EPilogue

A New Breed of Mennonites

The primary narrative of this book closes in the mid-1970s. In this brief epilogue, I note some of the more significant changes in the Mennonite landscape since 1975. The 1980s and 1990s were challenging times for California, especially urban California, as a confluence of influences put the brakes on over a century of effusive boosterism and gilded mythologizing. The end of the cold war, the shuttering of defense factories, and dramatic decrease in federal defense monies; demographic pressures of increased legal and illegal immigration; and overly strained public services brought about a slow reversal of fortune. Even Orange County—after a mixture of investment failure leading to a criminal conviction and voters voting down a tax increase—went bankrupt, leading to massive budget cuts and the loss of thousands of jobs. On the evangelical front, an exodus eastward had begun as some religious leaders, parachurch organizations, and folks in the pews returned to Texas and Colorado. California found itself in the rare position of having more people leave than move in. Of course, as Carey McWilliams asked so many decades ago, if the existence of California is nothing but swagger, California did have reason to boast. For the seeming implosion of the California dream in the early 1990s, by the late 1990s it returned to dizzying heights with its already diversified economy supercharged in the tech industry, though the Central Valley’s own economic recovery lagged behind the rest of the state.

About thirty years after Daniel Hertzler’s 1970 drive from Fresno to Reedley, amid the Edenic binary of paradise and sin described in chapter 2, the arcadian image of the Central Valley turned sour. The San Francisco
Chronicle ran a series on California in 1999 that read more like Dante’s *Inferno* than the opening chapters of Genesis, and Fresno was cast as the “cautionary tale.” Providing a snapshot of the city, the article on Fresno characterized the raisin capital as wracked by perpetual unemployment, violent crime, political corruption, dead strip malls, and abandoned discount stores, all softened by a thriving literary scene and the coffee shops of the Tower District. Fresno was Bay Area tragedy and Hollywood comedy. Fresno was packaged and broadcast to CBS viewers in the 1986 miniseries *Fresno*—a parody of such prime-time dramas as *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*, where wealthy oil tycoons and vintners were replaced with a raisin empire skewering refinement. That Fresno could be a comic location spoke to public perception, however deserved or not.

In these difficult decades for the Golden State, and inordinate stress on the San Joaquin Valley and Fresno in particular, Mennonites continued to work, flourish, and adapt. As Kevin Starr described the mid-1990s, the Central Valley had a population of 5 million and a robust $16-billion agricultural economy to maintain. As northern portions of the valley were becoming extensions of the Bay Area’s daily commute, the Central Valley as a whole was the fastest growing region in the fast-growing state. This agricultural region, with Highway 99 running the north-south course as a knotted rope, was urbanizing at a rapid clip, and its largest city, Fresno, was experiencing the strains of rapid growth, as other nearby cities were. Pollution, gang activity, and tagging—urban vandalism and graffiti—were drawing the attention of media and government officials alike. Agriculture towns such as Huron, a key center for Mennonite mission work earlier in the century, had now become some of the poorest places in California. Huron lacked print media and schools, but with four labor camps, it did not lack razor-sharp lettuce knives for harvest, meth to numb the backbreaking pain, and a reputation for fighting. It was not just Huron, but the Central Valley was suffering. Methamphetamines were in large-scale production, so that by 2001, a million pounds of byproduct waste was seeping into the ground with an annual environmental clean-up cost to taxpayers of $10 million to mop up labs busted by law enforcement at a rate of nearly one every day and a half. The arcadia of a century ago seemed in fact like a *Paradise Lost*. In October 2001 the Environmental Protection Agency described the San Joaquin Valley as a “severely polluted ozone region,” one of the seven worst in the country. Placed under order to comply with federal standards in five years, it did. Despite the problems rapid growth brought,
the Central Valley remained attractive to people the world over. California, in the words of Kevin Starr, was a “world commonwealth,” and that global diversity was soon reflected among the Mennonites.

A century and a half after Johannes Dietrich Dyck and Joseph Summers arrived in California to dig for gold, two other Mennonites, at the edge of the new millennium, reflected on what California meant for their future. They framed their future around urban development. Mennonite Church USA leader Ruth Suter explained that Mennonites with “traditional” roots had two options: “hunker down in our glorious Anabaptist history and slowly die out” or “embrace the new realities of our diverse communities and celebrate our new emerging identity as an Anabaptist ‘priesthood of believers.’” Suter continued, “For those of us in Arizona and California, the ‘hunkering down’ option just isn’t viable—there are too few of us ‘traditional ethnic Mennos’ to remain a critical mass.” As she pointed out, in 2000, Anglos were an ethnic minority among Southern California Mennonites amid the swelling groups of African, African-American, Hispanic, Hispanic American, Taiwanese, and Indonesian people.

Suter noted that in the Bay Area, a “new breed” of Mennonites worked in the computer and tech industries, often with hour-long commutes to their jobs. These Mennonites often engaged in a virtual online community because they were so widely separated by work, commuting, and other involvements. Unlike those in their agrarian past, these folks lived in communities distant from each other, with little face-to-face interaction during the week. Thus, the church (online and gathered) served as a focal point for their own engagement.

Chuwang Pam, born in Nigeria, moved to America in 1994 and in 1996 started the Mennonite-related Los Angeles Faith Chapel. Pam described the ethnic diversity of California Mennonites in these words: “If our search for a new identity is simply to support the existing structures, we will have questions to answer. If our search for identity is simply to reinforce our glory, we will be missing the mark. Look at what’s happening right now in Los Angeles. Right now as I talk to you, we are on the march for full realization of the new Mennonite church. Today the pure ‘Anglo’ churches in southern California are a minority. Today the majority are people of color—Africans, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. That to me is just a glimpse into what God in this millennium expects the Mennonite church to look like.” A glimpse of the future, perhaps; however, these late twentieth-century observations were at least a century in
the making, as Mennonites in California wrestled with and adapted to changing demographics, social trends, and mission goals.

Embracing changing demographics was to come through making vital choices on how to expend resources, as demonstrated by Mennonite Community Church in Fresno. This small church, as described by Rod Janzen, rejected the siren call of building a large theater-style church with evangelical pop-rock worship music in order to plant a church in Clovis (Peace Community, 1989–1997), which became the Hmong Mennonite Church in Fresno.8

The first two waves of Mennonite migration came at the turn of the twentieth century and again in the 1940s for reasons including health, agriculture, and adventure. As Jeff Wright, Mennonite Urban Ministry director for Southern California, observed, there was also a third wave of immigrants who joined Mennonite churches. These immigrants did not arrive in California with a Mennonite heritage, nor were they of Euro-American ancestry. This new wave was so numerous that by the end of the twentieth century, ethnic Mennonites—descendants of white European immigrants—were a distinct minority. As late as 1978, there were fewer than twenty Mennonite churches in Southern California. Bakersfield for some was the southern border of the Mennonite domain and Southern California just a “wasteland.”9

The makers of the Mennonite renaissance arrived from across oceans. Some of these diverse peoples had been denounced by Mennonites for their beliefs in earlier times or were cited for a host of churchly problems. Immigrants from Africa, Latin America, and Asia had long-established communities in Southern California, and by the 1980s, Mennonites made a concerted effort to plant churches among them. Progressive thinkers on issues of evangelism and church expansion realized that change was rapidly happening around them, and now Mennonites themselves needed to change.

Churches were started in numerous communities in order to meet the needs of Nigerians, Ghanaians, Mexicans, Taiwanese, Japanese, Koreans, and others. The results were encouraging: the few Mennonite congregations in Southern California in 1978 nearly tripled to fifty-six by 1998 and mostly comprised members of numerous ethnic groups speaking a variety of languages. By the end of the twentieth century, according to Jeff Wright, the multiracial mix in Southern California had reduced the number of Euro-American members in the twenty-nine churches of the
Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference approximately to a mere 11 percent!\(^\text{10}\)

Although the numbers are difficult to track, a simple tally of church names in 2000 shows that nearly half of MCUSA churches in California were Spanish, Hmong, Indonesian, Ethiopian, and Taiwanese congregations and that their members made up nearly one-third of the total MCUSA membership in the state. For the Mennonite Brethren, just over half of churches in 2000 were Spanish, Japanese, Russian, Slavic, Korean, Ukrainian, Ethiopian, Indian, and Chinese congregations, composing about one-fifth of the total MB membership.\(^\text{11}\) By 2012, 44 of the 105 Mennonite churches in California were ethnic minority churches (or "churches serving ethnic minority populations"). These congregations combined had approximately 3,000 members, which was nearly one-quarter of the total Mennonite membership (12,567) in California that year.\(^\text{12}\) The numbers for ethnic and racial minority church membership are extremely rough and unarguably low as congregations throughout California were racially mixed, indicating that the number of ethnic groups and their membership was much higher.

Mennonite work among refugees coming to California has a long history too, as we have seen in MCC work. It continued in the post-1960s era as the “boat people” exodus from Cambodia to North America took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though California was not a major destination, those who came were welcomed, cared for, and given assistance to start life again through the efforts of the West Coast MCC, local churches, and FPC. Combined, these Mennonite institutions had the resources necessary to respond to human tragedy in Southeast Asia. Here was one of many intersections of California Mennonites understanding their place in society as markedly Anabaptist, with the cultural and religious capital at hand to help new “outsiders” navigate new surroundings.\(^\text{13}\)

Mennonites had joined the westward migration to California in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, but now at the century’s end, their role reversed as they turned their attention to assisting other newcomers. Over the course of the 1980s, Mennonite attitudes changed on many fronts, including their views of immigration and ethnic minorities. In 1984, West Coast MCC helped establish an office in Glendale at the request of the Greater Los Angeles Mennonite Council to work with immigration concerns. This service was expanded in 1992 to include refugee issues.\(^\text{14}\)

As we saw earlier, Mennonites engaged in missions with Hispanics
who were often employed in migrant labor in the valley’s fields and with those attending the City Terrace Mission in Los Angeles as early as 1926. Eventually, numerous Hispanic churches were started; most were in the Reedley-Dinuba area, but some were in San Jose, Fresno, and Los Angeles. Hispanic Mennonite Brethren churches typically emerged from a mission outreach or as an extension of an existing congregation. Regardless of their origin, the established Anglo Mennonite leaders sought to train Hispanic leadership from within the fledgling congregations. It was a challenge well into the 1980s for these new churches to survive, especially economically. Until 1978 they were not listed separately as Pacific District Conference (PDC) churches, but were counted under the wing of their “mother” churches. Even when the Hispanic churches were counted as full-fledged conference congregations, many still did not have the title to their property and received subsidies from their parent churches into the late 1980s. Thus, some local Hispanic leaders experienced the ambiguity of being suspended between independent congregation and mission church.  

It was not just in Southern California that new churches were planted. The PDC of Mennonite Brethren churches in the 1970s and 1980s started churches or ministries in places such as Bakersfield, Fremont, San Jose, Sacramento, and Firebaugh. This activity coincided with encouragement from the conference for individual church member participation in missions of a Mennonite or an evangelical nature—including Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, and Christian Social Concerns.  

Part of the Mennonite success with these new church communities resulted from developing economic programs to serve and empower them. Economic empowerment for both new arrivals and those living in longer-term poverty was a challenge, and Mennonites decided to take it on. Furthermore, as the embrace of racial and ethnic diversity developed, so too did a Mennonite acceptance of charismatic Christianity. The once-condemned Pentecostalism of the early twentieth century became the celebrated neo-Pentecostal influence of the 1980s, which blended charismatism with Anabaptism.  

As the 1970s and 1980s rolled on, other Mennonite ministries, such as Home Missions, continued to expand, starting churches throughout the state, from the Bay Area through the Central Valley and beyond. Shifting from a funding practice of grants and subsidies for new congregations, Home Missions began to focus on what it called “tent-making” ministries,
where church ministry is supported by the labor of the worker. That is, Home Missions trained people in the skills needed for various aspects of church planting and sent them out to evangelize and start churches. Through the 1980s, the work expanded to include Spanish-language training and ministry.18

As Mennonite Brethren had gathered in Reedley in 1960 to work at unity among various groups and make apologies for an old fracture in Russia (1860), so they met again in 1995 in Fresno, but this meeting was more divisive. The Canadian and American constituencies found themselves more and more estranged, the delegates divided over how to even spend their time together: worship and spiritual exercises or discussions around conference structures. Furthermore, 1995 in Fresno was a significant year for American Mennonite Brethren education. The Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS) was celebrating its fortieth anniversary as it and the denomination were set to decentralize their operations to points in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Kansas, while attempting to retain their “head” in California.

In 2010, MBBS changed its name to Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary and was a separate administrative unit of Fresno Pacific University (FPU). Mennonite Brethren theological education continued in the various regional centers, and by 2012, online instruction reached a global audience from its perch at FPU in the Central Valley. As late as the mid-1990s, the majority of students at the seminary were from Canada, but within fifteen years, Canadian students virtually disappeared from the California location because they could receive a theological education in British Columbia or Manitoba. As with many other California-based evangelical enterprises, the Mennonite trend was also dispersion. Decentralizing the seminary’s outreach, yet keeping its administrative head under the FPU umbrella, was a pragmatic response to changing times.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the seminary developed a highly regarded marriage and family counseling program in addition to its already established programs in biblical studies and ministry training. Over the decades, biblical scholars did not simply contribute to their scholarly disciplines, but readily engaged the issues and struggles in the MB churches throughout North America. Though the MBs delayed dealing with the issue of women as senior pastors longer than some other Mennonite denominations, it was not for a lack of thoughtful reflection, theological examination, and careful biblical exegesis. Already in the 1960s and
1970s, professors such as Alan Guenther wrote serious articles for the MB Herald on the issue of gender and church work. Through the 1980s, the study papers and denominationally oriented publishing continued, with some of the academics cast as “liberal” and others as “conservative” on the issue, many of whom were working at the same small seminary in the valley. The culmination of this gender work for the denomination was the publication of Your Daughters Shall Prophecy (1992), which provided a range of perspectives, grounded in biblical scholarship, for churches to use in their own study groups as congregations wrestled with the issue of gender and pastoral leadership.

Meanwhile, Pacific Bible Institute, founded at the end of World War II, becoming Pacific College in 1960, then Fresno Pacific College in 1976, was renamed Fresno Pacific University in 1997. The first, and only, solely Mennonite Brethren-sponsored university in North America boasted expanding enrollments, programs, and graduate studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

During its institutional journey, the college went through several iterations of Mennonite identity—changes significant enough to warrant revisiting the first “Fresno Pacific College Idea” of 1965. That identity statement defined the essence of FPC and served as a landmark for institutional decision making with seven descriptors: Christian, community, liberal arts, experimental, Anabaptist Mennonite, nonsectarian, and prophetic. During the 1970s, FPC benefited from federal Title III funding to expand its professional programs and graduate studies. Furthermore, the Pacific District Conference (PDC) took ownership of the college from the national denomination, localizing its administration and governance. These developments led to higher enrollments, increased hiring, and questions about the continuing relevance of the 1965 “Idea.”

President Edmund Janzen, in the late 1970s, motivated in part by a looming accreditation visit, initiated a process to review the “Idea” and propose any needed changes. After much deliberation and debate, a revised identity statement adopted in 1982 reduced the descriptors to three: Christian, liberal arts, and community. Most striking was the dropping of Anabaptist Mennonite. Much of the debate surrounding FPC’s identity, future orientation, and mission was about the meaning of Anabaptism, Mennonitism, and evangelicalism. While a number of faculty argued for carrying the Anabaptist torch, others at the college, including board members, Mennonite Brethren pastors, and general constituents, wanted FPC
to go the route of Wheaton College (Illinois) or BIOLA (the Los Angeles educational bastion of evangelicalism) and be an inclusive evangelical college and not a restrictive Mennonite college that relied on denominational identity. This debate had roots in the creation of Pacific Bible Institute in 1944, but with the ownership of the college now transferred to the regional PDC, the time was ripe to revisit it again. The 1982 statement effectively made Anabaptism and Mennonite identity invisible. Those arguing for a clear evangelical identity won the day by associating Anabaptist ideas that were embedded in the 1960s “Idea” with the hippie-style, unpatriotic pacifism of the 1960s counterculture heyday.20

In 1995, however, the “Idea” was once again revised with the reinsertion of “Anabaptist-Mennonite” into the text, although not as a separately highlighted distinctive of FPC’s identity. In the opening decade of the twenty-first century, Fresno Pacific University established centers in North Fresno, Merced, Visalia, and Bakersfield and revised the “Idea” a fourth time as the “Fresno Pacific University Idea,” which mentions not only the Anabaptist Mennonite roots of the school, but an active relationship with the Mennonite Brethren denomination.21 These iterations of theological identity since 1944 flag the contested ground between evangelical and Anabaptist currents swirling about in the MB churches since the mid-twentieth century.

The 1990s also saw California Mennonites become more active in the arts. For one example, nationally recognized poet Jean Janzen wrote elegantly and poignantly about her Mennonite heritage. Janzen, who lived in Fresno and attended the College Community Mennonite Brethren Church, linked her spirituality to significant places in her own experience and those of her ancestors. While her Mennonite Brethren heritage informed much of her writing positively, though not without the critical eye of the poet, other Mennonite writers spoke with more of an edge. North in the Bay Area, Sheri Hostetler of Oakland, a member of a progressive Mennonite church in San Francisco, founded the magazine Mennonot (1993–2003) with Steve Mullet of Elkhart, Indiana. Mennonot was a magazine for “Mennonites on the Margins,” and its pages were filled with interviews, poetry, satire, essays, and jokes.22 Here a social justice–informed spirituality was resiliently Mennonite, if not post-modernist iconoclastic, and coming from California, it helped to stir a vital conversation among disaffected younger Mennonites.

Even as transportation and communication technology expanded ex-
ponentially in the post-1960s world, it did not close the geographic gap between California and the eastern Mennonite centers of power. In early 1975, MCC created a new separate regional body—West Coast MCC—because the former regional California office at times had strained relationships with the MCC headquarters in Pennsylvania due to geographic distance and cultural differences. The new body made official the independence that in reality had existed for decades. Nonetheless, some leaders worried that this development might break apart the national agency. That did not happen; rather, regional administration increased support for MCC generally. West Coast MCC was also the first regional office to register as a corporation, in 1979, and it went on to expand its work with the disabled, including developing residential programs in Oregon and California.

Other service ministries were transformed even more dramatically. At KVH a Chaplaincy Program was eventually started, and by 1975, the hospital had opened day centers for developmentally challenged persons in Atwater and Los Banos. Despite establishing an addictions treatment center in Fresno in the late 1980s, KVH’s time in Reedley was about to end. In 1990 the hospital portion of KVH closed for economic reasons and was transformed into a home for troubled adolescents. The adolescent home in turn closed and was sold in 2001. Though the brand Kings View continues today, headquartered in Fresno and with some Mennonite connections remaining, the Reedley enterprise founded by Jost had finished.

Other changes at the regional conference level included women increasingly sitting on PDC boards, including the executive committee in 1985. At the local level, churches began sending more women delegates to regional conferences. In 1975, 1.6 percent of the delegates were women, but women made up 12.5 percent of the delegates in 1985. By the mid-1980s, most churches included women in their delegations, with a number regularly sending delegations of at least 25 percent women.

The fragmentation and frenzy of the urban milieu did not necessarily negate neighborhood community building. Mennonites in Fresno, for example, formed a community on Kerkhoff Avenue. It was a regular grassroots neighborhood gathering started by members of College Community Church in Clovis. They hosted refugees, held potlucks, observed Christmas and Easter, and even set up a swimming pool for community use. They prided themselves on nurturing a relational “urban community” to such an
extent that on the twentieth anniversary in 1992, more than 230 people from across the country came for a weekend of events.16

As they entered the twenty-first century, Mennonites, now diverse in ethnicity and in their understandings of Christian faith and Mennonite identity, continued to articulate a sense of place and identity as they encountered and responded to California’s urban and natural environments. They now hailed not only from the Canadian prairies, American Midwest, and Russia but from Korea, Japan, Central America, and dozens of other cultural homes. This astonishing cultural diversity within the Mennonite world, which had mostly emerged since 1975, forever changed the Mennonite experience in California. Added to the changes in the first three quarters of the twentieth century—involving religious pluralism, race, gender, pacifism, institutional building, and higher education—the new diversity will leave a lasting mark on the Mennonite experience in California. Moreover, it raises the question of whether any kind of common Mennonite identity in California will be possible, if desired, in the future.
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