for the leaders to announce the need, ask the congregation to be in prayer about the matter, and set a time for votes to be taken. The congregation would meet (in the meetinghouse after the early 1880s) on the date set for the vote. Amish Mennonite meetinghouses had a Kammerli, a small room behind the pulpit in which the ministers would meet for consultation every Sunday morning and on any other occasion such as the one being discussed here. The leaders responsible for conducting the ordination process would assemble in the Kammerli. Persons from the congregation would go into the Kammerli one by one and give their vote, which a designated leader would record. All members in good standing were eligible to vote, but young people and women generally did not do so. In East Zorra a few women did exercise their right in this matter. In other congregations they had neglected to use their right for so long that in some cases it was forgotten they had it.

Generally several men received a substantial number of votes, and these would be considered eligible to be put into the lot. It was understood that the leaders in charge of the ordination had the right to decide which ones had

enough votes to be considered for the lot and which ones did not. Their decision, however, was not always without its problems. If they hesitated to eliminate those with few votes, they ran the risk that the lot would fall on a person who may have had only one or two votes. In that case he was far from being the congregation's choice. If they eliminated some persons, it may cause hard feelings. Although the voting was to be confidential, information sometimes had a way of leaking out.

Once it was decided who would be in the lot, there were a few different ways to proceed. It was likely that the assembled congregation would be informed as to who was in the lot. Those persons might be summoned into the Kammerli, one by one, and interviewed. As part of their baptismal vows, Amish Mennonite boys were asked to be willing to accept leadership in the congregation if called. The candidates would now be expected to express that willingness again. Those who were not very willing could only hope that God would deliver them by eliminating them through the lot.

Frequently, the ceremony of the lot and ordination proceeded immediately after the above scenario. As many hymn books (these would be identical) as there were persons in the lot would be collected and the slip of paper containing the wording "The Lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord" (KJV Prov. 16:33) (or something similar) was inserted into one of the books (or more if more than one new leader was to be chosen). Then the books were schuffled, put on a table at the front of the assembly room and schuffled again by another person. The candidates were seated on the front bench across from the table with the books. After appropriate remarks and prayer, there was silence while each man decided when and which book to choose. When all the books had been picked up, the presiding bishop proceeded to examine each book for the slip of paper until he found it, indicating which one had been chosen. In large congregations such as East Zorra, there were frequently several ordinations at the same time.

Once the lot had decreed the final selection, the wife was called to join her husband while he was given the charge by the presiding bishop. Although she was not given a special charge, it was understood that she support her husband and that she had a part in his ministry -- although an unspoken one. Some women were better able than others to fulfill these expectations. Women, of course, were not voted for in the mid-twentieth century.

#### The Amish Mennonite Church in 1950

The Amish Mennonites, along with everyone else in the western world were somewhat affected by World War II. Although the change from German to English had begun, it was probably accelerated by the unpopularity of anything German at that time. Several young men had experienced the Alternative Service work camps where they had met both other conscientious objectors and the "world" beyond the borders of their rather closely-knit communities.

Evangelical influences had been resisted in the Amish Mennonite churches since before the turn of the century, but in the 1940s they were embraced by a large number of people. To claim a "conversion experience" became acceptable, although the Amish probably never had as lively testimony meetings as did other denominations. It did not seem to be quite proper to

"brag" about one's conversion even if God was supposed to be receiving the glory.

Nelson and Ada Litwiller and Amos and Edna Swartzentruber had been missionaries in Argentina since the 1920s. Although their furloughs were

infrequent, they had a powerful influence on the churches when they returned with their stories, calling people to look beyond themselves, and the young to prepare themselves for missionary service.

A number of young people were making the "sacrifice" to seek higher education rather than embarking on a business career. Some of the leaders in the congregations were reading the "handwriting on the wall." They sensed that a better educated constituency was on the horizon. Some were already receiving theological training -- most of them with foreign missionary service in mind. Congregational and conference leaders, however, were also eyeing those students as possible leaders for the congregations at home.

In 1950, the East Zorra Amish Mennonite congregation had three places of worship -- East Zorra on the 16th Line, Cassel on the 17th Line, and Tavistock in the town. Dan Wagler was the minister and Andrew Zehr the deacon at East Zorra. Joel Schwartzentruber was the minister and Daniel Zehr the deacon at Cassel. David Schwartzentruber was the minister at Tavistock. Rudy Brenneman had been ordained deacon but had moved to Kitchener. Henry Yantzi, as bishop, served alternately at all the locations. Marriages, baptisms and communion were administered only by the bishop.

#### Leadership Changes

Orland Gingerich (married to Agnes Roth) from the Wilmot congregation (Steinmann and St. Agatha) attended Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and Goshen Biblical Seminary in Goshen, Indiana. It was their intent to offer themselves for missionary service. By the time of Orland's graduation, the ministerial leadership, headed by Bishop Moses Jantzi, asked Orland whether he would be willing to serve in his home congregation if approved by the congregation. The congregation was given the option of using the traditional method (vote and lot) or ordain both Elmer Schwartzentruber, who was deacon and Orland to the ministry. The congregation chose the latter option and Elmer and Orland were ordained as ministers in 1951. Elmer had gone through the lot at the time of his ordination as deacon. In 1954, Orland was selected by lot for the office of bishop.

During this same decade, Herbert Schultz, a single young man from the Poole congregation, decided to enter Bible training at Eastern Mennonite College. Conference recommended that he be ordained with the understanding that he would return to minister at Poole. This idea met with some opposition; so Herb spent one year at school until the disagreements in the congregation were ironed out. He was ordained in April of 1955 and then completed his degree. Not only did the Poole congregation side-step the traditional procedure, but they ordained an unmarried man. The scriptural injunction that a minister should be the "husband of one wife" was understood to mean that he should be married. Herb married Shirley Schultz from the Poole congregation in 1959.

Ross Bender from the Cassel congregation had attended high school in Tavistock, married Ruth Steinmann in 1950, and began teaching school. They lived at Hickson, a hamlet southwest of Tavistock and attended the newly-established branch congregation in Tavistock. A new meetinghouse built at the southwest corner of town was dedicated in July, 1950. Ross and Ruth were active in the congregation with Ross serving as Sunday school superintendent. Ross entered Goshen College in the fall of 1953 and graduated from Goshen Bible Seminary in the spring of 1956. Ross had already been asked in the spring of 1955 by the Rockway Mennonite School Board to come to Rockway following his graduation.

By this time David Schwartzentruber was feeling the need for assistance in the leadership of the congregation at Tavistock. Henry Yantzi served at East Zorra and Cassel one Sunday and Tavistock two Sundays each month, but that left Dave alone two Sundays of each month. Amish Mennonite ministers were used to having more than one person taking part in the worship service, although they would not likely have considered asking for the assistance of a lay person except as song leader.

How widely Henry and Dave consulted with other ministers in the East Zorra churches or with Conference is not known. Knowing that Ross who had previously served in the congregation was returning to Ontario, and with the experience of the Steinmann congregation in calling Orland Gingerich and that of the ordination of Herbert Schultz at Poole without the usual procedure of voting for candidates and making the final selection by lot, Henry and Dave decided to make a proposal to the congregation that Ross be considered for ordination to the ministry at Tavistock.

When Henry presented the proposal to the congregation for their consideration, Lloyd Zehr got up asking whether the congregation was not having any say in this matter. Henry responded that the congregation's response was being solicited -- that was the intent of the presentation of the proposal. The ensuing discussion revealed that the proposal would not carry without a significant dissenting group, with Lloyd Zehr as their spokesman.

Still wishing to proceed with calling an additional leader for the Tavistock congregation, it was decided at a meeting of Conference Executive in consultation with the ministers at East Zorra that persons out of any of the three East Zorra congregations could be voted for but that Tavistock was to have the priority in voting. Votes were to be given orally to the bishop in charge in a private room. (2)

The result of that vote was that both Ross Bender, two others, and Lloyd Zehr received sufficient votes to be candidates for the lot. Ross declined to go through the lot. Conference disqualified Lloyd Zehr because his number of votes was considerably lower than Ross's and two other candidates and because of his critical attitude toward Conference. Due to the strained relations within the congregation, the process to select an additional leader for Tavistock was halted indefinitely.

Ross took a pastoral assistant assignment at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church during the summer. He had been engaged to teach at Rockway Mennonite School, but when Harold Groh resigned as principal, Ross was asked to fill that position in the fall of 1956.

The Rockway Board was happy with Ross's work, but was interested in having him ordained. It would have added to his "status" in the Conference and in

his contacts with congregations. (At that time Conference was led by ordained men -- not lay persons.) Since Ross was from the Amish Mennonite Conference, the Board approached that Conference whether it would be interested in ordaining him. The Ontario Amish Mennonite Conference executive discussed this question in the spring of 1958. They interviewed Ross, who expressed his willingness "accept what the Lord has for me." It was decided to ordain Ross as a "minister at large" in the Conference. The ordination took place on May 18, 1958, at the Steinmann (Amish) Mennonite Church. Ephraim Gingerich was in charge of the ordination, and Harold S. Bender, dean of the Seminary in Goshen, brought the message. (3) Early in 1958, the Seminary had also issued an invitation to Ross to join the seminary faculty and thus had considerable interest in having Ross ordained. After the ordination, Ross served as assistant to J. B. Martin in the ministry at Erb Street Mennonite Church.

At the same time, Joel Schwartzentruber was requesting ministerial help at Cassel. Although Ronald Zehr had attended Ontario Mennonite Bible School and his wife, Ruth Bender, was a school teacher, that he be asked to serve without the traditional procedure was not considered as an option. Votes were taken, and both Ronald and his older brother Vernon were voted for. The lot fell on Vernon, who was ordained in July, 1958.

Shortly after, Dan Wagler requested additional leadership at East Zorra, but also made it clear that he was not in favour of educated leaders. At that time Dale Schumm from the East Zorra congregation was in seminary in Goshen. How to proceed? Obviously, Dan would not accept any other procedure except a general vote followed by the use of the lot. Votes were taken, and Dale was among the candidates.

Dale and his wife Laura (Bauman) had already been accepted by the Mennonite Board of Missions and had just been informed that Ghana, West Africa, would be their field of labour. Orland Gingerich called Dale by telephone informing him of the proceedings at East Zorra, asking whether he would come and go through the lot. It took some time, counselling, and prayer, but Dale decided that he would accept the lot as a means of deciding the location of his ministry. He returned to East Zorra but requested that if the lot fell on him, the ordination would be postponed until Laura could be present. She was eight months pregnant and unable to travel that distance. The lot did fall on Dale, and he was ordained in June, 1960.

Efforts had been made to accommodate both the traditional methods of choosing leaders and a trained leadership, but change had set in and the old ways would give way.

The East Zorra congregation built another meetinghouse near New Hamburg in 1964. At that time, the East Zorra congregation was divided into autonomous congregations, and Henry Yantzi became the pastor stationed at the new congregation, named Hillcrest. Ministers were granted licences to perform marriages, and the office of bishop fell into disuse. Deacons were no longer ordained and were replaced by elected elders. Also at this time, the conference dropped the use of the term "Amish" and became the Western Ontario Mennonite Conference.

Friction between Dale and Dan at East Zorra resulted in granting Dale a three-year leave of absence. Dale and Laura went to India under the Mennonite Board of Missions. During that time Dale resigned from the ministry at East Zorra, and Dale and Laura spent another term in India. Dan continued as a

visitation minister at East Zorra, but was no longer to preach. Newton Gingrich, a minister in the Mennonite Conference of Ontario, was called to take ministerial leadership of the East Zorra congregation in 1966.

Not happy with the turn of events at East Zorra, Dan Wagler and a number of families established the Maple Grove congregation in 1969. They purchased the former S.S.No. 7 schoolhouse on the 17th Line, East Zorra, for their place of meeting.

At Tavistock, Peter Erb was licensed and served one year (1966-7). In 1968, Wilmer Martin, ordained in Pennsylvania, was called to the pastorate in Tavistock.

In East Zorra, both before and after the separation of the congregations, there was a pool of leadership which served as a team for consultation and decision-making. Even in their case, it was desirable to have designated conference leadership with whom to confer, but in the case of small autonomous congregations with only one pastor, it would be crucial. Orland Gingerich was appointed ministerial superintendent in the Western Ontario Mennonite Conference.

Not only were there changes in calling leaders who had Biblical and seminary training, but the methods of calling them also changed. The ordinations (or attempted ordinations) at Tavistock, East Zorra and Cassel had all used the method of oral voting with the final selection made by lot. Conference and congregational consultations followed by secret ballot voting replaced the old methods. The formation of church councils also aided considerably in the congregational decision-making process -- both in leadership questions as well as the carrying out of congregational programs.

The two conferences -- Mennonite Conference of Ontario (and later Quebec) and Western Ontario Mennonite Conference -- jointly called Ralph Lebold to the position of Conference Minister in 1974. With the uniting of these two conferences with the United Mennonite Conference in 1986/7, the office of conference minister was continued and supported by a Leadership Commission.

Thus, in the latter half of the 20th century, the changes from the traditional to the contemporary leadership in the Mennonite churches have been substantial. The stress during the initial period of change was considerable, sometimes causing a great deal of pain for those directly involved.

#### Notes:

1) A transcription and translation (made by Mattie and Elmer Schwartzentruber) of a copy made by Joseph Ruby in 1854 is in the collection at the Mennonite Archives, Conrad Grebel College. A translation of another copy brought to the United States was printed as "An Amish Church Discipline of 1779" in Mennonite Quarterly Review, 11 (1937) pp. 165-68.

2) Conference minute in 1956 Minute Book (Conrad Grebel College Archives: Collection IV-1.1.A Western Ont. Mennonite Conference Minutes of Annual Conf.)

3) Plans for the ordination appeared in the Minutes of Conference (see Note #2) and as reported by Ross Bender in a letter to the author, [February 20, 2001]

Accompanying Materials Relevant to this study:

Exhibit A: Notes of Ontario Amish Mennonite Conference Minutes

Exhibit B: Response of Orland Gingerich on the subject of this study.

Exhibit C: Correspondence with Ross Bender on the subject of this study.

Exhibit D: Correspondence with Dale Schumm on the subject of this study.

Exhibit E: Tape or writing from Herbert Schultz (to be secured)

Not to be reproduced Lorraine Roth Waterloo, Ontario August, 2001

#### EXHIBIT A

Notes on some Amish Mennonite Conference Executive Minutes

The Minute Books are found in the Mennonite Archives at Conrad Grebel College in the following Collection: IV-1.1.A Western Ont. Mennonite Conference Minutes of Annual Conf.

(The books are labelled according to year, but the pages are not numbered. Minutes concerning Ross's ordination, which took place in 1958, were recorded in both 1956, 1957 and 1958 books)

From 1956 Book:

discussion concerning ordaining a minister for the Tavistock congregation (meeting at E.Z. Mar 9, 1956 -- Conference executive and ministers of E.Z.

recommendations: 1. Minister to serve at Tavistock  
2. Privilege given to vote on persons out of 3 congregations  
3. Tavistock cong. To have priority in voting  
4. Oral vote to be given to bishop in charge in private room

Also in the 1956 Book: Meeting on Mar. 8, 1958: -- moved and carried to ordain Ross Bender in our (Am. M.) Conference Apr. 29/58 meeting of bishops and Conf. exec at Secretary's home [Elmer Schwartzentruber]

-- following Mar meeting called Ross

-- Ross -- "willing to accept what Lord has for me"

-- made it clear to E.Z.

-- wants it to be made clear to every church

-- moved to have ordination May 18 -- in charge of Ephraim Gingerich  
-- message by H.S. Bender  
-- moved that ordination be held at Wilmot (Steinmann) by the Conference to  
be a minister at large  
-- several persons made comments: "We feel we  
made a mistake"

"have to begin from where we made the blunder"

"people are afraid of a scheme"

From 1957 Book:

Page toward end of book records Mar. 8, 1958 Conference Body meeting  
at Steinmann church  
-- regarding a request and desire from Ont. Mennonite Conf. to have Bro.  
Ross Bender ordained to the ministry  
-- moved & carried that Ross B. be ordained in A.M. Conf as minister at large  
-- motion that bishops and conf. exec. interview and arrange at their  
discretion  
-- met again Mar. 22

Ross had part in June Conference 1958: "The Great Commission in Light of  
His Coming: Urgency"

From 1958/59 Book:

Conference Body meeting Mar. 8, 1958 concerning request to have Ross  
Bender ordained to ministry  
-- to enable him to more effectively carry out his responsibilities at  
Rockway Mennonite School  
-- no ministerial responsibilities in any particular  
congregation  
-- planned for May 18, 1958 at 3 p.m.

Additional Comments on the Question of Ordinations of persons not designated  
for specific congregations -- particularly as it related to Ross Bender.

It might be noted that the ordination of Ross Bender was of great interest to  
the Goshen Biblical Seminary Board. They had contacted him early in 1958  
concerning joining the faculty at the seminary. It was a concern of the  
Seminary Board to engage ordained persons (preferably with some pastoral  
experience) to teach theological students who were aspiring to become  
pastors. This had been a rather serious problem in Harold S. Bender's case.  
He served for a number of years before finally being ordained. This matter is  
discussed at length in Albert N. Keim's biography, Harold S. Bender, 1897-  
1962.

The problem was the Mennonite (not only Amish Mennonite) custom to ordain  
persons by vote and lot for a specific congregation. Seminaries, of course,  
were not in the Mennonite tradition either. Goshen College and its Board  
could create a "Bible Department" and even a "Seminary," but ordination was  
the prerogative of the local church not an educational institution. To obtain  
ordination for H. S. Bender had required delicate diplomacy -- "scheming"

perhaps! To have Ross Bender join the faculty at the Seminary as an ordained person would eliminate one hurdle that the Board would not need to overcome.

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