The Mennonite Young People's Conference Movement, 1919-1923: The Legacy of a (Failed?) Vision

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Abstract: Throughout the history of the church, reform initiatives and new visions both strain the fabric of church life while also enabling the church to address new challenges. The Young People's Conference movement of 1919-1923 was one such movement in the (Old) Mennonite Church. Young progressive leaders, shaped by their experiences as World War I conscientious objectors and relief workers, critiqued existing church structures and proposed a program of sweeping changes. From its beginnings, however, the reform movement faced the difficult challenge of winning support from all sectors of a church polarized by broader modernist/fundamentalist debates. The challenge proved insurmountable—after four years the movement disbanded. Yet several decades later, the church had enacted most of the reforms proposed by the Young People's Conference movement, which raises interesting questions about the process of negotiation and compromise leading to changes in church life.

In January 1921, Orie B. Gerig—a gifted young Mennonite leader, Goshen College alumnus, and World War I conscientious objector—faced rejection at the hands of the church he hoped to serve. Gerig had applied for a position with the Mennonite Board of Missions as an overseas missionary. But despite his apparent qualifications the board denied the appointment because of his association with theological movements that the board had deemed unorthodox. Gerig faced the option of either denouncing those movements or severing his ties with the denomination. For years he had struggled—unsuccessfully, for the most part—to introduce reforms into the (Old) Mennonite Church that he hoped would become a defining vision for the twentieth century.[1] A year earlier Gerig expressed his discouragement to a friend and cousin, Jacob C. Meyer: "You and I will be old men before our people will grasp

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1. The Y.P.C. movement took place primarily within the oldest conference of Mennonite churches in America known as the (Old) Mennonite Church prior to its merger with the General Conference Mennonite Church in 2002 to form Mennonite Church USA.

such a vision of service."[2] Yet he believed so strongly in the possibility of church renewal that he had been willing, initially at least, to give up a promising career outside Mennonite circles to see that dream realized.

By 1921, however, the lines dividing Gerig from key church leaders had become sharply drawn. "Frankly," he wrote to Meyer, "I sometimes feel that we are attempting a hopeless task. [We] cannot reconcile . . . on these grounds. It will be impossible."[3] Gerig's fears were confirmed early in 1921 when the Mission Board asked him to renounce all association with liberal groups and doctrines, a concession that Gerig found to be "unthinkable."[4] As Gerig explained to Meyer in March 1921, "I have come to the point where I can no longer view all problems only in the light of our own little branch of the church. We have a larger project in view. In the end, our plan will live after all their intrigue has passed on the blemished page of history."[5] Gerig had made his choice—a choice that would ultimately lead him out of the Mennonite Church.

Orie B. Gerig was part of an early-twentieth-century reform movement in the (Old) Mennonite Church in which young people sought to engage their faith and their church with the rapidly changing world of their day. The initiative, known as the Young People's Conference (Y.P.C.) movement, sponsored four conferences between 1919 and 1923 at which youth and young adults envisioned the future of the Mennonite Church for their generation. Almost from the beginning, however, the Y.P.C. movement became entangled in larger church debates, framed largely as a struggle between Modernism and Fundamentalism. The controversy culminated in 1923 when conservatives successfully closed the reputedly "liberal" Goshen College and brought an end to the Y.P.C. movement. The struggles prompted Gerig and many of his progressive-minded friends to leave the (Old) Mennonite Church, disappointed by their failure to enact reforms and convinced that the church would not develop an effective peace witness in the twentieth century.

Yet however tragic the demise of Y.P.C. might have seemed to Gerig and his colleagues in 1923, a longer historical perspective suggests that the Y.P.C. vision was not entirely lost on the Mennonite Church. Indeed, only twenty years after Y.P.C. radicals had all but given up on the

2. O. B. Gerig to J. C. Meyer, Dec. 3, 1919, file 10, box 2, Hist. Mss. 1-44, Jacob C. Meyer Papers, Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. [hereafter cited as MCA-G].

3. O. B. Gerig to J. C. Meyer, March 26, 1920, file 10, box 2, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

4. O. B. Gerig to J. C. Meyer, Jan. 19, 1921, file 10, box 2, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

5. Gerig to Meyer, date unknown but sometime after March 2, 1921, file 10, box 2, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

church, the denomination had adopted nearly all of the specific reforms they had advocated. The Y.P.C. was unable to realize the changes it desired, in part because of the impatience of its leaders and its close association with larger currents of liberal theology. Yet its struggle and even its failure to promote church reform helped open the door to many of the transformations in the (Old) Mennonite Church that would eventually become central to Mennonite identity in the twentieth century.

Progressivism and the (Old) Mennonite Church in the Early Twentieth Century

In many ways, the Young People's Conference was a product of the broader currents of the American Progressive movement dominant in the early twentieth century. As historians Theron Schlabach and James Juhnke have amply documented, the influence of American Progressivism was already evident in the (Old) Mennonite Church long before the Y.P.C. emerged. One expression of the Progressivist influence was a tendency toward greater rational organization and formal structure within groups that had previously functioned as only loose associations.[6] Since the last decades of the nineteenth century key leaders in the (Old) Mennonite Church had been promoting a movement to institutionalize church structures. Although not without resistance, a largely informal ecclesial organization increasingly gave way to centralized denominational institutions. Part of this process involved a shift in the locus of authority from local congregations to more tightly organized district or conference structures. At the same time, conference bishops and leading church figures further consolidated authority by standardizing church doctrine and enforcing tighter church discipline.[7] In 1898, the church created a General Conference, charged with the task of promoting church unity, administering churchwide institutions, and overseeing new churchwide policies.

At the same time, Mennonites began to join other Protestant churches in new initiatives promoting home evangelism, foreign missions, and church sponsored education. Thus, in 1906 the church formally organized the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charity, with its first missionaries in India and central Argentina. Between 1890 and the

6. Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

7. James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930*, vol. 3: Mennonite Experience in America (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989), 119.

outbreak of World War I, Mennonite groups in the U.S. founded seven institutions of higher education. In a speech entitled "The Spirit of Progress," given at the 1896 opening of the Elkhart Institute, the first (Old) Mennonite school, evangelist John S. Coffman instructed a young generation of Mennonites that it was not only possible to be both Mennonite and progressive but that the early Anabaptists themselves were exemplary progressives.[8]

In addition to increasing institutionalization, Progressivism also introduced a new interest in social activism and a new confidence that religious ideas could find expression in the realm of politics. The Social Gospel movement sought to translate religious truth from an individual spirituality into practical social ethics. In his 1907 classic, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Walter Rauschenbush emphasized the social responsibility of Christians in addressing the needs and injustices of the world around them.[9] Rauschenbush was familiar with the Anabaptist movement and shared with them a commitment to practical discipleship and pacifism. A few Mennonites in the early twentieth century resonated with Social Gospel ideas and even hinted that it was consistent with an Anabaptist heritage; most, however, kept their distance from the Social Gospel movement because of its association with socialism and even worse, communism.[10]

The newly emerging Mennonite denominational institutions, with their increasingly activist and progressive agendas, often found themselves in tension with rural and culturally isolated Mennonite communities. Especially in the eastern conferences, church members felt that the new institutions too closely resembled Protestant models, were driven by a spirit of pride and professionalism, and reflected a liberal, progressive theology that was in tension with the orthodox convictions of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.[11] The close association of social activism with liberal theology made it especially controversial among more conservative church groups.[12]

Newly established Mennonite colleges were an important arena for these conflicts since they opened doors to new theological ideas and cultural attitudes that had previously not been considered by

8. Ibid., 166.

9. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Association Press, 1907).

10. "Social Gospel," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* 5:832-834.

11. Ibid., 152.

12. Donald Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1988).

Mennonites at large.[13] Goshen College—created in 1903 when the Elkhart Institute relocated in the nearby town of Goshen—was the site of a particularly sharp conflict between competing visions for Mennonite theology and practice in the early twentieth century. Was the primary goal of education to create intellectual leaders who would help Mennonites negotiate increased contact with the wider world? Or was education an arm of the church that equipped students to return home as better farmers and keepers of the faith?

Initially, Goshen College and its predecessor, the Elkhart Institute, enjoyed a degree of freedom from the Mennonite denomination since they were run by an independent board. However, in 1905 the Mennonite Board of Education claimed oversight of Goshen College, thereby giving the church more control over what took place at the school.[14] With closer control came a heightened sense of accountability and growing criticism of what many perceived to be progressivist and modernist tendencies, particularly in the academic centers of the church.[15] The increased denominational presence created significant tensions for Goshen's first two presidents—Noah Byers (1903-1913) and John E. Hartzler (1913-1918). Byers and Hartzler embodied the new spirit of liberalism with their ecumenical leanings and their confidence that more sophisticated higher education should inform church theology and practice. Both ended up relocating to Bluffton College, an institution with a consciously progressive approach to education.[16] To Goshen College opponents, the association of Goshen faculty during Byers and Hartzler's era with Bluffton was further proof of the waywardness of Goshen College.[17] In 1918, A. J. Bendle expressed the concern of many when he wrote to J. B. Smith, president of Eastern Mennonite School:

> [W]herever Goshen lays their hand blight immediately follows; the head covering begins to shrink until it is only the size of a mushroom; the bangs begin to grow; the jewelry business begins to flourish; the chickens begin to scratch the feathers off their breast

13. Paul Toews, "Fundamentalist Conflict in Mennonite Colleges: A Response to Cultural Transitions?" *MQR* 57 (July 1983), 241-242.

14. "Goshen College," *ME* 2:546-548.

15. Susan Fisher Miller, *Culture for Service: A History of Goshen College, 1894-1994* (Goshen, Ind.: Goshen College, 1994), 59. In fact, two other (Old) Mennonite colleges, Hesston College and Eastern Mennonite School, were both founded, in part at least, as a safe alternative to the progressive tendencies evident at Goshen.—Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War*, 169.

16. Perry Bush, "'United Progressive Mennonites': Bluffton College and Anabaptist Higher Education, 1913-1945," *MQR* 74 (July 2000), 359-360.

17. Miller, *Culture for Service*, 60.

> and put them on their head; their clothes suddenly grow shorter and the shoes longer; the lace and ribbon stores get increased patronage and the County Commissioners have to print more ballots![18]

The concerns about Goshen's progressivism, particularly among church members and leaders in the East, placed a heavy strain on the college. By the early 1920s, tensions were so severe that they threatened the very survival of the college.

Three-fourths of the original leaders of the Young People's Conference were Goshen students. Given the college's reputation as a center of modernist thought, that fact would significantly affect how the church received Y.P.C.[19]

WORLD WAR I

The U.S. declaration of war against Germany in April 1917 also played a crucial role in shaping the Y.P.C. movement. While the Quakers, a sister peace church, were quick to vocalize their convictions against militarism and absolute allegiance to the government, Mennonites were not as well coordinated or aggressive. Nor were they prepared to fully equip their young men to face the challenges of being conscientious objectors.[20] Almost overnight, some 1,500 young men from all branches of the American Mennonite Church found themselves in a situation that put their pacifist resolve to the test in the most public of ways, as they became the face of the Mennonite Church to the nation.[21]

For many Mennonite young men—most of whom came from simple, rural communities—army training camps signified a loss of innocence about the broader world. The experience in military camps forced them to rethink their religious beliefs, particularly with regard to pacifism, and to articulate their convictions to military officials independently from their church leaders. Although not all Mennonite young men remained firm in their nonresistant beliefs, many of them did. And along the way, many also experienced a renewed commitment to Christ and the church.

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18. A. J. Bendle to J. B. Smith, Jan. 2, 1918, quoted in Juhnke, *Vision Doctrine, War*, 168-169.

19. "Report of the General Conference of Mennonites in France in Reconstruction Work: Held at Clermont-en-Argonne, Meuse, France, June 20-22, 1919," box 2, VII-28-1, Miscellaneous Mennonite Organizations, MCA-G; *Goshen College 1894-1994 Alumni Directory 1994* (Goshen, Ind.: Office of Alumni Relations, Goshen College, 1994).

20. Gerlof D. Homan, *American Mennonites and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Waterloo, Ont: Herald Press, 1994), 45.

21. Ibid., 104, 183.

In early 1918 Payson Miller, later a key leader in the Y.P.C. movement, wrote from a military camp in Taylor, Kentucky, to his friend Harold Bender about the spiritual challenges he faced: "I can now more clearly see why men should cry out 'is there a God?' There is nothing more comforting to me as to know that God will eventually work things out according to his plan."[22] World War I transformed the lives of Miller and many of his conscientious objector friends—they returned home not only with revitalized spiritual conviction but also with a greater sense that the Mennonite Church should be of service to the outside world.[23]

Although their own convictions of pacifism had been renewed, many objectors felt that they had been abandoned while in the camps and expressed disappointment that their church had not taken a stronger and more positive position on peace. In addition, the war reinforced a generation gap between the youth who went through the camps and the church leaders who made the decisions about how the church would respond to the war.[24] For many Mennonite conscientious objectors, the war heightened their awareness of the needs of the world around them. They also recognized the inadequacy of their own theological preparation and the negative reputation of the Mennonite Church for its lack of civic responsibility during the war.

The Formation of the Young Peoples' Conference: Critique and Vision

As World War I drew to an end in the fall of 1918, a group of Mennonite conscientious objectors, many of whom had been students at Goshen College, began to call on the church to reclaim its distinctive Mennonite theology and to apply it concretely to the needs of the twentieth-century world. Moreover, after spending months in military camps where they refused to offer military service, many felt that they needed to do something constructive in the aftermath of the war. Thus, in July 1918, one Mennonite conscientious objector, Fred Augsburger, urged a church leader, Aaron Loucks, to create a Mennonite program for reconstruction. "I do not favor making money and living a selfish life while the world is bleeding," he wrote. "I think it is our duty to get out

22. Payson Miller to H. S. Bender, early 1918, box 3, Hist. Mss. 1-278, H. S. Bender Papers, MCA-G.

23. Melanie Springer Mock, *Writing Peace: The Unheard Voices of Great War Mennonite Objectors* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press U.S., 2003), 79.

24. Gerlof D. Homan, "Orie Benjamin Gerig: Mennonite Rebel, Peace Activist, International Civil Servant, and American Diplomat, 1894-1976," *MQR* 73 (Oct. 1999), 723.

and help the suffering."[25] Four Goshen friends—John J. Fisher, Orie B. Gerig, Ernest E. Miller, Jacob C. Meyer—along with their teachers, Dan S. Gerig and Irvin R. Detweiler, were also eager to participate in reconstruction work, as reflected in their regular correspondence about what the church needed to do. "This is a great opportunity for the Mennonite Church to develop and utilize the talent of its young men and women. . . ," Fisher wrote to the group in November 1918. "The talent of young men and women should be directed by the church itself, as a whole church."[26]

In fact, the (Old) Mennonite Church had recently established an organization for this purpose. In December 1917, church leaders had established the Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers as a branch of the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities that would focus on reconstruction work.[27] Not feeling sufficiently prepared to organize their own work, however, the relief commission opted to partner with an established program. Wary of the patriotism of the Red Cross and Young Men's Christian Association, the relief commission chose to work with a sister peace church, the American Friends Service Committee.[28] Between 1918 and 1920 fifty-four Mennonites participated in relief work in France through the Friend's agency.[29]

Criticisms Emerge at Haverford College

During the last months of 1918 the first group of these Mennonite young men gathered at Haverford College in Pennsylvania, a school founded by the Quakers, to prepare for service and await their visas. There they began to share their frustrations and hopes. One immediate concern was a sense that church leaders had done a poor job of preparing the church for a strong peace witness during the war or for relief work in the aftermath of the war. These criticisms quickly expanded to include frustration with church leadership in general. The young men at Haverford were especially critical of Daniel Kauffman, editor of the church periodical *Gospel Herald*, and Aaron Loucks, chairman of the Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers, who they felt were indicative of fundamental problems in the church.

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25. F. Augsburger to A. Loucks, July 23, 1918, quoted in Homan, *American Mennonites and the Great War*, 170.

26. J. C. Meyer to J. J. Fisher, E. E. Miller, and D. S. Gerig, Nov. 27, 1918, file 42, box 4, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

27. "Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers," *ME* 3:636-637.

28. Homan, *American Mennonites and the Great War*, 179.

29. "Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers," *ME* 3:636-637.

Jacob C. Meyer, a Goshen College alumnus, conscientious objector, and leader of the Mennonite unit of the American Friends Service Committee, was particularly outspoken in his critique. Meyer felt that Kauffman, Loucks, and the "Scottdale bunch" held a monopoly of power since the same small group of people were on all the church committees, controlled all the publications, and made all the decisions. Kauffman, for example, had eliminated the "Readers Say" section of the *Gospel Herald*, which had previously been an open forum for lay church members to express their views. This style of church authority, Meyer claimed, undermined an Anabaptist model of a decentralized, congregational oriented, lay church.

In their correspondence with likeminded friends still at Goshen College, Meyer and his colleagues accused the church of lacking "COMPETENT leadership."[30] For example, Meyer cited the case of Ora J. Hartzler, a conscientious objector who was imprisoned and given a sentence of twenty-five years of hard labor. According to Meyer, the relief commission ignored Hartzler's plight for far too long. "Our Church leaders have been further removed than we from the events of recent years and cannot appreciate the gravity of the situation." Meyer went on to clarify that the clothing restrictions—"scriptural garb" about which the leaders seemed to care so fervently—were not the pressing issues for the church and its young people. "The call was for competence," Meyer later recalled, "rather than an ordination and a garb."[31]

The young men at Haverford also felt that the "incompetence" of their leaders gave the Mennonite Church a weak public reputation. They resented the fact that, as conscientious objectors, they had been forced to bear the brunt of this bad reputation. The beginning of the church's "failure," they said, was that the relief commission had delayed fundraising for postwar relief work with the excuse that other areas of the church budget had to be met first. Since the relief commission had not provided Mennonites with a good alternative to channel their funds, some church members, under pressure from their neighbors, had given money to Red Cross or purchased war bonds. The young men thought that this lack of organization reflected poorly on the Mennonite Church, and especially on conscientious objectors. They specifically resented the

30. Jacob C. Meyer, "The Young People's Conference Held in Clermont, France, June 20-22, 1919," file 5, box 6, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

31. Ibid.

charge that they were "doing nothing" to contribute productively to society.[32]

As they awaited their assignments in Europe, several of the young men decided to take action. In January 1919, Meyer and others sent out a questionnaire to a selection of Mennonite ministers and lay members in the United States, asking five questions.

> What is the relation of the individual to the church?
>
> Should the Church at large or a few control the activities of the church?
>
> What is the Church's attitude toward her present educational institutions and toward Christian education in general?
>
> Should the Church interest herself in an aggressive social and mission program for the world as opposed to the policy of isolation and apparent lack of interest in the evils of the world?
>
> Should the young people of the church be trusted to effect some permanent organization aiming to discuss, on an open platform, the above and related questions?[33]

The responses to the questionnaire confirmed that others in the church shared their concerns and encouraged the Haverford group to plan a conference where these concerns could be addressed.

Around the same time, Meyer convinced Daniel Kauffman to publish an article in the *Gospel Herald* expressing some of the concerns apparent at Haverford. On February 6, 1919, a few days after Meyer finally left for France, his article on "The Supreme Movement" appeared in the *Gospel Herald*. The Mennonite Church, claimed Meyer, was now in the "limelight" of the nation because of her nonresistant principles. Yet, Meyer questioned the church's resolve on this doctrine. "There are many who admit that Christ taught and practiced the doctrine of nonresistance, but at the same time they deny that it is a practical doctrine in our modern social system." The bottom line, according to Meyer, was not historical church doctrine but individual conscience. The questions that church members would be facing in the future were not ones of historical creed but rather "What do *you* think? What do *you*

32. Ibid.

33. "Report of the General Conference of Mennonites in France in Reconstruction Work: Held at Clermont-en-Argonne, Meuse, France, June 20-22, 1919," box 2, VII-28-1, Miscellaneous Mennonite Organizations, MCA-G.

believe? What are *you* willing to do to exemplify your faith in nonresistance?" [34]

Here Meyer's focus on the individual clearly revealed the influences of the Progressive movement and modern liberalism. "This is a question between God and the individual," he wrote. "The realm of conscience is sacred ground upon which the communion with God takes place. . . . Every man must stand by his own convictions or go down with them." He then subtly implied that the church leaders were stifling individual conscience.

> A Romish hierarchy—or a Prussian military system—are not possible in church government unless every man gives up his conscience and accepts the group conscience. The Anabaptists were persecuted for this principle of individual conscience. Are we worthy to be classed as their descendants?[35]

Meyer's article provides a window into the contrasting worldviews at stake in the debate. In his appeal to the Anabaptists as champions of the "modern man"—identifying individual conscience and democratic governance as their highest teaching—Meyer may have revealed more about himself as a young Mennonite progressive than about the Anabaptists themselves. Daniel Kauffman certainly caught the point. Directly beside Meyer's article he published an essay entitled "What Does God Expect of Us," which left *Gospel Herald* readers with no doubt about his view of things. What God expects, according to the article, was nothing less than "Strict, true and willing obedience, nothing short of it."[36] The tension between submission and individual conscience evident in the *Gospel Herald* would be a theme that was repeated often throughout the history of the Young People's Conference.

Reconstruction Work in France

For many Mennonite relief workers, the experience of postwar service in France gave them a new perspective on the world and a new vision for how the Mennonite Church could be active in promoting peace. Early in 1919 most of the young men who had gathered at Haverford arrived in France and began their work. Their main task was building, or rebuilding, houses at Clermont-en-Argonne in the Meuse region, which

34. J. C. Meyer, "The Supreme Movement," *Gospel Herald*, Feb. 6, 1919, 803-804. Emphasis in original.

35. Ibid.

36. Joseph and Alice H. Nissley, "What Does God Expect of Us," *Gospel Herald*, Feb. 6 1919, 804.

had been devastated by the battle of Verdun in 1916. The work proved to be as meaningful as it was useful.[37] Just as being conscientious objectors in military camps had forced them to wrestle with their pacifist convictions, working in war reconstruction exposed them directly to the destruction of war and the complexities of its aftermath. They encountered not only the perspectives of the French whose homes they were reconstructing but also those of the German prisoners of war with whom they often worked. Once they even worked with a German Mennonite prisoner of war who was assigned to their crew. In a letter home to his friend Harold Bender, Meyer explained the complexities and ambiguities that he felt American churches and society had overlooked. "Two sides spoil some good tales," he said, explaining how his work with both French and Germans forced him to reject the one-sided story of American war propaganda.[38]

While in France, the young men continued to press the same questions they had raised in Haverford. During a March 30 meeting at Neuvilly, eighteen of the Mennonite workers held a worship service after which they discussed the possibility of holding a summer conference for all the Mennonite workers to share their concerns for the church. The men were disappointed that the church had shown minimal support for their work and that no representative from the United States had come to visit them, even though the American Friends Service Committee had provided a way for two such representatives. In an open letter published in the *Gospel Herald*, they wrote, "This has resulted in a feeling of estrangement between ourselves and the church. [W]e have had to do this work under a foreign organization without anywhere coming in contact with an official representative of the Mennonite Church even though the doors were open."[39] Among themselves the young men also discussed at great length other events at home that seemed to further confirm the "incompetence" of their church leaders. They were appalled, for example, to discover that in March of 1919 the Board of Education had named a man who had no college degree, H. Frank Reist, as the new president of Goshen College.[40] They were also troubled that the Mennonite Relief Commission for War Sufferers had announced plans to

37. Homan, *American Mennonites and the Great War*, 171.

38. J. C. Meyer to H. S. Bender, Aug. 5, 1919, file 9, box 1, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

39. "Open Letter to the Mennonite Brotherhood from the Mennonite Brethren in Relief Work in France," *Gospel Herald*, May 8, 1919, 109.

40. Mennonite Board of Education Report, *Gospel Herald* (May 8, 1919), 108; "The development of the Y.P.C. Movement in France 1919," file 2, box 1, Hist Mss 1-649, J. S. Gerig Papers, MCA-G.

begin a new Near East relief effort just as they were about to leave for France. On January 4, 1919, the relief commission announced the project and on January 25 the first group of nine relief workers sailed from New York, with Aaron Loucks and William Derstine leading the effort. To the Mennonite workers in France, not only had the Near East relief work been organized far too hastily, but it seemed to undermine the reform movement that had begun to emerge in Haverford. On the first point, the men in France had little confidence in the leadership abilities of Loucks and Derstine—a concern soon shared by letters from friends in the Near East. In a letter of July 1919, E. E. Miller wrote to Meyer from Beirut: "The fellows in Turkey are fed up. We gave him [Loucks] every possible chance to show that he is able—he fell down on the job—consequently we are doing our work in spite of him."[41]

Mennonite relief workers in France were also suspicious that the new venture was an effort by the relief commission to break up the core group of volunteers who had been so vocal in their critique of the Mennonite Church. A new relief location would disperse some of the momentum of the emerging movement while also bringing the relief workers under closer supervision of the church since Loucks and Derstine would exercise direct leadership there. In January 1919 when Meyer was about to leave for France, the relief commission asked him to change his plans and go to the Near East instead. Meyer emphatically rejected the request, saying, "I felt I owed far more to those who stood up against service under the military and in many cases suffered for their conviction, than to a Relief Commission which so far as I could learn did next to nothing for the men in the two camps where I was."[42] Whatever the merits of Meyer's interpretation, it does reveal a severe lack of trust between the two groups.

Meyer shared his opinions of Loucks, Derstine, and other leaders freely to trusted friends and mentors at home. In a twenty-two-page letter to Samuel E. Allgyer, a bishop in West Liberty, Ohio, he promised to give "the frank information and analysis to outline . . . what seemed to me to be the problems and attitudes of the young men of the church, and more especially of those who had had camp and prison experience."[43] Meyer specifically attacked Loucks, Derstine, and other leaders of the relief commission, accusing them of weak leadership during the war, of

41. E. E. Miller to J. C. Meyer, July 7, 1919, file 3, box 7, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

42. "The development of the Y.P.C. Movement in France 1919," file 2, box 1, J. S. Gerig Papers.

43. Ibid.

"secrecy or underhanded work," and especially of jumping hastily into Near East relief without adequate preparation. Allgyer's reply was kind, but evidenced surprise at Meyer's accusations. He believed Meyer to be mistaken in most of his accusations and encouraged him to exercise patience and charity toward his brethren. "One thing I notice," Allgyer wrote:

> is a lack of confidence on the part of some of our young Brethren in our church leaders, and the same may be true on the other side, and that in my opinion is a very unfortunate thing. One thing is evident; if the enemy of souls can bring divisions between us, he has gained a great point and we are defeated. We ought to consider that men of age and experience often see danger that younger heads do not see even though both parties are absolutely honest. Therefore we want to be charitable.[44]

Even Daniel S. Gerig, a Goshen College professor and sympathizer of the emerging movement, found the criticisms overly harsh. "Some of us have at times been a little surprised what you men have written in view of what we have known about you earlier,"[45] Gerig wrote to Meyer in November of 1918. He went on to encourage Meyer not to make hasty conclusions about others.

After the preliminary meeting at Neuvilly, the relief workers in France announced their plan for a "Young Peoples Conference" to be held on June 20-22, 1919, which would bring them together for fellowship and worship as well as provide an opportunity to discuss their hopes for the Mennonite Church. The planning committee quickly received a negative response from home. Daniel Kauffman posed two objections. First, he argued, the apostolic church had no "young men's meetings," and second, no church conference was sponsoring the meeting. W. W. Oesch, a Mennonite pastor in Mottville, Michigan, was sympathetic to the movement but suggested that the committee at least pay attention to Kauffman's second concern.[46] Philemon L. Frey, a pastor in Fulton County, Ohio, also expressed concern. Frey had three reservations. First, he thought that the organization needed to be in the hands of the church. Second, the "boys" were attempting something they did not have authority to do. "If you organize in Europe and expect your organization to continue after you return to America," he wrote, "I am afraid the church would look at such a move with disfavor. Un-democratic you see.

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44. S. E. Allgyer to J. C. Meyer, Feb. 12, 1919, file 3, box 1, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.
45. D. S. Gerig to J. C. Meyer, Nov. 25, 1918, file 42, box 4, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.
46. W. W. Oesch to J. C. Meyer, May 9, 1919, file 42, box 4, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

Just a little aristocratic or autocratic." Third, he did not like the idea of a movement composed only of young people.[47]

The conference planners heard these concerns and offered assurances that they intended the conference to enrich the life of the church, not undermine it. Undeterred, they continued with their plans for a summer conference.

THE Y.P.C. VISION ARTICULATED AT CLERMONT-EN ARGONNE, FRANCE

On June 20-22, 1919, some fifty Mennonite relief workers gathered in Clermont, France, for the first Young People's Conference in an effort to articulate the vision of their emerging movement and to give formal expression to what had previously been informal conversation and correspondence. Two representatives from the (Old) Mennonite Church in America were also present—Bishop S. E. Allgyer and the *Christian Monitor* editor, Vernon Smucker—in addition to Pierre Sommer, a French Mennonite leader; Noah Byers, who served as dean of Bluffton College; and two women, one of whom was a Dutch Mennonite, Ada Cnoop Koopmans. J. C. Meyer opened the gathering by outlining the goals of the conference, highlighting his vision of a more relevant church. "Would it not be possible to get together and openly discuss as well as prayerfully meditate on these issues?" Meyer asked. "The ambitious young people could here listen to the experiences of the more mature while the latter would get into closer touch with the vigorous young life of the church." [48] Anticipating the criticism of the topics they wished to discuss, Meyer urged all sides to engage in an open and honest discussion:

> If it is heresy for a young person to express his views it is no less heretical and infinitely more hypocritical for him to hold the views and never express them. Let us all be honest and come to the light. Darkness, wirepulling, and secrecy never saved a soul and I am persuaded that these methods never will accomplish anything good.[49]

After Meyer's opening address other presenters addressed topics of relevance to the relief workers and their concerns for their church. The

47. P. L. Frey to J. C. Meyer, April 30, 1919, file 42, box 4, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

48. "Report of the General Conference of Mennonites in France in Reconstruction Work: Held at Clermont-en-Argonne, Meuse, France, June 20-22, 1919," box 2, VII-28-1 Miscellaneous Mennonite Organizations, MCA-G.

49. Ibid.

themes included: "Practical Christianity in France"; "Relations Between Friends and Mennonites during the Last Century"; "Our Future Peace Policy"; "Future Opportunities for Permanent Relief and Reconstruction by the Mennonite Church"; and "The Relation of the Individual to the Church." The conference encouraged a great deal of discussion among the participants. By the end the group agreed on a list summing up their "interest and concern for the church of the future." Included were the following:

To deepen the spiritual life of the Mennonite church.

To study our responsibilities that grow out of our attitude toward war.

To study the problems of the Mennonite church as regards:

Church organization and administration,

Its relation to the social order,

Its relation to the state,

Its obligation to missionary endeavor,

Christian education,

Relief and reconstruction among stricken peoples.

To inspire young men and women of the Mennonite church to consecrate their lives to the conservation and extension of the principles of Jesus Christ.

To encourage the study of the historical development of the Mennonite church, with special emphasis on the life and writings of Menno Simons.

To establish a basis for closer cooperation between young people and those of mature judgment.

To foster an appreciation and better understanding between Mennonites of American and Mennonites of foreign countries such as Russia, Switzerland, Germany, France, India, Holland, South America, etc.

To provide for the discussions of life-work problems where interviews with men of experience and training in various vocations may be had.[50]

On the broadest level, the relief workers wished to see the Mennonite Church look outward, using her unique gifts and heritage to advance the kingdom of God and drawing on the energy of the church's young

50. Ibid.

people to do so. Specifically, they believed that this new vision would focus on peace, service, and relief programs. Its leaders would be called out of a congregationally-oriented church body based on their training and ability. The future mission of the church should be strengthened by greater cooperation among different groups of Mennonites and by a deeper understanding of Anabaptist history and theology. The mission of the church could also be strengthened, they suggested, by a greater emphasis on the gifts of women in the church. Such a renewed church would not only be faithful to its call to advance the kingdom of God in the twentieth century, but would also engage the talents of a younger generation in the church and ensure a vibrant and hopeful future.

Before adjourning, those assembled drafted a preliminary constitution that called for more conferences upon their return to the United States, and they elected an executive committee and a program committee to carry out the preparations for the next gathering. The executive committee consisted of Vernon Smucker, J. C. Meyer, N. E. Byers, E. E. Miller, J. B. Cressman, and O. B. Gerig—all men with progressive leanings. Payson Miller, B. F. Stoltzfus, A. H. Lehman, C. C. Janzen, and A. J. Miller agreed to serve on the program committee.[51]

The American Mennonite representatives present, S. E. Allgyer and Vernon Smucker, advised the young men to exercise caution and moderation even as they returned with a positive review of the conference. Their report, printed in the *Gospel Herald,* noted: "A deep spiritual atmosphere was evident throughout all the sessions and a seriousness of purpose well worthy of emulation by everyone who calls himself a Christian." [52] Allgyer and Smucker praised the young men for their strength of resolve as conscientious objectors during the war and for their commitment to living out their convictions in practical ways through their service in France. "It is the same vision that every true Christian must have," they wrote. Allgyer and Smucker did acknowledge that the movement had its faults but they urged readers to focus on the many strengths.

> The [Y.P.C.] may be unwise and impractical in some of their applications and mistaken in some of their ideas. They themselves realize this and are anxious to work hand in hand with those of maturer judgment. What an opportunity for all of us, old and

51. O. B. Gerig, "Mennonite Young Peoples' Conference" *Gospel Herald*, April 15, 1920, 61.

52. S. E. Allgyer and Vernon Smucker, "Report of Trip to France," *Gospel Herald*, Sept. 18, 1919, 468-469.

> young, to work together for one common cause and one common end, and what a pity if either young or old should be so unsympathetic and uncharitable as to be unable to see the good in the other! Let us not be caught in the snare of distrust and suspicion but let us work together for the glory of God.[53]

Thus, the Mennonite Young People's Conference movement was born among a group of young American Mennonite visionaries in France.

From the beginning the Y.P.C. was plagued with controversy swirling around its tendency toward liberal theology, its reluctance to subordinate its organizational structures to the oversight of the church, its resistance to the lifestyle regulations of the church, and the overwhelming association of key members with Goshen College. Indeed, when the relief workers returned home in the winter of 1920 they were immediately faced with the task of convincing skeptics of their sincerity, orthodoxy, and loyalty to the (Old) Mennonite Church.

Though labeled by some as "Socialists and Bolshevists," Y.P.C. was not a revolution intended to take over the church; rather it was a movement to strengthen and redirect the existing church.[54] Letters of Y.P.C. leaders reveal a concerted effort to reassure skeptical parties of their loyalty. Thus, for example, one Y.P.C. enthusiast, J. Roy Allgyer, wrote to his Goshen College friend Harold S. Bender, who had expressed some reservations about the movement, insisting that the conference would be open for "all interested in the problems of our young people and church. It is by no means an attempt of the younger element to run away from the old."[55]

Indeed, even though the Y.P.C. movement clearly had its origins among young people, its founders did not intend it to be primarily a ministry for youth. Early on they considered naming the initiative "The Mennonite Life Movement" or the "Mennonite Open Forum Movement."[56] However, by the time the leaders returned to the United States in 1920 their program was clearly framed as a "young people's" movement. The report from the 1920 Y.P.C. explicitly linked their platform with the youth of the church:

> We believe that the young people of the Mennonite Church have a place, a power and possibilities which must be developed. We believe in the function of the Young People's Conference to serve

53. Ibid.

54. O. B. Gerig to J. C. Meyer, Nov. 4, 1919, file 10, box 2, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

55. J. Roy Allgyer to H. S. Bender, Jan. 27, 1920, box 1, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

56. Homan, *American Mennonites and the Great War*, 176.

> Christ and the church by strengthening the spiritual life of young people by acquainting them with the needs of the world and the tasks of the Church and by calling them to a greater church loyalty, a more consecrated service and more adequate preparation.[57]

At the same time, Y.P.C. leaders realized that to effect the changes in the church they desired they would need to formulate their critique and vision within a productive and affirmative program. This program would need to acquaint Mennonite young people with the importance and relevance of the church to their lives and to equip them for service to the church. Thus, upon returning home Y.P.C. leaders explicitly presented the movement as an attempt to call young people to dedicate their lives to Christian service. They hoped that this emphasis would win the approval of church leaders.

Y.P.C. at West Liberty, Ohio: Consecrating Youth for Service

Despite ongoing criticism the first Young People's Conference in North America took place as planned in West Liberty, Ohio, on August 28-30, 1920. It was an overwhelming success. The youth who attended the gathering clearly came away with a new sense of consecrating their lives to the church. The program focused on the challenges of young people in the church, called on them to find their "life work" in the church, and educated them in Mennonite history and theology. Although older observers were welcome and many of the speakers were middle-aged adults, the Y.P.C. leaders conceived the conference as primarily benefiting the church's young people.

After the conference, the committee collected reflections on the conference from a large number of participants. The results of the survey underscored the profound impact the conference had on the young attendees. Participants noted especially the value of having a conference that focused specifically on them as young people. One said, "It is high time that the church supply this need; and if this need is not supplied, the young people will, as many have done in the past, leave the church and go to some other church which will supply this need. It helped the young people to have a new interest in the church and see that the church is worthwhile." Another person was convinced "that we have a place to fill in our church [which] makes us realize a responsibility."

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57. "Report of Young Peoples' Conference held at South Union near West Liberty," *Gospel Herald*, Oct. 21, 1920, 590.

Many participants testified to their renewed commitment to Christ as well as to the church. A strong theme emerged of participants acknowledging that the conference awakened new hope and commitment to a Mennonite Church in which they had previously seen little value. One said, "This past year, especially lately, I have been doubting whether our principles are really worthwhile. Now I have a conviction that we have a real message. It is my desire to be a more sincere Christian and not only accept our beliefs because others do but because I believe them." Another attendee enthused, "The big thing I learned was that I have no reason whatsoever for being ashamed that I am a Mennonite. I am proud of it and am not afraid to tell anyone who wishes to know why."[58] Reports also came back of others who were toying with the idea of leaving the church but had been persuaded to remain through the engaging vision of the Y.P.C.

Participants were also impressed by the level of spirituality and intergenerational cooperation exhibited by the conference leaders and participants. According to one, "The clash that many predicted did not have to come." Others noted that the genuine and honest dialogue that took place had helped to break down doubts and prejudices about the conference. Many observed a teachable spirit on the part of the young leaders toward the older brethren who were also involved. "We mean to do God's will first of all," said one attendee. "We can stand to be corrected where we are wrong and are willing to learn from anyone."[59]

Negotiation, Compromise and Failure

Despite the glowing reports from participants, the suspicions that skeptical church leaders harbored against Y.P.C. were not easily overcome. The *Gospel Herald,* for example, continued to publish articles that implied disapproval or even attacked Y.P.C. directly. And Y.P.C. leaders continued to receive letters of opposition from key church figures. Among other things, skeptics accused Y.P.C. leaders of being unorthodox in doctrine, unsubmissive to authority, and tainted by their association with people of questionable repute. Yet even though conservative leaders repeatedly accused Y.P.C. of drifting away from the doctrines of the church, they rarely cited specifics. Oscar Burkholder, a bishop from Ontario, complained to the executive committee that he

58. "Echos from the Young Peoples' Conference," 1920, file 6, box 92, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

59. Ibid.

"looked for a testimony of truth but failed to find it."[60] By "testimony of truth" Burkholder meant a statement on doctrines such as atonement, biblical inspiration, and regulation garb. J. L. Stauffer, a Bible teacher at Eastern Mennonite School, wrote a harsh letter of reproach in the *Gospel Herald* in which he accused the Y.P.C. of a drift towards liberalism and away from what he saw as the "true Gospel of Christ."[61] *Gospel Herald* editor Daniel Kauffman, who frequently referred to Y.P.C. as the "Young Men's Conference" in his editorials, challenged the group to prove itself "in full harmony with the distinctive doctrines, standards, ideals, and practices of the Church."[62] The absence of formal affirmations of doctrines like biblical inspiration, the virgin birth, and the atonement—or statements explicitly opposing liberal theology—left leaders like Burkholder, Stauffer, and Kauffman to assume that Y.P.C. had abandoned the orthodoxy of the church for the freedoms of the world.

Y.P.C. leaders responded by asking for specific instances where they had espoused false doctrine. In a letter to J. L. Stauffer, Harold Bender, a recent recruit, asked, "Can you, Brother Stauffer, point out to me by direct quotation any doctrinal teaching in the report of these young brethren contrary to the outward doctrinal position or our church as shown in the General Conference statements on 'Bible Doctrines'?" Bender even turned the tables by pointing out that Stauffer himself taught premillenialism, a doctrine that the Mennonite Church General Conference had not endorsed.[63] Stauffer replied, saying that it was not so much what Y.P.C. said but what they failed to say. Linking Y.P.C. with Goshen College, Stauffer went on to complain that not one Goshen graduate had publically denounced the trends toward liberal social and theological movements. For Stauffer, this was sufficient proof of unorthodoxy. He also complained that the Y.P.C. emphasized action over clear doctrine, citing an objectionable quote from an anonymous Y.P.C. leader to the effect that: "Since a union on doctrinal grounds is probably impossible, does it not seem possible to unite for activity?"[64] From Stauffer's point of view anything short of doctrinal unity was tantamount to heresy.

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60. H. S. Bender to Oscar Burkholder, Oct. 7, 1920, file 7, box 92, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

61. J. L. Stauffer, "Meditations on the Report of the General Conference of Mennonites in France in Reconstruction Work," *Gospel Herald*, Feb. 19, 1920, 891.

62. Daniel Kauffman, "Editorial," *Gospel Herald,* April 15, 1920, 49.

63. H. S. Bender to J. L. Stauffer, March 1, 1920, file 6, box 4, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

64. J. L. Stauffer to H. S. Bender, March 19, 1920, file 6, box 4, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

Y.P.C. leaders responded by saying that issuing statements on systematic doctrine was not the purpose of Y.P.C.[65] In fact, they said, to do so "would have been doing what we are accused of doing—stepping outside our field and trying to take the place of a church conference or other organizations."[66]

The litmus test for sound doctrine according to conservative leaders was adherence to church practice and lifestyle. Thus, Daniel Bender challenged his nephew, Harold. The Y.P.C. should be absolutely clear, he said, "on such doctrines as separation from the world . . . dress, ornamentation, conformity to church practices, amusements, world movements, etc."[67] On many of these points, however, Y.P.C. progressives were reluctant to submit to the standards of their conservative leaders, and they resented that their loyalty to the church rested on these external measures.

Critics also accused Y.P.C. of associating too closely with the progressive element at Goshen College. In the years leading up to 1923, Goshen College struggled for its very survival in the face of criticism from conservative constituents that it had been infected with a progressivist spirit. That the most outspoken leaders of Y.P.C. were graduates of Goshen College did not help their cause. Daniel Bender cited these associations as one of his main concerns. Unless Y.P.C. made a concerted effort to distance itself from Goshen College, Bender insisted, he would not be able to support the movement in any form. Y.P.C. leaders lamented that they were being judged not by the vision of the movement itself but by external factors such as who their friends were and where they went to school. As Jesse Smucker, a Y.P.C. member, wrote in the spring of 1921, "All who are connected with the Y.P.C. are on trial and the Y.P.C. is justified or condemned not so much because of what it may claim to stand for but because of the leaders of it."[68]

Perhaps most significantly, Y.P.C. opponents felt that the movement was not in alignment with the governing structures of the (Old) Mennonite denominational organizations and leaders. In short, the Y.P.C. had not submitted appropriately to church authority. In light of the fact that Y.P.C. had originally been formed essentially as a critique of church authority, leaders of the movement struggled to convince church authorities that it was working with and not against the church. Some in

65. H. S. Bender to J. L. Stauffer, March 1, 1920, file 6, box 4, Bender Papers, MCA-G.
66. H. S. Bender to Oscar Burkholder, Oct. 7 1920, file 7, box 92, Bender Papers, MCA-G.
67. D. H. Bender to H. S. Bender, Nov. 25, 1920, file 4, box, 1, Bender Papers, MCA-G.
68. Jesse Smucker to H. S. Bender, May 17 1921, file 3, box 4, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

the governing body of the Mennonite Church found Y.P.C.'s emphasis on democracy especially threatening, and they rankled at the accusation that church leaders were being "autocratic."[69] To their ears the cry for democracy was a rejection of authority and evidence of how the Y.P.C. had been influenced by modern liberalism.

Some argued that Y.P.C. was simply unnecessary since existing committees of the Mennonite General Conference had already been charged with the responsibility to nurture the youth. Still others agreed that Y.P.C. was an illegitimate organization because it had not been endorsed by key church leaders. One of Daniel Bender's concerns was that there "was nothing or very little along the lines of giving recognition to church leaders who have tried to maintain the doctrines of the church and hold out young people for Christ and the cause. The same can be said of church authority and government."[70] When pushed to explain exactly how Y.P.C. members were disloyal to the church, leaders responded with reports of men who participated in such worldly activities as attending the theater, taking life insurance, drinking, dancing, smoking, growing a mustache, and wearing a soldier's uniform.[71]

J. L. Stauffer in particular took issue with Y.P.C.'s alignment with principles of liberal democracy. In a letter to Harold Bender, Stauffer named the problem of individualism that democracy promoted and argued that it was not the way of the church. "In the democracy the voice of the people is law and can change the constitution. This cannot be done in the church. *Accuse the young men of abandoning the peculiarities of the Mennonite Church*."[72] Here, Stauffer's reaction against individualism and democracy in the church was in genuine opposition to J. C. Meyer's belief that the church should be run more democratically so that the voice of the individual could be heard.

In September 1920, the Y.P.C. controversy became even more divided along lines of church loyalties. On September 27, the Virginia Mennonite Conference took an official position against Y.P.C., stating: "We are not in sympathy with its origin nor sanction its continuation."[73] The statement went on to assert that church conferences should be

69. O. B. Gerig to H. S. Bender, March 2, 1920, file 1, box 2, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

70. D. H. Bender to H. S. Bender, Nov. 25 1920, file 1, box, 2, Bender Papers, MCA-G. These accusations were based more on rumor and exaggeration than on fact.

71. J. L. Stauffer to H. S. Bender, March 19, 1920, file 6, box, 4, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

72. Ibid [emphasis in the original].

73. "Minutes of Virginia Mennonite Conference," *Gospel Herald*, Oct. 28, 1920, 606.

responsible to provide for the welfare of young people. This official expression of opposition forced church members to choose sides and led to even more polarization within the church. When Y.P.C. program planners tried to include moderate conservative speakers on their program the responses were often negative or noncommittal. Some moderates seemed interested in being involved in the conferences but were not willing to risk their reputations by doing something contrary to an official ruling.[74] It seemed that until the Y.P.C. came directly under the control of the denominational leaders it could have no future inside the church.

After the 1920 West Liberty conference the future of Y.P.C. was unclear. Would the young reformers continue to seek change within the church or would they take their vision elsewhere? To remain in the church meant that Y.P.C. leaders would need to navigate the politics of existing church structures. In 1920, the sentiment was inclined toward patience. Indeed, even the most radical Y.P.C. leaders still expressed a deep commitment to work within the church. Orie B. Gerig is a good example. A bright and gifted young leader, Gerig knew that the (Old) Mennonite Church would not be able to provide the vocational opportunities that he could find elsewhere. More than once, Gerig admitted, he had considered pursuing a vocational path that would "not permit Mennonite Church privileges." But, "the more I think of it," he continued in a letter to Harold Bender, "the more am I convinced that it is a most cowardly thing to do. It smacks of self-interest so strong that it makes me ashamed of myself. Our problem is within the church and our real and only point of vantage is to work from the inside as long as possible."[75] To do that, Gerig concluded, meant a willingness to work in the rural communities. Thus, Gerig had tentatively decided to move back to the farm and work among the people as long as they would receive him as a member in good standing.

Yet despite a stated desire to work for change within the existing structures of the (Old) Mennonite Church, the most radical Y.P.C. leaders were ultimately not willing to subordinate their ideals for the sake of church unity. They were ready to counsel patience and to adjust their methods in order to gain broader support; but they were not willing to compromise their convictions. By contrast, more moderate leaders, like Harold Bender, placed a higher value on church unity, were willing to exercise greater patience, and were ready to employ more

74. D. H. Bender to H. S. Bender, Dec. 15, 1920, file 1, box 2, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

75. O. B. Gerig to H. S. Bender, March 2, 1920, file 1, box 2, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

flexible strategies in continuing their struggle for church reform. These differences soon found expression as deep tension within Y.P.C. as the movement sought to gain its footing within the church.

A Delicate Balance – Bender Assumes Leadership of Y.P.C.

At the 1920 conference Harold Bender was elected the chairman of the Y.P.C. executive committee. Bender had been educated in the progressive milieu at Goshen but had also spent time teaching at the more conservative Hesston College and had learned to work well in that setting. Initially, he had expressed hesitations about the Y.P.C., particularly with regard to the critical attitude taken by the early group in Haverford toward church leaders. However, the movement's vision for reform caught Bender's imagination. In fact, when the outspoken J. L. Stauffer rebuked the Y.P.C. in the *Gospel Herald*, it was Bender, not Gerig or Meyer, who rose to its defense.[76] As a recent member of the movement who had not been present at the Clermont conference, Bender's leadership brought a new dynamic to the leadership of Y.P.C. He entered the movement at a crucial moment when Y.P.C. was forced to negotiate its original vision within the constraints of the church at home—he would go on to play a significant role in shaping these negotiations.

Although momentum was high coming out of the 1920 conference at West Liberty, increased disapproval from the church and tensions within the Y.P.C. leadership on how best to move forward prevented the group from holding a conference in 1921. Nor did they make a presentation to the General Conference held that August. Instead, they wrote a personal letter to Bishop Sanford C. Yoder explaining the purpose of Y.P.C. in the hope that they might win the sympathy of at least one influential leader. Treating the letter as if it were addressed to the entire assembly, Yoder responded with a formal statement, saying that any new movements should be conducted through existing agencies and, therefore, the General Conference was unable to give approval to Y.P.C.

From the fall of 1920 through the following summer the Y.P.C. executive committee struggled to reach consensus on how to proceed. For the first time, the Y.P.C. leadership included members who had not been at the original conference in France and did not share the same experiences as conscientious objectors and as relief workers in France. By

76. Gerig to Meyer, March 5, 1920, file 10, box 2, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

enlisting leaders who were not "tainted" by Clermont, the group hoped to demonstrate that the movement was churchwide in its scope, not just the project of disaffected relief workers in France. Yet this also brought new tensions to the leadership committee. Although the group agreed broadly on the mission and purpose of the movement, they were not of one mind about the best methods for promoting the vision. Could Y.P.C. receive official endorsement from the church while still maintaining its ideals?

Bender believed that if Y.P.C. was to have a widespread impact on the church it would need to win the approval of church leaders. As chairman of the executive committee, he actively sought that approval. Bender worked hard to ensure that conservative-minded men were represented on the committees and as speakers or moderators on the programs of the conferences. He strongly urged trusted leaders like Paul Erb, Chris Graber, and Jacob Burkhard to serve on the Y.P.C. constitution committee. When Graber and Burkhard declined, Bender asked them several times to reconsider. His approach was to present the Y.P.C. vision slowly and eventually bring the church along with them. In the summer of 1921, Bender expressed his views to the executive committee:

> We cannot hope to conduct regularly a church wide conference for young people without the moral support and encouragement of our church leaders, nor would we wish to do so. It is becoming increasingly manifest that to secure this support the Y.P.C. must eventually come under the control and direction of general conference in some way or other. It is my conviction that we must begin to shape our policy wisely and consistently toward that end from this time on.[77]

However, not everyone agreed. Payson Miller, Paul Witmer, O. B. Gerig, and others were afraid that if Y.P.C. allowed itself to become controlled by the church leaders its goals would not be realized. Witmer told Miller, "Some, not all, but the ruling spirits of the Gen Conf. at the present time, feel that they must oppose everything that does not subscribe 'in toto' to their program. If the YPM is not to their liking they will not be a whit more friendly towards it under its official wing than they are as it now stands." Witmer offered the example of what happened to Goshen College—which had previously been independently owned—when the church took control of it. The precarious state of the college in 1920 was proving just how challenging

77. H. S. Bender to Y.P.C. Committee, Aug. 15, 1921, file 7, box 92, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

that affiliation could be. Witmer did not want the same for Y.P.C. Therefore, Witmer said, "I am in favor of treating with the greatest respect all the advice even in points where our judgment differs from theirs, but we should not put them into a position where they must stand sponsor for the YPM and take criticisms that should be counted to the credit of the people who are active in the work of the YPM."[78]

The more progressive Y.P.C. leaders felt that Bender's leadership was transforming the young radical movement into an organization that too closely resembled the very denomination the movement was trying to reform. Payson Miller, for example, critiqued Bender for using too much "I" language. The whole point of the movement for Miller was that it was no single "I" but rather "We" who make up the movement. Miller also thought Bender was getting too many "older brethren" involved in a movement that was supposed to be about young people. Miller also expressed concern that Bender was the head of two Y.P.C. committees—the executive and the constitution committees—when part of the movement's goal was to get away from committees where a few persons dominated.[79] He further encouraged Bender to keep Y.P.C. free from "insidious politics." "I trust that in making concessions to the more conservative elements," he continued, "you have had in mind that they were not only concessions. . . , but changes [that] would not destroy the purpose of the conference."[80] Miller went on to admonish Bender not to lead the Y.P.C. like church leaders led the denomination. After all, the purpose of Y.P.C., he insisted, "is not to propagate doctrine formulated into specific creed, but rather to inspire and uplift men."[81] Paul Witmer was less discreet when he told Bender, "I believe that you suggested a course that was full of danger to the best interests of our church. I fear you are not sufficiently aware of the danger of placating the brethren to the point of becoming a party to their schemes."[82]

Undeterred, Bender continued to believe that it was possible to find a middle ground in the debate and to negotiate with both conservatives and liberals alike. He responded to the rising criticism from his more progressive friends with an argument that the dogmatism exhibited by young progressives was not that different from what he had observed in church leaders:

78. Paul Witmer to Payson Miller, Nov. 30, 1920, file 7, box 92, Bender Papers, MCA-G.
79. Payson Miller to H. S. Bender, July 23, 1920, file 9, box 3, Bender Papers, MCA-G.
80. Payson Miller to H. S Bender, April 1, 1923, file 7, box 92, Bender Papers, MCA-G.
81. Ibid.
82. Paul Witmer to H. S. Bender, Sept. 17, 1921, file 10, box 4, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

> The suspicion which has arisen against me because I have opinions differing from some of our more radical Goshen friends or because I have not come out denouncing the church and kicked the traces, seems to me has arisen out of a quite narrow and dogmatic state of mind, also one that is just as anxious to press everybody into the same mold of thought and action as that of some of our more dogmatic and less cultured leaders.[83]

In the midst of these negotiations, Y.P.C. held another successful conference in 1922 at Sterling, Illinois. The gathering included nearly fifty speakers, a variety of music ensembles, and several hundred participants. The program included many of the original Y.P.C. participants who had been at the Clermont conference and were connected to Goshen College such as J. C. Meyer, Raymond Hartzler, Lester Hostetler, Noah E. Byers, and C. Henry Smith. But it also included several new young leaders such as Oscar Burkholder, Noah Oyer, and Orie O. Miller, many of whom had at first been hesitant about Y.P.C. As in previous conferences, the group addressed topics on the Christian life, missions, and Mennonite theology and history. Despite positive reactions from several conservatives, the *Gospel Herald* published no report of the conference. Nevertheless, the Y.P.C. was on its way to winning the support of conservatives, and the executive committee planned to hold a conference the following year.

The Y.P.C. gathering at Sterling marked a clear shift toward moderation. Although many of the original progressives were still present at Sterling, the increased presence of conservative speakers and participants resulting from Bender's influence led to a tentative balance between conservative and progressive voices.

That balance would not hold for long. Larger events in the church soon overwhelmed the efforts to chart a moderate course.

Crisis in the Church: The End of Y.P.C.

In 1923, as the Y.P.C. leaders began to plan for their next conference, larger tensions within the (Old) Mennonite Church finally climaxed into a major crisis at Goshen College and within several Mennonite conferences, particularly in Indiana and Ohio. In May 1923, the Mennonite Board of Education announced that Goshen College would be closed for the 1923-1924 academic year. Financial troubles, exacerbated by a rising tide of criticism from constituents regarding its

83. H. S. Bender to Y.P.C. Committee, Aug. 15, 1921, file 7, box 92, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

progressive leanings, made it impossible to keep the school open. Further drama unfolded when the Indiana-Michigan conference revoked the credentials of numerous pastors who were allegedly at variance with the standards of the conference on the issue of dress and life insurance. As a result of these events, more than 400 church members in the Indiana-Michigan Conference left the (Old) Mennonite Church for the General Conference Mennonite Church and other churches.[84] A similar drama unfolded in the Ohio Mennonite and Eastern Amish Mennonite conferences.[85] These events had a great impact on the people most closely connected with Y.P.C. Most of the original Y.P.C. leaders, along with their likeminded friends, were among those who left.[86] Three ministers who lost their ordinations in Indiana-Michigan Conference—I. R. Detweiler, Raymond Hartzler, and Menno D. Lantz—had all been supporters of and speakers at Y.P.C.[87]

The crisis in the church put the Young People's Conference planned for June 1923 in jeopardy and dampened any remaining hopes among progressives that the church might soon adopt reforms. However, Bender and his committee pressed on. In February of 1923 Vernon Smucker urged Bender to carry on with the conference. "What a wonderful opportunity to perhaps encourage some who might otherwise be completely disgusted with the church," Smucker wrote.[88] He was confident that a Y.P.C. focused especially on spiritual renewal would be well received, though it was clear that the Y.P.C. committee would have to prove its orthodoxy and loyalty to the church more than ever. "We would need to be very careful as to the nature of the program which we would put on," Smucker advised Bender. "Sane and moderate speakers would need to be used and the thing pushed in a very conservative and reasonable way."[89] Bender agreed. Promising a moderate program featuring conservative speakers, he convinced the influential conservative Indiana-Michigan Conference bishop, Jacob Bixler, to host the Y.P.C. conference in Middlebury, Indiana, at the Forks Mennonite Church. He also persuaded J. D. Charles, dean of Hesston College and an

84. Homan, "Orie Benjamin Gerig," 759.

85. Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897-1962* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1998), 143.; Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War*, 265.

86. "List of Those Who Left Old Mennonites About 1920," file 7, box 8, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

87. Keim, *Harold Bender,* 143.

88. Vernon Smucker to H. S. Bender, Feb. 23, 1923, file 4, box, 4, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

89. Ibid.

important young conservative leader, to be the keynote speaker for the gathering.

Others, like Daniel Bender, were initially very noncommittal about participating. "I will not say that I will not attend," he wrote to his nephew. "I can make no promise now, and you would better not count on me, but I am open to conviction."[90] However, by the time the conference finally came around, Daniel Bender decided to attend and afterward had good things to say about it. Even the prominent Daniel Kauffman attended the Y.P.C. Although he still couldn't bring himself to endorse the movement, he did say that the conference was "well arranged and the talks inspiring."[91] Against great odds, the 1923 conference held at Middlebury was successful in finally gaining the support of key church leaders who for so long had kept their distance from the movement.

Yet ironically, just when the church seemed to be ready to accept the Y.P.C., the movement came to an abrupt end. Only two of the original Y.P.C. committee members present at Clermont—Payson Miller and Vernon Smucker—remained in Y.P.C. leadership. Although a few progressive-minded speakers remained on the program, moderates were now at the helm of the movement. And when, on June 18, the morning after the last Y.P.C. session concluded, Harold Bender and his new wife, Elizabeth Horsch Bender, left for a year of study in Europe, the Y.P.C. lost its most able moderate leader. Neither Bender nor or any others would take on the task of planning another conference. There were no more conferences after 1923.

Once it became clear that Y.P.C. would no longer be an effective forum for dialogue, the progressives briefly shifted their energy to a new periodical. Created only six months after the last conference in 1923, the *Christian Exponent* became the central voice of the progressive movement in the Mennonite Church. From 1924 to 1928 the biweekly periodical served as an inter-Mennonite paper that embraced many of the proposals first advocated at Clermont. Its editor, a former Y.P.C. leader, Vernon Smucker, featured articles by notable progressives and former Y.P.C. leaders such as O. B. Gerig, J. C. Meyer, Payson Miller, and many others.

The first issue of the *Christian Exponent* included a reprint of John S. Coffman's famous speech, "The Spirit of Progress," given in 1894 at the opening of the Elkhart Institute, the predecessor to Goshen College. In

90. D. H. Bender to H. S. Bender, May 11, 1922, file 4, box 1, Bender Papers, MCA-G.

91. Keim, *Harold S. Bender*, 144.

doing so, *Christian Exponent* aligned itself with Coffman's vision of a church that was both Mennonite and progressive. Many articles appearing in the *Christian Exponent* focused on young people, associating the journal with the young people's movement around the world.[92] Its content emphasized peace, service, international development, and missions. Not surprisingly, the *Christian Exponent* came under the same critique as Y.P.C. Church leaders boycotted the paper, and by 1928 the *Christian Exponent* folded due to financial difficulties.

By 1923 Y.P.C. had managed to win the approval of many church members who were previously antagonistic to the movement. However, the price was high. Though many of the young men came back from France in 1920 with a deep resolve to stay in the church, by 1923 nearly all of the core group had become so disillusioned with the (Old) Mennonite Church that they left. Most joined General Conference Mennonite churches or other Protestant churches.[93]

The story of Orie B. Gerig is illustrative. In 1920, Gerig had talked of moving back to the family farm in Ohio to work among the people of the church. However, the repeated discouragements in the next months led Gerig to believe that the problems between Y.P.C. and traditionalist church leaders were irreconcilable. Eventually the root questions of doctrine would have to be addressed and when they were, the prospects of finding common ground were slim. In a despairing letter to J. C. Meyer, Gerig wrote:

> Frankly I sometimes feel that we are attempting a hopeless task. The opposing leadership is entrenching itself behind certain specific doctrines which if we do not openly accept will at once spot us. I for one, do not feel sure that when it comes to a show down I can accept them all. . . . When it comes to accepting verbal inspiration, special creation, plain uniform dress, etc. I do not agree with them. Yet any one of these charges will practically mean an open break. Eventually it will come down to this I believe. [94]

In 1921 Gerig applied to serve with the Mennonite Board of Missions. Told that his appointment for service would be approved only if he wrote an article in the *Gospel Herald* denouncing his association with the progressive and liberal movement, Gerig balked.[95] Shortly thereafter, he

92. "Youth Movement, "*Christian Exponent*, Feb. 15, 1924, 52.

93. "List of Those Who Left Old Mennonites About 1920," file 7, box 8, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

94. O. B. Gerig to J. C. Meyer, March 26, 1920, file 10, box 2, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

95. O. B. Gerig to J. C. Meyer, Jan. 19, 1921, file 10, box 2, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

withdrew his membership from his home congregation, the Oak Grove Mennonite Church. "This is the crux," he wrote to Meyer. "The Literalists and the Liberalists can not reconcile themselves together on these grounds. It will be impossible."[96] Gerig went on to be an international diplomat working for the League of Nations and then the State Department, never to return to the Mennonite Church.[97]

The Legacy of Y.P.C.

As an organization, the Young People's Conference came to an abrupt end in 1923. J. C. Meyer later reflected on the perceived threat of the movement saying, "The leaders that dominated the church organization were correct in assuming that [Goshen] [C]ollege and the young people's movement would in time mean the end of the conservative control of the church."[98] Yet despite the seeming victory of the conservative wing, the energy and vision of the Y.P.C. was not lost. Indeed, four decades later, a prominent Mennonite leader and Goshen College professor, Guy F. Hershberger—who had kept a safe distance from Y.P.C. progressives in the 1920s—praised Y.P.C. for envisioning a future Mennonite Church that would eventually come into reality.[99] "I am amazed at the far-reaching, progressive ideas discussed and suggestions made at the Clermont conference," he wrote in 1966. "Most of the proposals are now realized in a real way, but at the time they were quite beyond the thinking of many people through the church."[100]

In the short term, the aggressive, sometimes imprudent, tactics of the original Y.P.C. progressives destined the movement to fail. Yet even though most of the original Y.P.C. visionaries left the Mennonite Church after 1923, their vision continued to circulate within the church, albeit in a somewhat different form. Despite the demise of Y.P.C., the collapse of the *Christian Exponent*, and the departure of many Y.P.C. progressives from the denomination, elements of reform continued to persist in the (Old) Mennonite Church. Indeed, under the direction of a new generation of leaders who were ready to anchor their reforms more explicitly in Mennonite history and tradition, the church gradually implemented virtually all of the reforms that the Y.P.C. had advocated

96. O. B. Gerig to J. C. Meyer, March 26, 1920, file 10, box 2, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

97. Homan, "Orie Benjamin Gerig," 59.

98. J. C. Meyer, "The Young People's Conference Held in Clermont, France, June 20-22, 1919," file 5, box 6, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

99. Theron F. Schlabach, *War, Peace, and Social Conscience: Guy F. Hershberger and Mennonite Ethic*s (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2009), 25.

100. J. C. Meyer to Guy F. Hershberger, 1966, file 9, box 8, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

only a few decades earlier. The relationship between Y.P.C. and these later reforms was not a linear path of direct causation; but the similarities were striking. And they raised important questions about the role of progressive groups in the life of the church.

Several former Y.P.C. leaders, most notably Harold Bender, remained firmly aligned with the church while carrying on central aspects of the Y.P.C. vision. In 1924, following a year of study in Europe, Bender joined the teaching faculty of Goshen College under its conservative reorganization, thereby making it clear that his loyalties remained firmly with the church. Although he sympathized with his "old Goshen" progressive-minded friends, Bender did not believe that the progressive agenda of the *Christian Exponent* would provide the church with a lasting and unifying identity for the next generation. Thus, as a direct alternative to the *Christian Exponent*, Bender proposed the creation of a different periodical that would be more firmly rooted in the historical and theological identity of the church. The periodical he envisioned, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review,* appeared first in 1926 as a supplement to the Goshen College student newspaper, *The Record*, and then in 1927 as a scholarly journal.

In an opening dedication addressed "To the Youth of the Mennonite Church," Bender made it clear that *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* would not be a publication of Mennonite history only for the sake of scholarship; rather, the journal would be a source of renewal and identity for a rising generation of Mennonites. "The Golden Age of the Mennonite Church is not past; it is just ahead," Bender announced, calling on the younger generation to consecrate their talents for the work of the kingdom and of the Mennonite Church. "YOUTH OF THE MENNONITE CHURCH," he continued:

> the church of tomorrow! The heritage is yours, the organization is yours, the talent is yours, the problems are yours, the future is yours. Get the vision, follow the gleam, bend your back to the burden, consecrate yourselves to the task. You are needed, you are wanted, you are able. May God grant the will.[101]

With this vision for the journal, Bender provided an alternative both to the progressive *Christian Exponent* and its conservative counterpart, the *Gospel Herald* (as well as to the even more conservative *Sword and Trumpet*). His approach to renewal sought to avoid the polemics of liberals and conservatives that had divided the church and led to the demise of Y.P.C. In Bender's vision, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*

101. H. S. Bender, "To the Youth of the Mennonite Church." *MQR* 1 (Jan. 1927), ii.

would be a vehicle for the church to find common ground in an awakened historical consciousness. The renaissance of historical interest in the Mennonite Church that followed in the middle decades of the twentieth century not only fulfilled the original Y.P.C. hope that the church would embrace a stronger focus on its historical roots, but also opened the door for many other Y.P.C. concerns to be discussed as well.

During the decades after the founding of the journal other significant aspects of the Y.P.C. agenda—now shorn of its activist, critical spirit and absent from the dominant personalities of the earlier movement—also took root. Again, it was largely Bender who articulated a vision for the twentieth-century Mennonite Church consonant with earlier Y.P.C. positions.

In 1919, for example, Y.P.C. had called for a more vibrant Mennonite peace witness that would strengthen the integrity of Mennonite conscientious objection during times of war. Mennonite C.O.'s following World War I thought that the church needed to improve its peace position, train its young people in peace theology, provide stronger support for its objectors, and develop a more positive and productive peace witness to the world. Although the church moved slower than those World War I COs would have liked, it took significant steps to develop exactly the kinds of proactive peace programs that Y.P.C. had envisioned. Along with other historic peace churches, the Mennonite Church worked with the U.S. government throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s to create Civilian Public Service as a way of providing draftees with an alternative to military service while making a contribution to the nation.[102] By World War II, the American Mennonite Church was much better prepared to rise to the challenges of being a peace church in the face of war.

Y.P.C. had also desired that the church would cultivate a stronger service ethic among its members as a practical expression of its commitment to sharing Christ's concern for justice and peace on earth. They asked for "evergreen" programs in peace, relief, and reconstruction that were not limited to times of crisis. These hopes were soon realized. By midcentury Mennonite Central Committee, organized in the 1920s to provide relief to Mennonites in Russia, emerged as one of the most important inter-Mennonite organizations of the twentieth century. Along with a host of other service and relief programs, Mennonite Central Committee helped to cultivate habits of volunteerism among Mennonites

102. "Civilian Public Service," *ME* 1:604-611.

that have made service a defining characteristic of twentieth-century Mennonitism.[103]

Furthermore, Y.P.C. had asked the church to provide a context to discuss issues of concern to young people and a place where those young people could develop leadership skills. Steps in this direction happened almost immediately. Already in 1924, a year after Y.P.C. ended, the denomination created the Young Peoples Problems Committee and charged it with the task of addressing the needs of youth. The 1925 committee report recognized that "the church now has and probably always will have problems that are distinctly young people's problems and that there is a definite need . . . to [foster and encourage] . . . various young people's movements."[104]

First on the committee's agenda was to work with "Young People's Conferences." However, the Young Peoples Problems Committee assured church members that these conferences would be "conducted by several district conferences" rather than by an association of unauthorized young leaders.[105] The conferences took the form of Young Peoples Institutes (Y.P.I.), which began in 1927. The Young People's Institutes held in the 1920s and 1930s gave way to Mennonite Youth Fellowship (M.Y.F.) in the 1940s and 1950s. These programs provided opportunities for youth in the church to grow spiritually and develop leadership skills. In later years, J. C. Meyer was not afraid to boast that the creation of M.Y.F. was the fulfillment of the Y.P.C. vision. "Must one conclude that the priest has finally caught up with the prophet?" Meyer asked rhetorically.[106]

Mennonite ecumenism was yet another Y.P.C. concern that the broader church would gradually adopt. Through their interactions with other branches of Mennonites during WW I and in relief work afterward, Y.P.C. members were convinced of the great benefit that could come from greater inter-Mennonite cooperation and fellowship. Conservatives, on the other hand, feared it would lead to the erosion of values of their distinctive commitments. In 1925 European Mennonites initiated the first Mennonite World Conference, held in Basel in 1925, with successive gatherings in Danzig in 1930 and Amsterdam in 1936. Initially, North American Mennonites were quite hesitant to join these

103. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War,* 246-256.

104. Ibid.

105. Ibid.

106. Meyer, "The Young People's Conference Held in Clermont, France, June 20-22, 1919," file 5, box 6, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

conferences. They participated reluctantly primarily for the sake of better coordinating inter-Mennonite relief aid for Russian Mennonite refugees.[107] But they were represented at each of the first three gatherings, and by 1948 American Mennonites were comfortable enough with the idea of Mennonite ecumenism that they hosted a Mennonite World Conference on their own territory, an event that J. C. Meyer claimed Y.P.C. had anticipated twenty-nine years earlier in Clermont.[108] More recently, the 2002 merger of the General Conference and (Old) Mennonite churches points to a level of North American Mennonite ecumenism that was only a dream among Y.P.C. leaders in 1919.

Among the other Y.P.C. proposals that eventually found their way into the structure and practice of the church were: seminary training for ministers; professionally educated church leaders; greater attention to stewardship of life and resources; broader inclusion of the gifts of women; and deeper attention to work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. In all of these areas, the Mennonite Church of the twentieth century would eventually implement change and reform that the Y.P.C. had first put forward in the early 1920s, reforms that the church initially rejected but would eventually come to embrace on its own.

The Y.P.C.'s widespread legacy over the next decades was made possible by the decision of leaders like Harold Bender to join reforms with existing Mennonite ecclesiology and values in a way that the more radical reformers of the early 1920s were unable to do. The cost of a more moderate pace of reform and a strategy of change that integrated the innovations with more traditional Mennonite themes was the loss of a generation of progressive leaders. And the reforms themselves reflected the accomodationist strategy. While Y.P.C. was, in effect, a ministry of young people to the church, the Young Peoples Problems Committee functioned as a ministry of the church to young people. The dynamic of young people taking initiative and active ownership in their church was lost in the shift. In a similar fashion, the *Christian Exponent* had a forward-looking vision that could not be captured through a periodical devoted primarily to history. Such were the trade-offs that resulted from Bender's approach of accommodating the largest voice in the church.

Although it is impossible to demonstrate a direct causal connection between the Young People's Conference Movement and subsequent transformations in the (Old) Mennonite Church, the fact that the church

107. "Mennonite World Conference," *ME* 3:640-642.

108. Meyer, "The Young People's Conference Held in Clermont, France, June 20-22, 1919," file 5, box 6, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.

did eventually adopt programs proposed by the Y.P.C. suggests that the Y.P.C. was not a failed reform movement but rather a movement whose vision exceeded its own leadership capacity. Its initiatives were a harbinger of changes that would eventually come despite its own inability to lead the church through those changes itself.

From 1919-1923, Y.P.C. struggled to find its place inside the (Old) Mennonite Church. During those four years its members inspired their sympathizers and horrified their opponents with a passionate commitment to change and reform in the church. Their progressive ideology, aggressive methods, and outward vision challenged the established norms of Mennonite theology and practice. Ultimately, the strain of that challenge was too great for the fabric of the church—already stretched thin by conflict—and the movement failed.

Yet even though their initiatives were rejected, they could not be easily erased from the consciousness of the church. In due time, the seeds they planted would eventually take root and flourish, albeit only with the careful nurture of more cautious leaders. Orie B. Gerig was right when he said, "In the end, our plan will live after all their intrigue has passed on the blemished page of history."[109]

109. Gerig to Meyer, date unknown but sometime after March 2, 1921, file 10, box 2, Meyer Papers, MCA-G.