Managing a merger: Forming the Mennonite Church USA

by William Vance Trollinger Jr. in the August 1, 2001 issue

It was not the sort of place where one would expect to find the folks who produced the *More-with-Less* cookbook, but the massive and hermetically sealed Opryland complex in Nashville was where 9,330 Mennonites gathered in early July for a momentous meeting. The two largest Mennonite bodies in the U.S.— the General Conference Mennonite Church (established in 1860) and the Mennonite Church (formally established in 1898, but with roots that go back much further)—voted to merge into one denomination, the Mennonite Church USA, after first finding a way to address the issue of homosexuality.

The merger had roots in cooperative efforts over the past century, including the Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Services, and the Civilian Public Service camps established during World War II for conscientious objectors. In the 1960s and 1970s increasing numbers of Mennonite churches chose to be “dually affiliated” with the two churches. In 1989 the two denominations agreed to explore the possibility of merger. In 1995 they adopted a joint Confession of Faith and established an integration committee to guide the merger, envisioned to take place at a joint meeting in St. Louis in 1999.

But a roadblock appeared. At St. Louis the discussion of membership guidelines for the proposed church resulted in confused and heated discussions over homosexuality, particularly regarding the handful of “dually affiliated” churches that had been disciplined by one (but not the other) denomination for their liberal stance on this issue. Unable to agree, the delegates decided to revisit the topic at their 2001 meeting.

Mennonites gathered in Nashville with some trepidation, but the Opryland experience had the feel of an upbeat family reunion. The Mennonites are a tiny group by denominational standards—the newly created Mennonite Church USA will have only 116,000 members. While Mennonites are becoming increasingly diverse,

thanks in good part to urban congregations, in many ways they remain a tightly knit ethnic community, with names such as Friesen, Hostetler, Lehman, Miller, Rempel, Schrag and Yoder appearing with striking frequency. At one business meeting a delegate garnered laughs when he said: “I am a Mennonite wannabe—but since my last name is Adams, I guess I didn’t need to tell you that.”

There was lots for the Mennonite “family” to do at Opryland, particularly in “mTown,” which contained, among other things, a Mennonite art gallery, a “Mirror of the Martyrs” display, exhibits for Mennonite colleges and agencies, a bookstore, playground, recreation area, and two stages for Mennonite folk and rock performers. Innumerable seminars underscored the Mennonite emphasis on peace, with such topics as “The Nonviolent Atonement,” “Serving a Nonviolent Jesus and a God of Vengeance” and “Does It Have to Be Peacenik vs. Evangelist?” Nearly 90 Mennonites joined with other Tennesseans in an anti-death-penalty march from the state capitol to a park near the maximum security prison. Said Goshen College sophomore Katie Yoder: “We are out here to show the people of Nashville what it means to be Mennonite, and to make the point that killing people does not bring justice.”

Many youth participated in the march, and over 1,000 attended a “Peace Takes Guts” seminar. In fact, nearly two-thirds of Nashville attendees were high schoolers. They held their own worship services in a packed ballroom; with praise songs on big screens, electric guitars, colored lights, and arms raised in the air, it was clear that “contemporary worship” has taken over large parts of the Mennonite world (although a few youth were heard to complain that they would have liked more time for traditional Mennonite hymns).

Watching groups of adolescents line dance around the ballroom, it was clear that, for them, the integration of the two churches had already taken place. But in the room next door, the merger was no sure thing.

Leaders came to Nashville with membership guidelines for congregations that included a section on homosexuality. The guidelines were ambiguous. Reaffirming both that “the teaching position of the Mennonite Church USA” is that “homosexual . . . sexual activity” is sin, and that the church is “to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views,” the statement leaves it to regional conferences to decide how to apply these guidelines. The guidelines further declare that pastors who “perform a same-sex covenant ceremony” could have their credentials reviewed, and that the

denomination’s Executive Board may intervene to resolve disputes involving the status of congregations that had been “dually affiliated” and had been disciplined by one denomination for their stance on homosexuality.

At the convention’s opening, Ervin Stutzman, dean of Eastern Mennonite Seminary and moderator-elect of the prospective denomination’s Executive Board, acknowledged that two groups had problems with the revised guidelines: those who opposed the inclusion of a section on homosexuality, and who feared the possibility of the national organization’s intervening to make decisions regarding membership; and those who wanted more clarity as to how ministers and congregations would be held accountable for upholding the church’s teaching position on homosexuality. Besides attempting to reassure both groups that these guidelines marked a balance between local and denominational authority, Stutzman also pointed out the obvious: these guidelines were shaped by the desire to find “common ground.”

Mennonite leaders took other steps to avoid polarization. A “listening committee” reported daily to the assembly on concerns from delegates who did not feel they were being adequately heard, and two “worshipful work” facilitators sought to introduce elements of worship into the business sessions. Perhaps most important, delegates were seated at round tables in groups consisting of folks from both the Mennonite Church and the General Conference; this encouraged dialogue, and eliminated the possibility of delegates sitting in denominational or like-minded blocs.

When delegates were given the opportunity to voice their opinions on the first day, a wide range of viewpoints was expressed, from the Kansas delegate who lamented that it was painful to be spending so much time on homosexuality, given that we “are supposed to be a peace and justice church,” to the Pennsylvania delegate who announced that his church would not be joining the new denomination, as the membership guidelines do not reflect the Bible’s condemnation of homosexuality.

But many delegates expressed opinions similar to that of the California delegate who asserted that, while Mennonites disagree on the issue of homosexuality, it was time to accept the guidelines in a spirit of hope for the future.

The delegates overwhelmingly agreed to prohibit amendments to the membership guidelines and merger plan, and the next day voted on the two issues. In the morning 90 percent of General Conference delegates and 89 percent of Mennonite Church delegates voted to accept the membership guidelines; almost

anticlimactically, in the afternoon 96 percent of GC representatives and 95 percent of MC representatives voted to accept the plan of merger.

After the votes Lee Snyder, Executive Board moderator and president of Bluffton College, happily noted that the final tallies “exceeded our . . . hopes.” The deliberate efforts of Snyder and other Mennonite leaders to avoid polarization was one reason for the wide margin of passage. Another reason was the deep desire among Mennonites to be together. A dynamic seen in other denominational battles was at work here: the majority of church members are often more interested in maintaining unity than in taking one side or the other in the “culture war.”

But given the pervasive vagueness regarding membership guidelines, it is clear that this discussion is not over. Now it will take place at the conference and congregational level. Amy Short, executive director of the Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, expressed the hope that the new church will be open “to all people who wish to fully express their faith,” but that “it is too soon to tell.” That may be true. But for now, Mennonites have said: Let’s come together, let’s stay together and let’s keep talking. If they can do this, they may show other Protestant denominations something.