"Better Right Than Mennonite": From "Egly Amish" to the Defenseless Mennonite Church to the Evangelical Mennonite Church to the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches[1]

TIMOTHY PAUL ERDEL*

Abstract: The gradual evolution of the nineteenth-century "Egly Amish" into the twenty-first-century Fellowship of Evangelical Churches may be interpreted as a classic case of the Anabaptist-Mennonite declension thesis, with evangelical contacts and commitments serving as the catalysts for eclipsing any obvious Anabaptist identity. The Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, for example, no longer goes by an Anabaptist name, retains Mennonite affiliations, or maintains a consistent peace witness. Nevertheless, a closer look at the "Egly Amish" story may suggest a slightly more complicated history that is difficult to reduce to a single, pessimistic thesis about the baneful effects of evangelicalism. Nor is it obvious that sincere biblical discipleship favors only the paths mainline Mennonites follow as over against those taken by groups, congregations, or individuals who seem to have left mainline Anabaptist orbits.

Mennonite identity may be a perennial topic of debate, but today's North America context, which includes weakening denominational loyalty, slumping numbers, and an unsettled institutional landscape has injected a sense of disquiet into discussions of what it means to be Mennonite, along with fears of fading commitment and lost vitality. Commentators offer cautionary tales of groups who lost their Mennonite moorings and suggest how to spot Anabaptist slippage.

---

*Timothy Erdel is professor of religion and philosophy at Bethel College, Indiana, and archivist for the Missionary Church. The author is deeply grateful to the following people for their assistance in this essay: Kevin L. Blowers, David A. Erdel, Paul A. Erdel, Sally E. Erdel, Steven M. Nolt, Stan Nussbaum, Rocky Rocholl, Donald W. Roth, John D. Roth, Calvin J. Rychener, and David E. Schmidt, as well as Royden Loewen, who facilitated the presentation of an earlier draft at the "Ex-Mennonite, Near Mennonite" conference at the University of Winnipeg, October 4, 2014.

1. The phrase "Better right than Mennonite" appeared in the context of a Defenseless Mennonite Church committee decision in 1929 to drop Bluffton College (General Conference Mennonite Church) as a recommended school in favor of Wheaton College (independent), Moody Bible Institute (independent), Fort Wayne Bible Institute (Missionary Church Association—a sister denomination with shared roots in the "Egly Amish"), or Marion College (Wesleyan Church). The doctrinal issue influencing the decision was the moral influence view of the atonement (taught at Bluffton) versus substitutionary atonement (taught elsewhere).

Two recent articles, one by Rich Preheim, the other by Ervin Stutzman, have singled out the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches as a formerly Mennonite denomination that has surrendered its Mennonite name and Anabaptist identity, most obviously by giving up pacifism.[2] These assessments are reminiscent of findings in two landmark socio-theological surveys. Indeed, the trajectories discerned in those studies may have finally sent the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches into an evangelical orbit that is no longer discernibly Anabaptist. The 1972 survey found that the Evangelical Mennonite Church, the forerunner to the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, had the highest "Fundamentalist Orthodoxy" rating among five Anabaptist denominations under scrutiny, while simultaneously ranking the lowest on the "Anabaptist" scale among the same five groups.[3] A subsequent and expanded empirical study, conducted in 1989, came to a similar conclusion, noting that the Evangelical Mennonite Church ranked high in modernity and religiosity (similar to evangelicals), but low (relative to the four other Mennonite groups under examination) in several traditional Anabaptist traits, such as in-group identity (least among those studied despite being by far the smallest group), communalism, peacemaking, and social service.[4]

Adding to the perception that the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches is no longer part of the Anabaptist-Mennonite world has been its formal disengagement from various Mennonite-related institutions. Early in the twentieth century, predecessor groups to the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches played a major role in the formation of several notable Anabaptist organizations, none more so than what is today the Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (AIMM).[5] Over time, however, official ties with other Mennonite institutions, whether church or para-church, have all but disappeared. In 1975 the Evangelical Mennonite Church took action to scale down its formal inter-Mennonite affiliations from eight to four—Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, Council of

---

2. Richard Preheim, "Losing Peace, Losing Identity," *Mennonite World Review*, July 21, 2014, 6; Ervin Stutzman, "Can the Quiet in the Land Keep Their Peace?" *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* 37 (July 2014), 102-107, esp. 107.

3. J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1975), 341-342 and passim. The five denominations under review were the Mennonite Church, the General Conference Mennonite Church, the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, the Brethren in Christ, and the Evangelical Mennonite Church.

4. J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991), cf. esp. 251-272, "Emerging New Identities."

5. Jim [James E.] Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM: A Story of Vision, Commitment, and Grace* ([Elkhart, Ind.]: Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission, 1998).

International Ministries, and Africa International Mennonite Mission—partly because involvement in so many organizations was burdensome for such a tiny denomination.[6] Then in the fall of 2014, after years of cooperation with various Mennonite bodies, the group brought an end to affiliations with Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Mennonite World Conference.[7]

In light of this history, a strong case might be made that Fellowship of Evangelical Churches is no longer Mennonite, and that this fact be lamented as a major loss—a loss both of Anabaptist values within the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches and of a historical constituency withdrawing from the Mennonite world.[8] The story could be seen as a sad one, another all too common and predictable illustration of a familiar Anabaptist/Mennonite "declension thesis"—contacts with modern evangelicalism tend to undermine genuine Anabaptism.

Nevertheless, since a number of other Mennonite and Anabaptist bodies both active and welcome in Mennonite World Conference do not seem to be strictly pacifist in their convictions, is it fair to claim the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches is no longer Anabaptist? And since some other recognizably Anabaptist bodies remain unaligned, does a lack of formal affiliation automatically signal the end of a Mennonite identity? Or, to consider matters more broadly, is the frequent insinuation by prominent Mennonite scholars that evangelical convictions mark the end of Anabaptist commitments a fair one? Is it

---

6. Though there was some further participation in various Mennonite institutions past that 1975 cut-off, e.g., the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches leadership later continued to attend the Council of Moderators and Secretaries (COMS), a low-profile gathering of Anabaptist denominational leaders that meets once a year for informal fellowship, encouragement, and dialogue. The last Fellowship of Evangelical Churches leader to attend COMS was Donald W. Roth in 2000. In contrast to F.E.C. leaders, Missionary Church, which cut formal denominational ties to Mennonite World Conference and Mennonite Central Committee decades ago, began sending a representative to COMS in 1994.

7. Phone conversation with the Rev. Rocky Rocholl, president, Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, Sept. 15, 2014. Individuals and congregations are free to retain links as they will.

8. Timothy Paul Erdel, "Holiness among the Mennonites," *Reflections* [theme issue: "An Anabaptist-Holiness Synthesis"] 10 (Spring/Fall 2008), 5-42, especially the section, "Lamentation," 7-10. Cf. Timothy P. Erdel, "The Evangelical Tradition in the Missionary Church: Enduring Debts and Unresolved Dilemmas," *Reflections* [theme issue: Five Traditions: Anabaptism, Pietism, Wesleyanism, Keswickianism, Evangelicalism"] 13/14 (2011/2012), 74-109; Timothy P. Erdel, "Institutional Changes, Ironic Consequences: The Curious Case of the Missionary Church," paper presented at the Conference on Faith and History biennial meeting, "Cultural Change and Adaptation," Gordon College, Wenham, Mass., Oct. 5, 2012; and Timothy P. Erdel, "Pedagogy, Propaganda, Prophetic Protest, and Projection: Dangers and Dilemmas in Writing an Authorized Denominational History," paper presented at the Conference on Faith and History biennial meeting, "Tradition, Confession, Perspective: Tools & Communities of Interpretation for the Christian Historian," Huntington College, Huntington, Ind., Oct. 11, 2002.

possible that when evangelical and Anabaptist identities converge there could be a reasonable hope for mutual edification and fruitful enrichment?[9]

What perspectives might we gain from an overview of Fellowship of Evangelical Churches history concerning the intersection—for good or ill—of evangelicalism and Anabaptism? Would this exercise also help us better nuance where the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches does or does not fit in the Mennonite world today?

What follows is a brief narrative history of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, and its predecessor groups—the Egly Amish, Defenseless Mennonite Church, Evangelical Mennonite Church—with an eye to what that history might say—or not say—to those who would invoke it as a story of declension.[10]

BISHOP HENRY EGLY (1824-1890) AND THE "EGLY AMISH" (1865-1908)

Bishop Henry Egly[11] was born on April 5, 1824, in Baden, Germany, and died of typhoid on June 23, 1890, on a farm near Berne, Indiana. He immigrated to Butler County, Ohio, at age 15, and then was baptized by Bishop Jacob Augsburger and joined the Amish church in 1841 at the age of 17. After marrying Katherine Goldsmith in 1849,[12] he moved to a

9. See Jared S. Burkholder and David C. Cramer, eds., *The Activist Impulse: Essays on the Intersection of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2012) for contemporary appraisals. A sharper evangelical-Anabaptist dichotomy surfaced in the work of an earlier generation of scholars represented in C. Norman Kraus, ed., *Evangelicals and Anabaptism* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1979), although even here three of the seven authors, namely Ronald J. Sider, Wes Michelson, and J. C. Wenger, showed considerable sympathy to evangelicalism, most notably Sider, "Evangelicalism and the Mennonite Tradition," 149-168, with its strong thesis, "First, if Evangelicals were consistent, they would be Anabaptists and Anabaptists would be Evangelicals," and its softer one, "Evangelicals need Mennonites and Mennonites need Evangelicals."

10. The history of the denomination has been told sympathetically in Stan Nussbaum, *You Must Be Born Again: A History of the Evangelical Mennonite Church*, rev. ed. (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Evangelical Mennonite Church, 1991), 45. The original edition was published in 1980, while a third edition is in preparation. Nussbaum kindly forwarded an electronic version of his latest manuscript as an email attachment on May 23, 2014. In addition, see the following overviews: E. E. Rupp, "Evangelical Mennonite Church," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 2:264-266; John Christian Wenger, *The Mennonites in Indiana and Michigan* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1961), 403-407; Willard H. Smith, *Mennonites in Illinois* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1983), 111-131; and Stan Nussbaum, "Evangelical Mennonite Church, United States (Evangelical Mennonite Church)," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 5:276-278.

11. Henry Egly, *Autobiography of Henry Egly* [1890], trans. Emma Steury (Berne, Ind.: Evangelical Mennonite Church of Berne, 1975), mimeographed; cf. Nussbaum, *Born Again* [1991 ed.], 2-3, 8-11.

12. Henry Egly married Katherine Goldsmith (June 15, 1827-Feb. 27, 1905) on Aug. 24, 1849, just before his call to ministry.

farm in Adams County, Indiana, near the towns of Linn Grove, Berne, and Geneva, which would remain his home base for the remainder of his life. Egly was chosen by lot to fill the office of deacon in November 1850, unanimously elected minister by his home congregation on Pentecost Sunday in 1854, and consecrated as a bishop (or elder) in 1858 by three older preachers from Holmes County, Ohio.

Starting in 1854 Egly began to emphasize the new birth in his preaching, which would remain a trademark of his ministry across various Amish communities in the Midwest. The focus on the need for a crisis conversion jarred some traditional Amish sensibilities, especially when he urged the experience upon established ministers and bishops. Other controversial innovations included a gentler application of the "bann" (1865), the use of church buildings (1871, though continuing the practice of an all-church meal following worship), and the addition of Sunday school (1875), which was still a contentious issue for Mennonites as well as Amish. A network of people supportive of Egly's emphases, often connected by immigrant kinship, emerged in the mid-nineteenth century.[13] The new group of "Egly Amish" held its first convention in Berne in 1883, where traditional Amish dress and grooming habits (e.g., women's head covers and men's beards) were firmly upheld.[14] Conventions would become an annual event in 1895.[15]

It is hard to know how many of the changes Egly advocated originated in some way from personal experience (for example, he had been healed from a prolonged illness shortly before his ordination in 1854), and how many came from the ferment of the times and the persons with whom he came into contact. Egly was in conversation with leaders from at least four other Amish or near-Amish groups also in flux, though he chose to join with none of them: Joseph Rupp (1840-1911) of the New (Reformed) Mennonites in Fulton County, Ohio; Peter Sommer (1811-1874) of the Apostolic Christian Church; John Holdeman (1832-1900) of the Holdeman Mennonites; and Joseph Stuckey (1826-1902) of the Stuckey Amish (Central Conference Mennonites).[16] Egly was also visited and endorsed in 1882 by Daniel Brenneman (1834-1919), a

---

13. Donald W. Roth, "Hunches about Family History Relationships in the Origins of the Evangelical Mennonite Church," *Illinois Mennonite Heritage* 20 (June 1993), 25, 40-42.

14. Nussbaum, *You Must Be Born Again*, 17; Steven M. Nolt, *A History of the Amish*, rev. ed. (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2003), 218-221, especially 218.

15. See the list in *Fellowship of Evangelical Churches: 2007 Annual Report & Directory: 113th Assembly of FEC, Northwoods Community Church, Peoria, Illinois, August 2-4, 2007*, ed. Ronald J. Habegger (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, 2007), 69.

16. Cf. Donald W. Roth, "The Anabaptist and Amish Cradle That Gave Rise to the Egly Amish and the Missionary Church Association," presentation to the Missionary Church Historical Society, Warsaw Missionary Church, Warsaw, Ind., Sept.9, 2006, outline printout (photocopied).

founder of the Reforming (or Reformed) Mennonites (later, through various mergers, to become the Mennonite Brethren in Christ).[17] It is also clear from Egly's *Autobiography* that he was quite impressed during a trip to Pennsylvania in May-June 1886 with the teachings of John H. Oberholtzer (1809-1895), an organizer of the General Conference Mennonite Church; and it appears that he was in contact with William Gehmen (1827-1918), a founder of the Evangelical Mennonites of Pennsylvania, which also became a constituent part of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ.[18] In 1889, the year before his death, Egly approached John F. Funk (1835-1930) in order to arrange for the printing of a hymnal, apparently gaining Funk's broader approval.[19]

Egly's followers remained Amish in plain dress and with respect to many other customs, such as foot washing and greeting one another with a holy kiss, as well as retaining prohibitions against musical instruments (reaffirmed 1887) and photography, and declining in 1883 to endorse Bibles that included pictures. Pacifism was assumed, as was a stance against seeking redress through legal suits, though Egly was once hauled into court in Decatur, Ind. (1887), where he was acquitted of charges brought against him by John Biberstine, a disaffected former member who sued Egly for $3,000. Egly's defense cost his church $175.

After Egly's death, new developments continued among the Egly Amish. On November 1, 1895, the group opened Bethany Bible Institute in conjunction with its Bethany Home (established 1888 in Bluffton, Ohio), making it the first institution of higher education within an Amish Mennonite context.[20] The first foreign missionary, Mathilde Kohm (later

---

17. Daniel Brenneman, "Missionary Tidings" *Gospel Banner*, Dec. 1, 1882, 181. At this point, Brenneman was a member of the Evangelical United Mennonites and the *Gospel Banner* was the group's publication. The Evangelical United Mennonites became, through merger, the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, later renamed the United Missionary Church and today the Missionary Church, Inc. Brenneman would be accused of abandoning his Mennonite heritage, but to his dying day he insisted that his banishment by Mennonites at Yellow Creek, Ind., did not mean he had surrendered his Anabaptist heritage. Although he cooperated with various evangelical denominations and championed Pietist and Wesleyan as well Mennonite teachings, he blocked any merger with bodies that were not fully committed to biblical pacifism. See Daniel Brenneman, "Letter from Daniel Brenneman to C. Henry Smith," *Reflections* 6 (Spring/Fall 2002), 41-50.

18. Egly, *Autobiography*, 14-15.

19. Wenger, *Mennonites in Indiana*, 404. According to Wenger, Funk noted in his diary: "They ['Egly Amish'] seem to be warm and devoted Christians"; and "They are positive Mennonites and we cannot discard them."

20. A sampling of early school documents, including fliers, photographs, prospectuses and catalogs of offerings (in English and German, the two languages in which classes were offered), graduation programs, student lists, and similar materials are held by the Missionary Church Archives and Historical Collections, Bethel College, Mishawaka, Ind.—Missionary Church Association Collection, sub-collection VI: Colleges, Box VI-1, Files 1-2. The dates normally given for Bethany Bible Institute are 1895-1901, but there is one student list from as late as 1904, when the school briefly reopened in Bluffton as "The Bible School

Stevenson), was sent to the Lower Congo in 1896 under the Christian & Missionary Alliance, then later with the Swedish Missionary Society. This would be an early link in a chain of events that would lead to the formal founding of the Congo Inland Mission by 1912, today known as Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission. In 1896 the Salem Orphanage Association was founded near Flanagan, Illinois, a ministry that continues to this day as Salem Ranch and Salem4Youth. Two years later (July 23, 1898) marked the first recorded use of the term "Defenseless Mennonites" for an Egly Amish congregation—Salem Church in Gridley, Illinois,[21] presumably a reference to the subtitle of *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*,[22] though it would not become the official denominational name until the church as a whole incorporated in the state of Illinois in 1908.

Launching institutions and sponsoring missionaries may have energized Egly's heirs, but perceived doctrinal innovation at the turn of the century tore the group apart. From the perspective of charismatic leadership, Bishop Henry Egly's obvious successor was J. E. Ramseyer (1869-1944),[23] a young Amish farmer turned preacher from Ontario whose life had been transformed by a three-day ecstatic, "willow-bush" (or "Pentecost") experience in July 1891 near Elkton, Michigan, that marked his ministry for the remainder of his life. Ramseyer's preaching

---

of the Missionary Church Association," before being relocated later that year in Fort Wayne, Ind.

The links between the "Egly Amish" and Bethany Bible Institute have generally been forgotten, in part because the name "Defenseless Mennonites" is sometimes used anachronistically, so that the Amish element is overlooked; this occurred in part because its leaders would join the ("Egly Amish" off-shoot) Missionary Church Association just three years later in 1898; in part because the Bethany Bible Institute was a precursor to an Missionary Church Association school re-founded in 1904 in Fort Wayne, Ind., as the Missionary Church Association Bible Training School/Fort Wayne Bible Training School, then Fort Wayne Bible Institute, then Fort Wayne Bible College, then Summit Christian College, then Taylor University, Fort Wayne, which was closed by Taylor University, Upland, in 2009. See Jared F. Gerig, "*A Vine of God's Own Planting": The Story of Fort Wayne Bible College* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Fort Wayne Bible College, 1980); William C. Ringenberg, "A Brief History of Fort Wayne Bible College," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54 (April 1980), 135-155; and William C. Ringenberg, *Taylor University: The First 150 Years*, rev. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), especially 257-275. Central Mennonite College (today Bluffton University) would be founded some four years later (1899) in the same town as the Bethany Bible Institute.—Cf. Perry Bush, *Dancing with the Kobzar: Bluffton College and Mennonite Higher Education, 1899-1999* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press, 2000), though Bush makes no mention of Bethany Bible Institute.

21. Nussbaum, *Born Again* [1991 ed.], 23.

22. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1938 [2001 printing with improved reproductions]).

23. See Nussbaum, *Born Again* [1991 ed.], 12: "Ramseyer was the logical young man for Egly's mantle."

among "Egly Amish" congregations had a powerful effect, but he simultaneously introduced ideas adapted from the Christian and Missionary Alliance, as well as his own experience, among them baptism by immersion (instead of pouring), the need for a second crisis experience with the Holy Spirit *after* conversion, a strong emphasis on divine healing, and *non*-dispensational premillenialism, reflecting the fourfold Gospel of A. B. Simpson—namely, Jesus Christ as Savior, Sanctifier, Healer, and Coming King.[24] Controversy over Ramseyer's teaching resulted in a decisive split on August 29, 1898, and the founding of the Missionary Church Association (today part of the Missionary Church Inc.). At least two of Bishop Henry's six sons, Joseph and Abraham, joined in the founding of Ramseyer's new denomination, and family lore suggests Henry himself may have seen the need for a second crisis, a post-conversion work of sanctification, shortly before his death.[25]

The general effect of the schism on the Egly Amish was devastating, with nearly every congregation splitting in two.[26] Within a short time

24. See Joseph E. Ramseyer, *Dwell Deep: A Series of Devotional Messages on the Deeper Christian Life* (Berne, Ind.: Bible Truth Publishers, 1948); cf. Macy Garth [Mrs. J. E.] Ramseyer, *Joseph E. Ramseyer: "Yet Speaking"* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Fort Wayne Bible Institute, 1945); and also John Pritchard Amstutz, "The Life of Joseph E. Ramseyer: Founder of the Missionary Church Association" (Th.M. thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1948). It is probably worth noting that the premillennialism Ramseyer taught was not a dispensational premillennialism, though many have assumed it was. Ramseyer retained a Christo-centric Anabaptist hermeneutic that began with the teachings of Jesus, though one with a Lucan [Wesleyan and Keswickian] emphasis on Pentecost as well, given his personal "willow-bush" experience. Ramseyer explicitly rejected both Reformed and dispensational approaches to Scripture that preferred a "Pauline" focus and minimized the Sermon on the Mount.—See Ramseyer, "Tension between Traditions: Introduction to a Letter of Concern from President J. E. Ramseyer to the Missionary Church Association, 31 July 1922," with an introduction by Timothy Paul Erdel, *Reflections*, 13/14 (2011/2012), 112-117. The premillennial theme was seen as a motivation to live holy lives and as an incentive to missionary outreach, rather than trying to pinpoint precise dates on a prophetic chart. Hence, Ramseyer's prophetic preaching emphasized morals and missions rather than speculations about the future. The missionary thrust was so central it gave rise to the denominational name "Missionary Church Association." By the 1940s, two generations later, among Defenseless Mennonite Church (and then the Evangelical Mennonite Church) enough influences had flown in from the Wesleyan-holiness and Keswickian-holiness movements that these doctrines were no longer unacceptable. J. A. Huffman, Mennonite Brethren in Christ preacher, author, and professor, proved a popular speaker to Evangelical Mennonite Church audiences and may have done more than anyone else to promote Wesleyan perfectionism in Evangelical Mennonite Church circles.—See Nussbaum, *Born Again* [1991 ed.], 45 and 47-48n. Among other matters, a number of ministers had attended holiness schools such as Asbury Theological Seminary. But the Wesleyan-holiness emphases did not last forever, and today several Fellowship of Evangelical Churches pastors exhibit a neo-Calvinist bent.

25. As a great-great grandson of Bishop Henry Egly, I have heard a story to this effect, but am not sure how to properly verify such a claim at this time.

26. Donald W. Roth asserted that the "Defenseless" in the Defenseless Mennonite nomenclature came from the sense of helplessness on the "Egly Amish" side in the wake of the split with the Missionary Church Association (Don Roth, "What's in a Name?" *EMC*

period there were rival groups meeting within view of the original buildings, the younger Missionary Church Association body frequently emerging as the larger of the two.[27] Only the Salem congregation in Illinois remained intact, neither dividing in two nor losing members to the new movement.[28] Nevertheless, the Egly Amish carried on and in 1907 voted to begin a city mission near Chicago's infamous stockyards, getting the project underway the following year and building on work that Egly Amish individuals had actually been doing since as early as 1892.

THE DEFENSELESS MENNONITE CHURCH (1908-1948)

On November 6, 1908, the Egly Amish movement formally incorporated for the first time, doing so in Illinois, naming Flanagan as their "principal place of business." They were chartered, however, not as Amish, but as the Conference of the Defenseless Mennonite Church of North America, an important and self-conscious shift in identity, one that had been developing for some time. While it was no small matter to give up the Amish identity in favor of a Mennonite one, the new name did fit the trend of innovation, especially since the Amish label was increasingly linked with the Old Order Amish movement.

Marks of that innovative spirit included formal forays into insurance, health care, and continued support for mission. The traditional Anabaptist stance against insurance gave way to the formation of a church-related mutual aid society in 1917, which in turn led to the development of sister insurance companies deeply rooted in the church constituency—first the Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company, and then also the Mutual Security Life Insurance Company. Mutual Security ultimately collapsed between 1990 and 1994, but Brotherhood Mutual continues to flourish as a business.[29] Two years later, in 1919, what is

---

Today, Aug./Sept. 1998, 4-5). Steven R. Estes, "Never, Never Forget," *EMC Today*, Oct./Nov. 1998, 4, 11, responded to Roth's claim with a suggestion that the term *Defenseless* more likely reflected the influence of the extended title of the *Martyrs Mirror*, given references to that book by both Henry Egly and Christian R. Egle. But Roth's initial observation may still offer a telling commentary on the psychological state of the church during those years, and the lingering memory of a very difficult period.

27. There was generally more sorrow shared and grace extended between old and new congregations than displays of outright acrimony. For example, the "Egly Amish" meeting near Linn Grove, Ind., (today the Berne Evangelical Church congregation) allowed the new M.C.A. group that had broken off from them (today, the West Missionary Church) to continue meeting in their building until they could afford to build one of their own.

28. Nussbaum, *Born Again* [1991 ed.], 13; Smith, *Mennonites in Illinois*, 121.

29. See the commissioned institutional history, William C. Ringenberg, *The Business of Mutual Aid: 75 Years of the Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Company*, (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Co., 1994).

today Meadows Mennonite Home and Retirement Center began as a joint venture with Central Conference Mennonites, as did the Mennonite Hospital in Bloomington. The latter would later merge with the Brokaw Hospital in Bloomington, which also had Mennonite roots going back 1894, to become what is today Advocate BroMenn Medical Center in Normal, Illinois.[30] And in 1945 the Defenseless Mennonites opened their first strictly denominational missionary work (not in cooperation with other groups, whether evangelical or Mennonite) in the Dominican Republic.[31]

The shock of the Missionary Church Association rupture had taken a toll on the Defenseless Mennonites, but during the first half of the twentieth century the group slowly added new congregations and members. The incremental growth continued until the Defenseless Mennonites reached approximately 1,500 members in at least ten congregations by the mid-1940s,[32] then 1,830 members in eighteen churches a few years later in 1951.[33] By that time the denomination had a new name, Evangelical Mennonite Church, which signaled a growing sense of connection with the post-war neo-evangelical movement in the United States and its flagship entity, the National Association of Evangelicals.

---

30. The Brokaw side, though conceived and pledged in 1894, actually opened in 1896 as "Deaconess Hospital." That name reflected the far-flung catalytic influence of businessman-turned-preacher John A. Sprunger of Berne, Ind., a General Conference Mennonite who profoundly impacted many circles and institutions. Sprunger established a series of orphanages and a "Deaconess Society," which overlapped with his Light and Hope Mission Society. He played a role in Bethany Home and Bethany Bible Institute in Bluffton, Ohio. He encouraged the newly emergent Missionary Church Association offshoot from the "Egly Amish" and by 1896, two years before the formation of the Missionary Church Association, had already founded what is today the First Missionary Church of Berne (though Sprunger himself never actually joined). Sprunger also sponsored a mission in Chicago, a hospital in Cleveland, and a home for tubercular patients in Phoenix, where Bethany Home Road bears lingering tribute to the sanitarium. His influence was also felt among the many persons who went overseas as missionaries or entered North American ministry through Light and Hope.—See Max Haines, "J. A. Sprunger," *Reflections* 6 (Spring /Fall 2002), 4-40.

31. Cf. Harry L. Hyde, "Foundations for a Pastoral Training Program for the Evangelical Mennonite Church in the Dominican Republic" (D. Miss. project, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1986).

32. Elmer T. Clark, *The Small Sects in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949), 187. The *1943 Conference Report of Conference of the Defenseless Mennonite Church of North America Held at Morton, Illinois, August 19-23, 1943* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Defenseless Mennonite Church, 1943) has some fifteen pages of minutes (4-19) and over ten of financial records (19-29), among other matters, but no numbers are given regarding attendance or membership.

33. Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), 126.

Indeed, a case could be made that the most significant affiliation the Defenseless Mennonite Church made was when it joined the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, even though it would be one of the smaller denominations in the organization.[34] For many years there was an unapologetic attempt at dual allegiance, both to the Anabaptist-Mennonite world and to the evangelical orbit. Over time, however, the relationship tilted toward the evangelical side of things. While this did not happen overnight, the progression became clearer over the next several decades. The relatively small size of the Defenseless/Evangelical Mennonite Church meant that trying to maintain full participation in the multiplicity of Anabaptist and evangelical institutions that were emerging during the post-WWII period would prove a difficult challenge. Participation in a plethora of organizations ultimately proved overwhelming, and the group began to pull back from some initial commitments in order to devote more time, energy, and financial resources to some of its own initiatives. As the denomination pulled back more often from Mennonite groups than from evangelical ones, its choices illustrated an evolving orientation toward the American evangelical side of its identity.

THE EVANGELICAL MENNONITE CHURCH (1948-2003)

In 1948 the Defenseless Mennonite Church became the Evangelical Mennonite Church. Was the loss of the term "defenseless" a sign that the group was implicitly exchanging a primary emphasis on pacifism for one on the New Testament evangel? Henry Egly had been firmly committed to nonresistance and the Defenseless Mennonites had signed on an uncompromising, inter-Mennonite peace statement in 1917.[35] During the U.S. military conscription that accompanied the Second World War and the Cold War, some members chose civilian alternative service, but more joined the military in noncombatant roles.[36] This pattern of

34. As late as 1975 the N.A.E. listed the Evangelical Mennonite Church as their smallest member group, though by 1989 there were at least eight smaller denominations that had joined N.A.E.—see the lists in Nussbaum, *Born Again* [1980 ed.], 70 and Nussbaum, *Born Again* [1991 ed.], 85.

35. "A Statement of Our Position on Military Service as Adopted by The Mennonite General Conference, August 29, 1917," *Gospel Herald* 6 (Sept. 6, 1917), 420-421, bore the signatures of almost 180 "old" Mennonites, but also representatives from six other Mennonite bodies, including the following Defenseless Mennonites: Christian R. Egle, Chenoa, Ill.; E. M. Slagle, Pioneer, Ohio; and Daniel N. Claudon, Meadows, Ill.

36. The experience of Kenneth John Gerig (1927-2003), from the Salem congregation near Gridley, Ill., was fairly typical. When drafted, he served, but in the Army Medical Corps. Cf. his yearbook from military training, *Medical Field Service School: Brooke Army Medical Center, Fort Sam Houston, Texas: To Conserve Fighting Strength* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co., 1952), where he is listed as a Private First Class in the school's 4th Battalion headquarters detachment.

noncombatancy paralleled the practice of many draft-eligible men in the Missionary Church Association, United Missionary Church, Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches, and Mennonite Brethren Church.[37] Although noncombatancy represented a drift from historical Mennonite and Amish practice, it was also a stance that was clearly out of step with the dominant Cold War sentiments of the time and represented a minority position within the American evangelical scene.

Slow growth continued. By 1973 the Evangelical Mennonite Church included some 3,136 members, and by 1978 the denomination had expanded to 3,507, with a general constituency of 4,544 in 21 churches.[38] By 1990 there were 3,888 baptized members, 4,700 within the larger church community.[39]

While the Evangelical Mennonite Church still did not have its own college or seminary, and though there had been longstanding connections to what had become Fort Wayne Bible College, and though persons from the Evangelical Mennonite Church attended many different schools, during the 1940s and 1950s Taylor University, in Upland, Indiana, became the *de facto* school of choice in the Evangelical Mennonite Church, a pattern that still continues for many in the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches. There were several reasons for this, none more important than the number of faculty, staff, administrators, and board members at Taylor who were drawn from the Evangelical Mennonite Church constituency. The best known was Milo A. Rediger, a longtime (1943-1950, 1952-1981) faculty member, student dean, academic dean, president, and chancellor of Taylor. But there were many others, including one precociously young president, Gregg O. Lehman, also from the Evangelical Mennonite Church in Berne, who had a brief tenure (1981-1985). While Taylor's historical Methodist and Arminian commitments—the school was traditionally aligned with the evangelical wing of the Methodist Episcopal Church—have been replaced by broadly Reformed and dispensational ties and tendencies, four campus buildings named for Evangelical Mennonite Church members would seem to imply a Mennonite influence: Rediger, Gerig, Nussbaum, and Rupp.[40] The Taylor administration so reflected the Evangelical

37. A position articulated by Grace Brethren theologian Herman A. Hoyt as a "nonresistance" stance in *War: Four Christian Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 29-57 and passim.

38. Reuben Short, "Evangelical Mennonite Church," in *Mennonite World Handbook: A Survey of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches*, ed. Paul N. Kraybill (Lombard, Ill.: Mennonite World Conference, 1978), 370-372.

39. *Mennonite World Handbook: 1990: Mennonites in Global Witness*, ed. Diether Götz Lichdi (Carol Stream, Ill.: Mennonite World Conference, 1990), 415.

40. Ringenberg, *Taylor University*, 218-219.

Mennonite Church that the theological shifts at the college might be seen as reflecting what was going in the Evangelical Mennonite Church as well—though there is probably no easy way to sort out a causal relationship. Coupled with the personnel at Taylor was the presence since 1968 of an Evangelical Mennonite Church congregation (today Upland Community Church) that became for many, in a small town with limited options, the "college church." A further reinforcement came from the choice of Taylor as the site for twenty-three straight annual Evangelical Mennonite Church conferences (1981-2003).[41] The symbiotic relationship just noted between the Evangelical Mennonite Church/Fellowship of Evangelical Churches and Taylor deserves more analysis, but my general assessment would be that it pulled the Evangelical Mennonite Church/Fellowship of Evangelical Churches into the evangelical galaxy rather than bringing Taylor into the Mennonite world, despite a persistent Mennonite presence at Taylor. The very fact that Rediger and others chose Taylor, when they were students, over Bluffton or Goshen may say something about prior dispositions within Evangelical Mennonite Church circles.[42]

Although the Evangelical Mennonite Church did not found a college or seminary, it did begin a number of denominational and parachurch institutions. Especially notable is The Christian Service Foundation, established in 1949 as a financial institution dedicated to support church growth and ministry by providing low-interest loans for building projects and similar initiatives. Although just ten of the sixteen Evangelical Mennonite Church congregations from 1949 survived sixty years later, by 2009 the Christian Service Foundation had actually help fund some twenty new church plants,[43] and the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches was beginning to grow more rapidly. Meanwhile, a new foreign mission field opened in Venezuela in 1980. Other initiatives included Miracle Camp and Retreat Center near Lawton, Michigan, in 1965 and LifeChange Camp and Retreat Center near

41. Habegger, *FEC: 2007 Directory*, 69.

42. A similar analysis could be made of the informal relationship between Taylor University and the Missionary Church Inc., which, among other things, supplied Taylor with another influential president, Jay L. Kesler (1985-2000), as well as with Kesler's provost, Daryl R. Yost, who had himself briefly served as acting president of Taylor in 1985. This was so even though the M.C.I. was trying desperately during much of this same time period to support and ensure the survival of two nearby schools of its own—FWBC/Summit Christian College (which merged with Taylor in 1992) and Bethel College, Mishawaka, Ind.

43. Al Rupp, "Christian Service Foundation Celebrates 60 Years: CSF Supports Fellowship of Evangelical Churches's Church Planting Ministry, Building Projects, and More," *FEC Connections 2009*, Spring 2009, 1. http://www.fecministries.org/img/-09_FEConnections_Spr.pdf (accessed online Sept. 24, 2014).

Clinton, Missouri, in 2003. Older commitments continued as well. For example, the Evangelical Mennonite Church continued to play a crucial role in Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission, the organization the Defenseless Mennonites had cofounded as Congo Inland Mission in 1912.[44]

Throughout the history of the Evangelical Mennonite Church, talk of joining with one or more denominations lingered in the background, in part because the church constitution allowed for and even encouraged the possibility of merger. In the earliest years there were multiple joint projects carried out with the Central Conference Mennonite Church (which in 1945 became part of the General Conference Mennonite Church, ending any possibility of merger with the Evangelical Mennonite Church). Given the Evangelical Mennonite Church's historical connections to the Missionary Church Association, including numerous family ties and overlapping links on both sides through institutions such as Fort Wayne Bible College and Taylor University, talk of a possible merger occurred repeatedly. One substantial impediment was the fear that the Missionary Church Association, which had grown much larger, might swallow up the Evangelical Mennonite Church. There was also the lingering pain of the Ramseyer schism, a legacy made visible by the fact that there was a Missionary Church Association congregation more or less within eyesight of each historical Evangelical Mennonite Church congregation except Salem. When the Missionary Church Association and the United Missionary Church merged over 1968-1969 to form the Missionary Church Inc., they tried to include the Evangelical Mennonite Church in their talks, but size again proved an issue.[45]

For about a decade, beginning in 1953, the Evangelical Mennonite Church did enter into a formal alliance with a similarly-sized and similarly-named denomination, Evangelical Mennonite Brethren, a group of Russian Mennonite extraction.[46] Known as the Conference of

44. Congo Inland Mission was renamed Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission in 1972 in recognition of the fact that its work was spreading well beyond Congo (which had been recently renamed Zaire, in any case). Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM*; cf. Stan Nussbaum, "Toward a Theological Dialogue with Independent Churches: A Study of Five Congregations in Lesotho" (Th.D. thesis, University of South Africa, 1985).

45. My father, Paul Arthur Erdel (b. 1927), who as foreign secretary of the Missionary Church Association was an architect of that group's merger with the United Missionary Church, had himself first been licensed for ministry by the Evangelical Mennonite Church in 1950, and had retained warm friendships with Evangelical Mennonite Church leaders and urged them to join in negotiations; he was particularly disappointed when the Evangelical Mennonite Church leadership decided to pull out of conversations about a possible three-way merger.

46. Kevin Enns-Rempel, "A Merger that Never Was," *Mennonite Life* 48 (March 1993), 16-21.

Evangelical Mennonites, the alliance was inaugurated in 1953 on the campus of Grace Bible Institute in Omaha, Nebraska (a school favored by the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren), and the two groups shared a periodical, *The Evangelical Mennonite*, and regular joint conferences.[47] Their very names, arrived at separately, implied similar trajectories. Both had been renewal movements and held very similar positions on almost all issues other than baptism. The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren favored immersion, but both groups were flexible when it came to the mode of baptism. Evangelical Mennonite Church leader Reuben Short proposed that the Conference of Evangelical Mennonites start a junior college that could grow into a full-scale liberal arts school; but that project, along with most other ideas floated in *The Evangelical Mennonite*, never came to pass. In fact, in 1962 the two conferences dissolved and the two groups "quietly parted ways, . . . their relationship the victim of geographic distance, differences in church polity, a lack of broad-based support among their members, and a nascent ambivalence toward their own Mennonite identities."[48] In 1987 the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren changed its name to the Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches.[49]

Finally, perhaps because a number of younger Evangelical Mennonite Church pastors and seminary students studied at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, there was a brief flirtation with its sponsoring body, the Evangelical Free Church of America, during the early 1970s, but then all merger discussions were tabled in 1974 as a drain of Evangelical Mennonite Church time and energy.[50]

---

47. Earlier the two groups had a jointly-published an English-language periodical, *Zion's Tidings*, from 1921 to 1931, which was the result of the merger of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren publication, *Good Tidings*, and the Defenseless Mennonite publication, *Zion's Call*. After 1931 *Zion's Tidings* became a publication of the Defenseless Mennonites alone.

48. Enns-Rempel, "Merger that Never Was," 16.

49. Cf. Cal Redekop, "The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church: From Anabaptist Renewal to Fundamentalist Remnant?" *Fides et Historia* 28 (Fall 1996), 51-68. Cf. also the break of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, Pennsylvania Conference, from the Mennonite Brethren in Christ as a whole in 1947, one precipitated by a turn toward a Calvinist fundamentalism, to become the Bible Fellowship Church in 1959.—Harold P. Shelly, *The Bible Fellowship Church: Formerly Mennonite Brethren in Christ, Pennsylvania Conference* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Historical Committee, Bible Fellowship Church, 1992).

50. See Nussbaum, *Born Again* [1991 ed.], 51-52. There are still other groups that appear remarkably similar to the Evangelical Mennonite Church, some formerly Amish, that at have at times seemed like they might prove possible candidates for merger conversations. One is the Conservative Mennonite Conference, another branch of Amish turned Mennonites.—e.g. *2008 Annual Report: Conservative Mennonite Conference*, ed. Steve Swartz (Irwin, Ohio: CMC, 2008). Cf. Timothy Paul Erdel, "The Challenge of Change," Christian Education program keynote address on behalf of Rosedale Bible College (Rosedale, Ohio), 99th Annual Conference, "The Providence of God," Conservative Mennonite Conference, Iowa Mennonite School, Kalona, Iowa, July 24, 2009; later summarized by Conrad

Perhaps no single congregation typified the Evangelical Mennonite Church more from the 1960s on through the 1990s than Grace Mennonite Church in Morton, Illinois, under the calm, steady, humble leadership of its pastor, Milo D. Nussbaum.[51] Grace began as a church "re-start" just five miles from the historic Groveland Evangelical Mennonite Church, which Nussbaum had been pastoring. The roots of the Groveland Evangelical Mennonite Church went clear back to Bishop Henry Egly's ministry. Some predicted Nussbaum's move from a well-established pulpit to a handful of struggling believers searching for an identity would signal the end of his pastoral career. Nussbaum would instead see his tiny new flock transformed into the largest, most stable congregation in the Evangelical Mennonite Church, with well over 600 members, a solid foundation and resource for many other ministries within and beyond the Evangelical Mennonite Church.

Nussbaum hailed from a farm near Monroe, Indiana, not many miles from Bishop Henry Egly's homestead. He was drafted during World War II, served as a noncombatant in a hospital for prisoners-of-war in China, and wondered whether God was calling him to be a missionary overseas. He attended Taylor University and became a pastor, as well as a highly effective chair of Evangelical Mennonite Church and Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission. In many ways his ministry was quintessentially Mennonite. Modest to a fault, low key, yet firm in his convictions, a person of deep integrity, Nussbaum embodied the teachings of Jesus. His style was one of pithy, biblical insight from the pulpit, not the least bit flashy nor flamboyant. Community, discipleship, and the reiteration of core Christian doctrines were his trademarks. There has even been a preliminary analysis done of the sermons he preached at Grace Mennonite Church down through the years.[52] Though a man of peace who taught the need for reconciliation with enemies, there are no obvious, overt references to issues of biblical pacifism or of war and peace in the 2,770 sermons he delivered from 1958 to 1991, at least not from their brief description as indicated by title, outline, or

---

Showalter, "The Challenge of Change," *Brotherhood Beacon* (Sept. 2009), 7. Another is the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, one of several small Russian Mennonite groups in Canada.—Cf. Jack Heppner, *Search for Renewal: The Story of the Rüdnerweider/Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference: 1937-1987* (Winnipeg: Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, 1987).

51. Selecting a representative pastor is difficult, but Nussbaum's "quality of ministry" clearly garnered as much or more respect as anyone in a 1978 study of Evangelical Mennonite Church pastors; see Timothy Paul Erdel, "The Reading Habits of Evangelical Mennonite Ministers" (A.M. dissertation, The University of Chicago Graduate Library School, 1978), see especially 74-81.

52. Stan Nussbaum, *What Grace Heard: Reflections on Milo Nussbaum's Teaching Ministry, 1958-1991* (Morton, Ill.: Enculturation Books, 2014).

descriptive annotation. Nussbaum embodied peace more than he preached about it or worked for it in activist peacemaking channels. The traditional Mennonite stance on pacifism was neither denied nor denounced; but neither was it singled out and championed as a particular cause relative to many other biblical truths.

If Grace Evangelical Mennonite grew beyond observers' expectations, Northwoods Community Church, located ten miles away in Peoria, has been the denomination's phenomenon of the twenty-first century. Begun in 1990 by Calvin "Cal" John Rychener, who had been an intern at Grace and a pastor at Grabill Evangelical Mennonite Church, Northwoods is a seeker-style mega-church that is today by far the largest congregation in the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, with a constituency of over 4,000 on several campuses.[53]

THE FELLOWSHIP OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHES (2003-PRESENT)

In 2003 the Evangelical Mennonite Church became the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, dropping the name "Mennonite" while retaining the designation "Evangelical." Arguments for changing the name included the sense that the term "Mennonite" handicaps church planters since the popular notion of Mennonite conjured images of buggies, bonnets, and beards; that a modifier such as "Mennonite" undercuts an identity solely focused on Christ by pointing instead to a human tradition; and that liberalizing trends in other Mennonite bodies, namely the ordination of woman and changing ethics around human sexuality, had tarnished any value the name once held. In the late 1990s as the denomination debated changing its name, the president of Evangelical Mennonite Church, Don Roth, added another argument, suggesting that it was not only that certain Mennonites had become too liberal to make the name attractive, but that the Evangelical Mennonites themselves had changed theologically and now held view on hermeneutics and soteriology that fit more comfortably in the mildly Reformed atmosphere of mainstream American evangelicalism. Said Roth, "It is my opinion that from a hermeneutical and salvational standpoint, we are not sufficiently Mennonite to qualify us for the use of that word in our denominational name. At best it causes confusion, and at worst, it communicates a statement that is only partially true."[54]

---

53. Personal conversation with Calvin J. Rychener, Sept. 19, 2014, Fort Wayne, Ind.

54. Don Roth, "Are We Really Mennonite?" *EMC Today*, April-May 1999, 4, 17 (quote 17). See also Don Roth, "To Change or Not to Change," *EMC Today*, Feb.-March 2000, 3-4; "Evangelical Group Might Drop 'Mennonite' Name. Some Say Name Makes It Hard to Attract New People," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, Oct. 29, 1998, 1-2; and "Evangelical but Not

The most outspoken opponent of dropping the name Mennonite was a denominational patriarch, James E. Bertsche, a longtime Congo Inland Mission worker and Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission administrator. Bertsche feared a concomitant loss of Anabaptist identity and, more pointedly, that the proposed name change represented a narrowing sense of primary affiliation with U. S. evangelicals at the expense of a wide family of Mennonites overseas.[55]

A number of signs suggest that Bertsche was correct. The dropping of formal Mennonite affiliations was noted at the outset of this essay. Another rather simple one is that the current Fellowship of Evangelical Churches president, Rocky Rocholl, has his personal roots among Baptists and the Christian and Missionary Alliance, rather than the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, and was on pastoral staff at First Missionary Church in Fort Wayne, though he served as a pastor at Brookside Church (Fellowship of Evangelical Churches) in Fort Wayne before his election to office. Rocholl's personal connections were primarily in the National Association of Evangelical orbit, and two other N.A.E. denominational leaders remain his close friends, President Steve Jones of Missionary Church Inc. and Bishop Phil Whipple of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. (Both groups, interestingly enough, formerly had strong Amish or Mennonite roots).[56] The fact that Rocholl's background was primarily external to the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches was not a complete departure from Evangelical Mennonite Church/Fellowship of Evangelical Churches tradition, however, since former presidents Harvey A. Driver, Gary L. Gates, and Ron Habegger were not Evangelical Mennonite Church "cradle constituency" either.[57]

At the same time, the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches has, since 2003, also welcomed an influx of congregations formerly affiliated with the Mennonite Church USA as they react to what they perceive to be waffling on basic issues of biblical orthodoxy and orthopraxy.[58] So the

Mennonite. Year After Name Change, FEC Says New Identity Fits," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, Oct. 18, 2004, 1-9.

55. Jim Bertsche, 11-page Memo to All General Board Members, All EMC Elders, All Convention Delegates, July 1, 2000.

56. As a side note, United Brethren leadership approached the Missionary Church Inc. in 2003 about a unilateral merger into the Missionary Church in 2005, which was seen by some as a "done deal." The Church of the United Brethren in Christ would simply have become a part of the Missionary Church, but the plan was subsequently rejected by a vote of United Brethren members in 2004.

57. Habegger did have roots in First Mennonite Church, Berne, Indiana, historically a General Conference Mennonite congregation, and both Gates and Habegger married into the Evangelical Mennonite Church.

58. See the *Convention Notebook, 2014 Convention: Ignite: Fellowship of Evangelical Churches: Convention 2014: Thursday, July 31-Saturday, August 2, Northwoods Community Church, Peoria, Illinois*, ed. Rocky Rocholl (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Fellowship of Evangelical

Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, which for most of its history (as the Defenseless Mennonite Church and Evangelical Mennonite Church) had less than two dozen congregations, now consists of some forty-eight congregations, with another ten church plants in progress and still more congregations from the Mennonite Church USA in conversation about possible affiliation. A Fellowship of Evangelical Churches historian, Stan Nussbaum, suggests that this infusion of more traditional Mennonite congregations could actually reinforce the Anabaptist thread within the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, without necessarily transforming the entire Fellowship of Evangelical Churches into a Mennonite quilt.[59]

Reflections

What is the core of Anabaptism? Is it baptism upon confession of faith in Christ? Is it a commitment to pacifism? Is it a formal affiliation with Mennonite Central Committee or Mennonite World Conference? Is it the "Mennonite game" of family connections? Is it defined by Harold S. Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" or a more recently modified version of it? Is it a Christian radicalism that clings to biblical teachings and moral standards while being aggressively evangelistic, planting churches, and engaging in missionary service overseas?

Whether one considers the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches to still be part of the Anabaptist family hinges in part on how one answers such questions. It is all too easy, on the one hand, to write off evangelically-oriented Anabaptists as no longer Mennonite, just as, on the other side, more and more former Mennonites are no longer comfortable identifying with the Mennonite label because of developments in North American mainline Mennonite circles, where traditional understandings of biblical standards on many issues, including same-sex relations, no longer seem to hold sway.

In one sense, the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches is so small that its trajectory could be ignored by larger Mennonite bodies, who may be tempted to dismiss its members as reactionary and obscurantist. But, as someone external to the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches who has worked for decades (however unsuccessfully) to resurrect Anabaptist convictions, including a biblical commitment to peacemaking, within my

---

Churches, 2014), 129-132 and passim. This phenomenon is by no means limited to the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches. The Brethren in Christ and the Conservative Mennonite Conference have benefited similarly in recent years by receiving congregations no longer comfortable remaining part of the Mennonite Church USA.

59. Phone conversation with Stan Nussbaum on May 23, 2014, further clarified by email on Sept. 28, 2014. The term "thread" is his. I have pressed the analogy by adding the term "quilt."

own denomination (Missionary Church Inc.), I suspect the case of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches should be a cause for careful reflection among more mainline North American Mennonites. This is so for at least two reasons.

First, there are numerous denominational bodies (however small some are), congregations, and individuals across North America who are likely to follow a path similar to that taken by the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches in response to those mainline Mennonites, who increasingly seem to tolerate or even embrace a biblical hermeneutic that allows for doctrinal positions that are wide of historical Christian orthodoxy or endorse behavioral standards that affirm such traditionally alien practices as same-sex marriage.

Second, when it comes to Mennonites and Anabaptists in Africa and Asia and Latin America—whose numbers now far exceed those in Europe and North America, and whose congregations probably represent the global future of the Anabaptist movement—I have little doubt that there would be numerous natural affinities with Fellowship of Evangelical Churches understandings of the Christian faith that derive energy from explicitly evangelistic witness, while there is a growing bewilderment among majority world Anabaptists about the directions being pursued by North American mainline Mennonites. Other Christian bodies, including the Anglicans, Presbyterians,[60] and Friends, are going through similar struggles with their core identity, and with the international repercussions of their decisions.

And there is still another reason. Becoming more familiar with the story of the heirs of Henry Egly—looking anew at sources typically outside the canons of mainline Mennonite historiography—can shield other Mennonites from both triumphalist certainty and presentist despair. The story of the Egly Amish-turned-Fellowship of Evangelical Churches offers a reminder of just how rich and complex the Christian story is. Even a relatively small group has had numerous ties to both Anabaptist and evangelical causes, institutions, and networks, at once reinforcing and crosscutting. Its story cannot be caricatured as a simplistic and straightforward loss of pacifism, even if the demise of pacifist conviction is, in fact, one aspect of the group's evolution.

60. I was in attendance at the United Church of Scotland General Assembly in Edinburgh on May 23, 2011, when the decisive vote was taken in favor of the "permissive track" on clergy same-sex marriages. The strongest, most anguished pleas against such a move came from persons speaking on behalf of majority world believers.—Cf. Timothy Paul Erdel, "Is Sexual Autobiography Self-Authenticating?: Assessing Moral and Spiritual Claims from LGBTQ Communities," paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society meeting, San Francisco, Nov. 17, 2011; cf. also Timothy P. Erdel, "'Go Tell That Fox!': Reflections on Religion and the Public Square," in *Activist Impulse*, 321-345.

Reducing a group's identity to one issue masks the character and contingency of history and of the Christian struggle for faithfulness in a world of imperfection and uncertainty—a world in which all of Christ's followers find themselves discerning the meaning of discipleship.