

**Information**

[About Us](#)
[Site Guide](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Subscribe](#)

Publications

[Current Issue](#)
[Back Issues](#)
[Indexes](#)
[Search](#)

Categories: Ethnicity, Mennonite Brethren Church and History

African-Americans in North Carolina: A Symbiotic Relationship

Conrad Ostwalt

The growth of the church now, as also in its beginnings, involves the incorporation and integration of various ethnic groups. Luke, in his story of the early church, records problems that arose in the process of incorporating the Greeks (Acts 6). The Mennonite Brethren Church, as other growing denominations, faces the challenge of assimilation. Four experiences of the process are detailed in the following mini-articles. [Ed.]

The Mennonite Brethren North Carolina District is made up of seven congregations and is the only Mennonite Brethren Conference in the United States with a majority of African-American members. These churches are situated in the mountains and foothills of North Carolina. Six of the seven churches combine African-American membership and leadership, cultural traditions, and religious practice with Mennonite theological insight to create an unusual, if not unique, experiment in religious assimilation and cooperation. The history and the life of the Mennonite Brethren North Carolina District provide a model for successful incorporation of multicultural experiences within the Mennonite Brethren world in a way to benefit both the ethnic group and the larger Mennonite Brethren community.¹

The largest of these African-American Mennonite Churches is located in Boone, North Carolina, a mountain community. As a result of this isolation, virtually all Mennonites in the area are African-American, and the black community in Boone seems to be centered on the Mennonite Church. The pastor of the Boone

Church, the Reverend James Isbell, comments:

Any black person in Boone, in this community . . . identifies in some way, connects, to this church. . . . They're all family. . . . And every black person in this community at least has a relative or friend who attends or is a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church. {39}²

So, in Boone and in the other North Carolina District black churches, the fusion of African-American concerns and Mennonite principles is particularly significant. The crucial question is, how have African-Americans in the North Carolina District fared in identifying with the Mennonite Brethren Church? As unusual a combination as African-American Mennonites might at first appear, the fusion, one must conclude, has been a successful one.

A cultural interplay takes place in both directions: There is Mennonite influence upon African-American concerns, but there are also subtle ways in which these African-Americans can and do influence the larger Mennonite community of non-African descent. As for religion, Mennonite theology provides the ideological framework, yet the North Carolina Mennonites are able to identify within that theology answers to social concerns that are relevant to the African-American community. And even though the theology and ideology of these churches is thoroughly Mennonite, the worship practices certainly are not, and the Boone Church actively preserves African-American ritual and worship practices. So, the North Carolina churches represent a rich example of cooperation where two diverse traditions contribute to each other. Examples of how African-American concerns have informed Mennonite circles and of how Mennonite theology and ideology have contributed to black church life follow.

WORSHIP PRACTICES IN THE CULTURAL INTERPLAY

The most obvious contribution the North Carolina churches have to offer the Mennonite tradition is their rich ritual and worship life. Characteristics from the black church tradition predominate. The Reverend Isbell recognizes this when he slyly

comments that “a starched-in-the-collar Mennonite would raise his eyebrows at what goes on in the Boone church.”³ Other congregants recognize this when they refer to their worship style as “Baptist or Methodist.” What Isbell and others are describing is the charismatic and enthusiastic worship practices that are common in the North Carolina black churches but are not so common in other Mennonite Brethren circles.

Worship in these North Carolina churches, often extending into Sunday afternoon, is characterized by swaying and clapping, shouts, holy dancing, and convulsive behavior. Enthusiasm often builds, climaxes with emotional fervor, and subsides during prayer time and sermons. Concert prayer and call-and-response preaching, both characteristics of the black church tradition, are common in these Mennonite services. And the music is straight from the African-American cultural tradition. Mennonite hymnals remain undisturbed in the back of each pew while members of the {40} congregation and the various choirs sing old gospel tunes accompanied by piano or electric guitar. Song time is an enthusiastic and expressive period and can last up to an hour.

These worship patterns were noticed by the earliest Mennonite missionaries to North Carolina in their written accounts. Missionary reports speak in glowing terms of the sincerity and spirituality of African-American song and worship, suggesting that the traits common to African-American worship had some positive effect on the Mennonite missionaries.⁴ Given the Mennonite Brethren recognition of diversity as a positive attribute, it would seem that one thing African-American Mennonites can offer larger Mennonite circles is a remarkable spirituality that first touched the Mennonite missionaries who helped start the North Carolina churches.

A second contribution of African-Americans to the larger Mennonite community is suggested by the tendency for members of these congregations to relate to the historical persecution of Mennonites and Anabaptists. In particular, black Mennonites associate their own oppression as African-Americans with historic persecutions of Mennonite Brethren in Russia and thereby feel a

deep connection to the Mennonite past, even though blacks were not part of that Russian past. In this sense, black Mennonites consider themselves "true" Mennonites. Hubert L. Brown, in his book *Black and Mennonite*, finds meaning in Mennonite theology because historically the Mennonite movement included oppression. The black Mennonites of the North Carolina District provide a real, though not physically direct, connection to Mennonite history through the common experience of oppression. They challenge the larger Mennonite body to continue to work to eliminate social injustice.⁵

THE IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF PACIFISM AND CHURCH/STATE SEPARATION

In addition to contributions African-Americans can provide the larger Mennonite community, Mennonite theology has also provided a uniquely well-suited ideological framework for this black church tradition. In particular, the Mennonite principles of pacifism and separation of church and state have been adopted by the North Carolina churches and have provided a means for African-Americans to identify with the Mennonite tradition.

At first glance, the principle of pacifism seems to complicate matters for black Mennonites and for African-American communities. For example, military service has traditionally been a means for economic and social advancement for African-Americans. Does this mean, then, that black Mennonites should not serve militarily because of their commitment {41} to pacifism? The North Carolina Mennonites do not discourage military service but instead stress non-combat roles for those who are in the military or who are contemplating a service career.⁶ These Mennonites hold true to the principle of pacifism and use this theological precept to creatively approach unique problems of the black community.

The pacifistic stance also comes into play in regard to civil rights and social justice. The North Carolina Mennonites have demonstrated an historic reluctance to use the church as a base for reform or protest. This is highly unusual for the black church, which elsewhere has been crucial as a center for social and

political reform for the African-American community. This hesitancy on the part of African-American Mennonites comes from the Mennonite principles of pacifism and the separation of church and state. For example, the Boone Mennonites avoided civil rights activism during the 1960s since, at least in part, such activism violated the pacifistic principle and also the church-state separation concept.⁷ Church leaders also avoid organizations such as the NAACP because to join would be a violation of the separation clause and would violate the principle to take no oaths of allegiance to any organization.⁸

The Mennonite principles of separation and pacifism are strong with these African-American groups, and this at first glance seems to be at odds with the traditional activist role of the black church in African-American communities. Nevertheless, these black Mennonites have adapted these theological teachings to the unique situation of the African-American community. These teachings do not result in the church members' complete detachment from society or in release from the necessity to work to better community situations. The Boone Mennonites enjoy a strong community orientation and hold true to the twentieth-century Mennonite stance on community responsibility.⁹ The modern Mennonite stance on political activism encourages individual responsibility and activity in the outside world, even though the church as an institution is reluctant to take an official stand on political and social issues. This is the position taken by the North Carolina Mennonites. Local leaders encourage individual members of communities to become socially and politically conscious without using the church as an organizing institution for activism. While maintaining that the church not "get involved" in civil rights issues, church leaders support individual efforts to seek social reform, community betterment, and political participation.¹⁰

These few examples provide some insight into the unique dynamics at work in the North Carolina District where African-American social and religious concerns interact with Mennonite theology and church organization.¹¹ The bond has been a profitable one for both the individual African-American

communities these churches serve and for the larger {42} Mennonite community in general. African-American worship patterns encourage a vital spirituality, while a history of persecution in the African-American community serves as a connector to historic Mennonite persecution and a reminder of the Mennonite challenge to work to overcome social inequities and oppression. At the same time, Mennonite theology provides African-Americans with an ideological system that the black church groups can claim as their own, and they use church precepts to creatively deal with problems unique to the black community. The Mennonite orientation to community provides a framework to create strong social ties that bind these isolated African-American Mennonites together in a supportive and helpful context. The North Carolina experiment in cultural and ethnic interaction has been a successful one that continues to meet the needs of black communities in the mountains and to enrich the entire community of Mennonites.

ENDNOTES

1. James Pankratz identifies the importance of incorporating multicultural experiences within the Mennonite community. See Pankratz, "More Alike Than Different," *Christian Leader*. Vol. 53, No. 1 (Jan. 16, 1990).
2. Interview with James Isbell, January 15 and March 11, 1991.
3. Interview with Isbell.
4. See Katherine Richert Siemens, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (Fresno: Jet Print, 1984) for many such accounts.
5. See Al Dueck, "Find Out That Dream: Models from Our Past Challenge Us to Stand for Social Justice," *Christian Leader*. Vol. 53, No. 1 (Jan. 16, 1990).
6. This issue was prominent during the Desert Storm conflict when charges of racial inequities in the military surfaced. The North Carolina Mennonites sought solutions that would allow their members to serve in the military without violating the spirit of pacifism.
7. The Reverend Rockford Hatten turned away a bus of civil-rights activists in the 1960s and current leaders similarly discourage church-sponsored participation in marches and other civil rights events. See *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, pp. 177-78. These sentiments were also expressed in the Isbell interview.
8. Isbell interview.
9. J. Howard Kaufmann and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1975), pp. 157ff. and 169ff.

10. Isbell interview.
11. On the subject more generally, see Herbert L. Brown, *Black and Mennonite: A Search for Identity* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976).

Dr. Conrad Ostwalt is associate professor of religious studies at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Dr. Ostwalt teaches American religious traditions.

© 1994 *Direction* (Winnipeg, MB)

This article may be printed or downloaded for personal use only. No articles may be additionally reprinted in any form without permission of the Managing Editor, kindred@mbconf.ca.

[HOME](#) [About Us](#) [Site Guide](#) [Contact Us](#) [Subscribe](#)
[Current Issue](#) [Back Issues](#) [Indexes](#) [Search](#)