

## **Ross Bender, a Partner on the Way**

### **Bill Klassen**

I met Ross Bender first probably the year that he graduated from Goshen College in 1954, when I graduated from Seminary. I have no memories of that. When I had already been appointed at the seminary in Elkhart, he came as Dean and that is the most intense and for me enriching encounters with him; after he had been appointed Dean of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, an extremely important position for the future of that institution.

There had, of course, been discussion, mostly fuelled by Frank Epp in The Canadian Mennonite on whether the first joint Dean would be GC or Old Mennonite, but I was never directly a part of that for those decisions were not important on my horizon.

My dealings with Ross became important after I had spent some several years teaching at Elkhart and had taken a leave of absence at the Menninger Clinic to improve my skills as a counsellor at the Seminary and write a book on forgiveness and returned for about a year and a half before I accepted an invitation at New York Theological Seminary on an interim basis. This decision was fully discussed with Erland Waltner and a few other colleagues and although the year and a half that we spent living in Princeton, New Jersey, while I taught in New York was very enriching for our family and personally, it was never, in my judgment, seen as an attempt to leave Elkhart for anything but a short period of time. It was also felt that I might be able to make some contribution to the New York Theological Seminary in its attempts to stay alive.

Many people in the Mennonite family had benefited from that school and felt that it might be appropriate for us to help them as they had helped the Mennonite Church.

I had been asked by New York Seminary to make a student recruitment trip one year in March, in 1963 (?), and in that connection was making a trip through Ohio to Malone college and a few other places. Ross and I met, had dinner, and had an open discussion about what I felt about the future of the Seminary and as well as his vision for the School. He agreed to that meeting and picked up the various strands of correspondence between myself and Erland. We had a delightful dinner at some place in Ohio.

I have always been grateful to Ross for the interest that he showed in my return to Elkhart

and his commitment to my coming back and being part of the team here.

As I recall, there was some fairly urgent pressure to stay in New York, and from the standpoint of our family, the living arrangements in Princeton were comfortable and did not add to the pressure of returning. We did have a plot of ground on County Road nine where we hoped to build a house when we returned. It was also a time when I was able to finish the book on The Forgiving Community, which was the outcome of my year at Menningers in 1961-62.

Moreover, I was enjoying very much my involvement in the Mennonite Mental health movement as a board member of MMHS, and preparing the Marpeck book for publication, and translating Marpeck. While in New York, I had also begun the enormous task of translating Marpeck into English, which I did on the train in the mornings when I went to New York and also when I returned in the evening. My main interests continued to be teach the New Testament and carry out research, even as I taught courses in New Testament at New York. The John F. Funk Lectureship Committee had also asked me to prepare a lecture drawing together the insights that had been gained at Menningers with my own biblical studies.

In retrospect, that year at Menningers had been very important to me and was continuing to grow in importance. The encounter with the world of psychiatry in the persons of Karl Menninger, Paul Pruyser and pastoral clinical training in the persons of Henry Nouwen and Seward Hiltner, as well as with Tom Klink, my immediate supervisor at Menningers is one of those extremely important experiences in my life. It opened up some very deep psychological problems, and especially led to a period of profound depression, which led to some two decades of psychological counselling, which began in Menningers, although with not very helpful results in part because my analyst committed suicide a few weeks after our joint work began. That psychiatric counselling continued when we moved back to Elkhart from Menningers and at that time I became an outpatient at Oaklawn for a number of years.

All of this made it easier for me to be quite at ease with Ross and I found his manner of administration, his openness to discussion of many problems, and in every way I was attracted to the idea of working with him as my Dean.

Ross's openness to my slightly scattered agenda was appreciated and is appreciated to this day. I have always found Ross easy to talk with and even though as my immediate superior there were many things, of course, that I did not share with him (for that I had a fine therapist at Oaklawn) and which may have seemed at times as if I was covering up or keeping secrets from

him, I valued his partnership, his hearty laugh rings in my ears still, especially in the Dean's Seminar.

But before we talk about that, I want to say how much that evening with Ross and the dinner together meant to me in getting a bearing on the developments in Elkhart.

Dean Harold Bender, by now had been dead some time and the shape of what was happening at Elkhart was beginning to become clear. I had never been part of Dean Harold Bender's team, even though I taught beginning Greek the first year I came back from Princeton at Goshen Seminary, and even though I taught occasionally a course in the Bible Department at Goshen College. With Ross things were different, very different. A new day was coming and Ross had no apparent nervousness about being able to be the new Dean at the seminaries, and he was able very warmly to affirm the gifts that I appeared to have and the experience that had brought me to this place.

He was open to expanding the number of courses that I would be teaching that would be available to the Goshen Seminary group, but also was supportive in my research writing, my Sunday curriculum writing, (for ten years) my work on the new Hymn book committee and other involvements in the church. As far as I can remember he never once raised the concerns at the top of Harold Bender's mind: How can we please the church? And when the time came and I was invited to teach a course at Moreau Seminary, Notre Dame, he took the recommendation to the faculty that I be allowed to do so. It was a great privilege to establish those relations with the Brothers of the Holy Cross and the friendship, which came out of that with Father Hesburgh and Jim Burtshaell. Hard now to imagine that in those days of Post Vatican excitement one could even be invited to preach at one of Jim Burtshaell's famous midnight masses (midweek attendance of 300) and even partake of the Sacrament!

Another factor in my ease in relating to Ross was that he and I shared a common Canadian background, although he came from Ontario and I was from a Manitoba farm. I felt at once a common commitment certainly to theological education and his Yale degree matched up well with my Princeton training. Did he ever even know that I had applied for a doctorate at Yale and was not accepted? I did not tell him.

What is most remarkable, in my judgment, is the years of experience that I had with Ross and the support that he gave as Dean me.

The invitation to join the Dean's Seminar shortly after my return to Elkhart was a particular honour and an experience which formed the centre of my academic life in many ways. I have said before that the experience of working with all of those colleagues in this very concentrated effort was the very finest that I have had in my academic life.

The background of this commitment to study what theological education was begun, however, in the first few years of our joint working in Elkhart. We had met several times in Chicago as two faculties discussing the whole issue of what theological education meant and what it might mean in the free church context. Here Dean Harold Bender must be commended for his eager desire to see what was happening in the world church. One meeting we had devoted totally to the discussion of the book by Niebuhr-Gustafson on the nature of theological education and the nature of the church as it had emerged in the North American scene. I remember writing that review and presenting it at that time, and again feeling how really improper it was for someone who had so recently joined the faculty to take a look at this extremely provocative book and try to sort out what in it might be of use to us in the building of the Seminary at Elkhart. I don't recall whether Ross was there in those sessions, but certainly he was fully in touch with that agenda and I always was confident that he would make a contribution of that, especially once the confining influence of Harold Bender would recede into the distance.

Ross Bender was also open in other ways. Shortly after I returned from the year at Menningers, I offered a course called, "Christianity and Psychiatry," and he gave me strong encouragement to teach it. In this course, we simply read a book a week dealing with some part of the interface between psychiatry and Christianity. It was well received in Elkhart and during one year I taught that same course for a busload of Notre Dame Moreau Seminary students, who met on the Elkhart campus for that one term course. It was an evening course which met occasionally in our home, but most vividly I remember the class party that we had when a busload of Holy Cross Seminarians spilled out on our property and we had an outdoor barbecue with the approximately 30 members of the class.

Some of those relationships continued on for many years, and especially during the years that I worked for Notre Dame in Jerusalem, the relationship that I had made first with Father Ted Hesburgh himself and with members of his staff remain with me to this day. The opportunity to take a course on sensitivity awareness or sensitivity growth, and then later to actually teach for one year in that Catholic Seminary were part of the appreciation that I have always had for the Catholic Church and that tradition. Ross made that possible and not only allowed it but encouraged me to do it.

At the same time, I have never been tempted, as some of my colleagues have, to become a member of that communion, although there is no doubt that anyone who studies Marpeck realizes what a deep source of inspiration the Catholic tradition was to the early Anabaptists. It seems interesting from this perspective that in those years the ecumenical relationships between Catholics and Mennonites was even stronger than it seems to be now. At the same time, the movement of John Howard Yoder to the Notre Dame faculty (Department of Theology and not in the Seminary) in the eighties may have been made easier by the fact that I had not only studied but also taught on the Notre Dame team. Most heart-warming for me was the assignment given to me during the last year that I taught at Elkhart in 1969 to work with priests in training and help them come with integrity to a commitment to take their final vows. In all of these things, not only did my colleagues at Elkhart support and endorse my work there, but also the support and permission of Dean Ross Bender were very important.

Some one should paint a picture of the motley crew of theologians et al. over which Ross presided as dean. John Howard Yoder and Clarence Bauman with their sheer brilliance, but also their idiosyncratic views of how one behaves in the church could give Ross a head-ache. At the same time in all of my studies I have never come across a more brilliant course than Bauman's on Bonhoeffer. And to think that when at Goshen Seminary as a student Bauman put tracts into our mail boxes (anonymously!) warning us that we might well be "left behind" when the Rapture comes!

After my years at Elkhart, my relationship to John Howard Yoder took on a different slant. During my year at Menningers, he and I had had a vigorous correspondence in which I urged him to come back to Elkhart and teach there as member of the team. He was ambivalent at that point and as he pointed out in a letter to me in the fall of 1961, he had no bonafide invitation from Harold Bender to come and join the seminary faculty. His correspondence with Minninger verified that and especially since Bender's resignation as Dean was contingent at that time upon "an adequate replacement" being found, Yoder was correct in saying that he could not come and teach at the Seminary where he really wanted to teach, namely the Old Mennonite Seminary. Eventually, through the association of the two seminaries and the pressures that MBS put upon Goshen, Yoder became a member of the faculty and taught there for a number of years, eventually becoming President of GBS before going on to Notre Dame.

When we moved to Winnipeg in 1969 and were divorced one and a half year after, John wrote quite a few angry letters to me in which he criticized me severely for not opening up some of my family problems to the Dean's Seminar.

My reply, naturally was that I had never considered the Dean's Seminar as a therapy session for faculty members' problems. In any case, I told him that we were part of the "Koinonia" group in the Hively Church, consisting of three other couples, two of them social workers and another a clinical psychologist, and as a couple we felt that was a normal place for us to air and deal with our family problems. The fact that they did not turn out in the way perhaps that we ourselves or others had hoped did not mean that we had not had an adequate place to deal with these problems away from the public eye.

The candour which John Yoder always showed and sometimes the rudeness or insensitivity that he shown in the act of rebuke toward other people's personal problems came to sharp focus in that. I certainly pointed out to him on several occasions that it did not seem appropriate to share one's personal problems with the administrators or one's immediate superior because the ways in which depression or other mental problems could be dealt with seemed to be quite adequate in the Mennonite Church in the institutions that the Church had formed to deal with it. In reflection I cannot help but be grateful for Oaklawn and its contribution to the Seminary, faculty and students and regret that John seemed never to heed my advice that he seek help there.

Ross seemed to be quite at ease with our human frailty and never probed. When he was given the opportunity to meet with me and Don Augsburg some years after I had left Elkhart he indicated he had no interest in doing so. I took that as evidence that there was no bad blood between us.

I shall always be grateful that he respected and honoured my multi-layered involvement in the church from Hymn Committees to Sunday School writing, that he helped me on the way to do research on New Testament aspects of Worship, he honoured my work on the Mennonite Health Service Board and the many speaking engagements I carried as a Bible lecturer. When I was asked to give three sermons at the College Church in Goshen, I chose the topic of love, love for God, love for self and love or the neighbour+enemy. I was curious to find out how such a position of honour might come to me and was told that Ross Bender had recommended me. It was, I felt, his way of saying that Old Mennonite churches should also become familiar with GC professors, but also I was grateful that Ross would give me that token of esteem.

In my life I have had many superiors and colleagues. Deans have been important to me while in Seminary and while in the University where I served for a decade as head of a department of Religion. Ross holds a special place of honour among them for he had to deal with

me when I was still quite immature. I was feeling my way, and Ross's gentle ways, his probing questions were just what I needed to stay in the Free Church.

When I received the Dean's Seminar report many years ago I read it immediately with intense interest. What a splendid report it is! How amazingly he was able to draw together the energy of those draft horses and bucking broncos he had to work with!

Of all the people in the Anabaptist fold he reminds me most of Pilgram Marpeck, with whom I live these days.

Ross too devoted himself to three institutions: the family, the church and the Seminary. His energies were used to connect these three to the rich tradition of the past and to build for the future by scrutinising that past and reshaping it for the future. I salute you Ross and commend you for your years of devoted service, your devotion to the local church and to the larger church and your devotion to your family. Please accept my gratitude for what you meant to me and mean to me still.

With cordial regards,

Bill Klassen

completed on August 21, 2004

