

AN ELDERLY MENNO IN THE TIME OF BLACK LIVES MATTER: An Essay on one Person's Perspective on Mennonite History and Racism.

What does it mean for an 80 year old Caucasian Mennonite living in rural Indiana in the time of Black Lives Matter in relation to issues facing Black persons? Recently writing about growing up in my family of origin brought to the surface some memories from long ago, recollections from work years, and the realities brought to light, especially since the murder of George Floyd, pertaining to matters of race and systemic racism. My challenge is to know how best to respond.

I grew up in an Amish-Mennonite community, on farms in the Shipshewana, Middlebury, Topeka, and back to Shipshewana rural areas. My family came from (Old) Mennonite Church roots with historical backgrounds in Germany and Switzerland. On both sides of my family the church was front and center of so much of our religious, social, and cultural milieu. The Mennonite Church was known as one of the three major historic peace churches, which included conscientious objection to participating in the military, at one time a test of church membership for our congregation.

The Mennonite experience in Europe included its beginning in the Anabaptist movement in the 1500s. This movement encountered some severe persecution, including the martyrdom of several thousand adherents in gruesome deaths. It left significant marks on the movement, including Mennonites becoming the "quiet in the land" for their own protection and survival. Many followers emigrated to the United States. The Amish were an off-shoot of the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage, following a bishop who advocated freezing some cultural aspects of the religion. The Mennonite church I knew as a youth was primarily rural, agricultural and working class people without much formal education beyond high school, with the exception of persons in the education, medical, and some other professional fields. However, things were changing as more Mennonites moved into the city, increasingly sought higher education, and entered a broader range of the professions.

To grow up in a Mennonite-Amish community did not mean being divorced from some influences of the broader culture. I was born less than a month after the beginning of World War II and my conscious memory reaches back to when the war was still underway. I remember some of rationing, scarcity of many things, and efforts through school to support the Red Cross and goals of the war. Given a German heritage and speaking Pennsylvania Dutch, related to German, in a war against Germany, provided for many uneasy tensions even in the community I grew up in, though much worse in other Mennonite areas. Mennonites had, however, achieved governmental recognition of their conscientious opposition to participating in the military. Civilian Public Service was an avenue by which many young men participated in camps doing a range of public service projects. One was working in state mental hospitals which aroused an interest in mental health reform which contributed later to the enactment of the national Community Mental Health Centers Act and establishment of Mennonite based mental health centers and hospitals, a field in which I later worked. Another lesser option was farm deferments. My Dad qualified to have a farm worker and one of my uncles lived with us for a while serving in this role. As I recall, he later became a Sea-Going Cowboy, accompanying a boatload of farm animals to Poland, I believe, following the end of the war. Another avenue contributed to rural health such as building outhouses, nicknamed the "Lady Roosevelts". One of the farms we rented had such an outhouse. Yes, it was cold in the winter. These kinds of programs included others, besides Mennonites.

We learned many prejudices in our community, though did not think of them in such terms. "Japs" were, of course, the enemy and bad people, militaristic and very tough fighters. Japanese products by definition seemed to be cheaply made, inferior, and not to be purchased. I did not learn till in my adult years that our country had internment camps for Japanese during the war. I wondered what else we were not taught. "Chinks", as Chinese were often referred to, were not much better than Japanese. Later it was the "Reds", communists, an evil, threatening menace. There were no African-Americans in our community and I think it was in my senior year of high school in a mass county choir I saw a "Negro", so known politely at that time, as the first Black county resident I had seen. Prior to that as a kid with my family driving through Gary, Indiana once I recall us kids plastering our faces in the car windows to see "darkies", a unique novelty to us. Later we saw some Black folks who were parts of music groups originating from other parts of the country. I do think of my parents having had an accepting attitude in many respects toward them. However, I also heard outside the family many derogatory words used to refer to Black people. Catholics did not escape prejudice either. During John F. Kennedy's campaign for President many anti-Catholic fears and sentiments were voiced. One of the fears was that the Pope would in fact be running our country. Perhaps one of the most graphic I recall was that if Kennedy was elected there would be a Protestant hanging from every lamppost in Goshen. Even some other branches of Mennonites were considered off track for their becoming too liberal, or in the other direction for going "off the deep end."

Jews were in a somewhat different category. In church and Sunday School we were taught they were a historical group that were the antecedents of Christians, but also considered, I believe, ambivalently. The Old Testament told of their history, and we admired their major leaders and prophets. In the New Testament they appeared often to us in a very negative light. We tended to overlook that Jesus was in fact a Jew, and of Middle Eastern origin, and likely did not look at all like the pictures of the Good Shepherd we had, or as Warner Sallman painted him in 1940, a white Jesus. I only once in my growing up met a man who was identified to me as Jew. Dad sold a cow to Julius Buchheim, from somewhere outside the county, and who Dad told me was a Jew. Dad noted he thought he got a fair price. I had known that in business transactions many persons, including Mennonites, tried to "jew down" others' prices in an effort to get better deals. Prejudice sometimes can take rather subtle forms.

I did in fact, I believe, grow up in a somewhat supremacist cultural environment that was white, though with a twist from what we today would consider white supremacy. We did not consciously see our culture in those terms, while in reality we saw ourselves as embodying the best. As a Mennonite I heard expressions that of any church, we were closest to being the true church. At the same time, as Mennonites, we saw ourselves as perhaps inferior, certainly outside the mainstream, and looked down on by many. Though we were kin in our religious heritage to Amish we somewhat looked down on what we saw as some of their cultural backwardness. We also admired some of their sense of community and engaged in neighborliness with them.

Another area of ambivalence was towards "Indians", Native Americans. We learned in school of wars against the Native Americans. In fact, we were living on and farming land that once was theirs. Our wider area had in one sense recognized Native Americans and named various towns for them. My identified home area of Shipshewana was named after Chief Shipshewana, a Potawatomi. Our school,

Shipshewana, in sports was known as the Indians. As a teen the books became a bit more real as the 80 year old farmer we rented some land from told me of his father having seen Indians walking over this land, now fields that I plowed. My Dad found a lot of arrowheads and a few other tools of the Native Americans on land he had farmed. As a Mennonite people in my young years I do not recall we ever really addressing what it meant to now own and benefit from land once taken from others who were driven out. In more recent decades these kinds of issues have been addressed somewhat in parts of the broader Mennonite Church.

In college I was exposed to students from different kinds of backgrounds and culture. At one point I was asked to help an African student with one of his classes. I was surprised at this request and I worked with him on the assignments, but realized in later years I had not taken advantage to learn more of his culture. In 1960 we heard Martin Luther King, Jr., on the Goshen College campus in a moving speech. In that context I learned to know more about Goshen's antipathy to Negroes, as kindly referred to then. The story circulated that he could not stay in Goshen overnight, but needed to go to Elkhart. It was a beginning to what I later learned of Goshen having been a "Sundown Town", meaning if you were Negro you better be out of town before dark and all that implied. Some of that story has been published. However, there were courageous and conscientious Mennonite leaders who identified with King and marched with him. On the other hand, I heard Mennonites condemning King as a Communist, thus an enemy, and not someone to follow or respect.

I think it was also during these college years I learned of "migrants" who worked the tomato fields in the Milford area a short way south of Goshen. These Hispanic folks were also not looked kindly upon and foreshadowed later cultural clashes in Goshen itself, a story in itself.

In my working career which began in public child welfare in Summit County (Akron), Ohio I found myself in environments far different from Northern Indiana. Now in an urban environment with people from many different cultures I needed to learn a new world with problems I had not known from previous contact. Also, having just become married it meant some major adjustments. I began my first job as a 1W (for conscientious objectors) assignment, the only 1W among a professional staff of 75, plus many more staff in other roles. There was one General Conference Mennonite in the agency at that time and he was assigned as my supervisor, a god-send. An early example of my cultural shelteredness occurred when my supervisor, Stan, sent me out to do a home visit. When I returned and he was debriefing me, he asked if I smelled alcohol on the client's breath. I told him, "Stan, I am sorry; I don't know what alcohol smells like." Stan chuckled a bit and replied. "Come to an office party and you'll learn!" That was just the beginning. I soon found out that coffee break was not good for me. The air would be blue with cigarette smoke which gave me headaches, also a god-send considering the health aspects of exposure to secondary smoke.

One part of my Mennonite background considered Jesus as accepting of all people and breaking barriers. In Sunday School we had sung "Jesus Loves Me" and "Jesus Loves all the Children of the World", the cosmos. We were taught it meant all children, generically, and presumably adults as well, even if it was not made specific to us by name and it came from Jesus, not a human. Despite what our community modeled and accepted as normal prejudice, it was understood ideally we did what the Apostle Paul and Jesus taught. My social work training reinforced the idea of the non-judgmental

acceptance of all persons, irrespective of background. While the staff in my first work environment was primarily Caucasian there was the occasional Black person and our clientele included people from many and varied cultural backgrounds.

In our family life Twyla and I in our first year helped to establish a new Mennonite Congregation in a city that did not have a Mennonite Church and where for many folk the name Mennonite conjured images of Amish and I was asked more than once about not having a beard, driving a car, and dressing like other men. Our new congregation drew people of similar backgrounds to ours but were pleased when a black couple joined our group. One deliberate act Twyla and I did was to get our daughter a very dark chocolate brown doll. Zo loved that doll, literally to pieces, and we had to mend and fix it more than a few times. We hoped it would help model something positive in acceptance. We did not get our son a doll; we were just too traditional for that.

It did not take long to realize that the urban environment also had its forms of prejudice and racism. I am not sure how long it took for me to learn the systemic nature of the racism and sexism that existed. Thankfully, while Akron had its share of issues, it did not burn in the 1960s as some of the other large cities did, but there were fears. It was a bit unsettling to see the National Guard driving by our house. Akron had more numerous, smaller pockets of impoverished areas, some of which were more heavily populated by Black folks. Nevertheless, they had their connections. As a public child welfare caseworker making home visits, I learned I was recognized by people I did not know who mentioned having seen me in another neighborhood on such and such a day. It made me cognizant that even in a large city one's character and work did not go unnoticed, and one's reputation with clients became known amongst each other, a learning that served me throughout my working career. So, it was incumbent on me as a Jesus follower to treat all people with dignity and respect, even when difficult and perhaps not merited. Sometimes I did better than at other times.

In my mental health experience, following child welfare, my work centered more within a Caucasian environment. I did hire a Black woman on the otherwise white Mental Health Center staff, a first among the social work agencies in Wooster that I was aware of. When she left for other employment it resulted in a visit from the small NAACP in town. They wanted to be sure this employee had been treated fairly and they appeared to be satisfied that she had been.

Sometime after moving to Goshen, in the fall of 1984 I became Director of The Window, a Community Volunteer Center sponsored by Church Women United. At one time during my tenure there were 26 congregations of various denominations which each named a representative to the Board. Most of the volunteers of The Window's programs were from a church in the area and practically all were Caucasian and represented many different backgrounds. I realized early on, after we opened a remodeled facility along S. Main St. in Goshen, that there was educational and attitudinal work to be done. One day two older volunteers saw a Black person walking on the sidewalk on the other side of the street and I heard them commenting, "I hope that "N" does not come in here." We commenced with a little discussion. In time we did have some Black, Hispanic, and persons of other backgrounds who came in for services.

It was while working at the "Welfare" department in Elkhart, for a year in child welfare and more than eleven years in public assistance, that the pervasiveness of systemic racism became more clear. It stood

out with clientele in their attitudes toward people from other backgrounds, and from part of the administration toward staff, from staff to clients, and beyond within community systems. Sometimes it was more than subtle. As I was learning the job, I heard a caseworker say that all the clients lie. That was not my experience. I found that people treated with dignity and respect were as honest as the “respectable” people of the community, and clearly did not want to run afoul of the system. There were a few exceptions, just like among those who file taxes. Some clients had in the past, in fact, not been treated fairly and were unjustly penalized; caseworkers were at times known to carry over less than desirable attitudes. An instructive time while waiting for my initial employment interview among a group of clients revealed some of what was important to them. They were talking about their caseworkers, by name, who I did not know, about whether their caseworkers liked them or not and how that made them feel, and I gathered it influenced them in how they responded. They desired to be accepted and treated fairly. It helped me in my approach with clients, which clearly paid off. More than once I was called to help put out a fire that another caseworker had stoked. Attitudes of some clients changed as they were treated with kindness, justice, dignity, and respect. Reconciliation could work. Several times Black caseworkers were penalized, or even fired, it seemed to me unjustly, for things that most other caseworkers had done. And their word was questioned at times when a Caucasian’s would not have. My integrity for truth telling was called on in one instance in support of a Black co-worker when her word was doubted and mine was not. In another, my presence saved her from on-going attack by a somewhat hostile Caucasian from another department and I was reported to my Black co-worker’s supervisor as having been a peacemaker when I, in fact, felt I had failed in what I could have done.

Blacks were treated differently in the community. One time during checkout in a store I inadvertently missed a rather small item in my cart till the bill was being rung up. I apologized and made sure it got included and the cashier responded that it was no problem. One of my Black clients reported her experience of accidentally overlooking a 97 cent item at checkout and when seeing it said right away she would pay for it. The cashier refused, called security, and the person was arrested and jailed. To add insult to injury the jail claimed she had charges in Alabama and the client insisted she had never been in Alabama and her children insisted likewise. Eventually, after two months, someone did double-check and while the first and last name matched the charges in Alabama, there was also the matter of middle initial and name, and a digit on the social security number that were different. Why could not have someone looked carefully at those details the first time? I told my client I hoped they gave her a huge apology. She said no one gave any apology whatsoever. Besides the racist indignity, etc., tax payers footed the bill for more than two months of incarceration over an item costing less than a dollar. I reported this story to a county official, but I do not know what came of my reporting the story. The jail had a popular known conservative Caucasian Christian in charge. Such is one picture of systemic racism in Elkhart County, a county that includes many Christian people.

Mennonites, among other Christians, live and work in this broader environment, sometimes not knowing or at least accepting injustice as part of our lives. Thankfully, there are those who actively work toward justice in many different ways. But we know it is far more than just a local issue. Racism has come to be at the core of some of our current political discourse. And Black Lives Matter has come to the fore.

All of my life has been lived in the states of Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois, in the Great Lakes area of the North, so have had quite limited exposure to the bigger issues. Twyla and I were once on a bus trip which took us to South Carolina. In Charleston our Caucasian tour guide, who grew up in Charleston, mentioned "The War of Aggression." It took me a second to realize he was referring to what we had learned in the North as the Civil War. This trip also took us to an old plantation with its slave cabins and quarters. We heard a series of stories illustrating a very different perspective and way of life on economic, racial, and cultural levels, alien to what Twyla and I had known. Admittedly, this was only a beginning point of some first-hand Southern perspective.

The murder of George Floyd appeared to be a precipitating factor along with other widely publicized unjustified murders of Black people by police and others, during the time of a pandemic and accompanying economic challenge for not only our country but the world. Seeing a Black man, a member of a discriminated against minority, blatantly murdered in cold blood, seen by the world on video, reminded me of the martyrs of our faith. It also brought to mind Jesus, crucified under a crushing empire, under the authority of the state, also by representatives of that state. Anabaptists were a minority and persecuted, many killed in the name of the state. And even now the state kills. What does it mean to come from that kind of background going back to the 1500s and identifying with Blacks having been enslaved in this country since the early 1600s, many lynched, and more recently killed by law enforcement, not to mention all the other aspects of Jim Crowism? This is not at all to equate the two histories, but to wonder how Mennonites identify with marginalized, oppressed, suppressed, and discriminated peoples. We could hide behind our whiteness and success in the American way. What does it mean to follow Jesus in light of this time of Black Lives Matter, when racism is being stoked, and to work toward justice? Could George Floyd be seen, while an unwitting fatal victim, as a secular messiah whose death is perhaps precipitating some system changes and saving some lives? And which Mennos ought to support?

I just remembered, and finally found, my notes from a speech by a Black Anabaptist Mennonite, Hubert Brown, from 1971. Brown was known to have challenged Mennonites and one could say was considered by many to be controversial at the least. Brown spoke in this 1971 presentation of "The Anabaptist Christ and the Black Jesus." He began with the question posed by John for Jesus, "Are you the Christ?", a search for identity. Both African children and the sons and daughters of Menno came to this country, one group destined to the roles of freedom; the other to slavery. While the children of Menno had experienced victimization, they also developed over time some sense of pride. Not so for the children of Africa, who were not appreciated. Brown asserted that the meaning of Anabaptism and Christ to the Anabaptists had been lost. Mennonites identified with a white American Christ. Africans learned of this Christ on their way to slavery and identified this Christ with systems that suppressed and oppressed people. In contrast, developing Black theology was oriented more toward liberation, defining God more in terms of being Black and Christ being concerned about oppression and taking the sides of the poor and oppressed. Brown maintained the Mennonite Church needed to develop a minority theology concerned about the suffering people of God, the sufferings of humanity, and taking the side of the oppressed. He added that the only way to understand Anabaptists is to become Black. And the church itself is a minority community. Is it any wonder that this prophet, Hubert Brown, found himself on the "outs" with the Mennonite Church for a time? How much of Brown's message still applies to 2020?

Today, the Mennonite Church is more urban, educated, professional, and diverse than in the days of my youth. Also, our youth today are much more open to accepting diversity in various areas of life. There have been clear changes, but we continue to be challenged. The denomination, in what I trust is more than only symbolism, important as that may be, chose a Black man as its organizational head, an ex-military man at that. In some ways times have changed; yet not.

Yet, history may have some other things to teach us. Has there ever been a time when there were not issues with bias, prejudice, racism, division in some form? Might it be connected with the human condition? We know from both Testaments of the Bible there were such issues. From Paul's writings we gather the times were rife with issues: Jew-Gentile; slave-free; male-female; Roman citizen-non citizen. Paul emphasized that in Christ these divisions did not matter. Instead, as Jesus-followers, we are together citizens of God's Kingdom. Jesus taught us to pray that God's Kingdom come and God's will be done on earth as in Heaven. The church is to be a place of acceptance; not the most segregated place in the country on Sunday morning. To this observer it appears the younger generation is much better with diversity, at least on the individual and micro level. Locally, in school, a diverse student body is normal. Our local college, Goshen, has been increasing significantly its multicultural, multiracial, international student body over the past some years. There are still the macro social system and injustice levels that need attention, beyond only the responsibility of the church. Examples include criminal justice reform, police reforms, attitudes toward offenders, employment, health care, etc. How far can/should the church go to help mitigate these issues? Can or should we join in public protest? Or, work only behind the scenes? How can the church best educate, relate to the Scriptures, do story-telling, to help effect positive change? We can trust that God can use even the smallest acts to benefit God's Kingdom. There is hope.

Maybe the Mennonite Church or parts of it, have learned some lessons, yet the Church has struggled in the past generation, and continues to struggle, with another form of discrimination and oppression, that which relates to whether LGBTQIA+ people can be included as part of God's people. To be "straight" has appeared to be a supremacist position, with appeal to parts of Scripture to exclude certain people, while others look to Jesus and understand us all as beloved children of God, so created, understanding Scripture from some alternate interpretations and perspectives. That could be a somewhat separate, though certainly related, discussion.

In the final book of the New Testament, The Revelation, we find a picture of worship that includes "...a great multitude from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages..." (7:9; also, in 5:9). Elsewhere, Revelation referred to every creature singing praises in worship (5:13). Do we need to, or how, do we best practice this broad inclusiveness now on earth to prepare for that future?

In the past decade or more we have been re-exposed to the essence of Anabaptism, symbolized by the writings of Palmer Becker on *Anabaptist Essentials*, about what it means to be an Anabaptist Christian, and by Stuart Murray on *The Naked Anabaptist*, among others. Yet, another step may be needed to apply the essence of Anabaptism to the political, racist, and unjust systems within which we live and work today, and in selective areas may apply ourselves to others who are "different". Just as some other churches have increasingly come to embrace some of Anabaptism, while many Mennonites are moving away from Anabaptism, so today there are voices from the secular world of commentary and action that

embody some of the prophetic calls to justice and right relations, more Christian than some of what the evangelical world appears to espouse.

As individual members of the church we live and work in a myriad of different situations and opportunities, so each would need to evaluate the unique ways in which we can contribute to reconciliation and justice. The prophet Micah challenges us to "...do justice, and to love kindness (or mercy), and to walk humbly with our God." It appears Micah was also addressing the people corporately. Today, we live in a much more individualistic culture. To what extent can we as a church, a corporate body, do justice and seek reconciliation at local, conference, national, or international levels?

Addressing racism only as individuals, while important, will likely not bring an end to the racist system. Considering Christianity as only one's individual relationship with God has helped enable racism and other social injustices to continue, if not flourish. From one perspective racism may personify what St. Paul wrote of as "principalities and powers", a kind of demonic force. To combat this kind of power may require looking at this as spiritual warfare, require all people of faith to serious study, learning, concerted prayer, sharing stories, leading to interaction on addressing racially tinged matters such as abuse by some police powers, the penal system, and mass incarceration.

What does it mean to assert that the lives of Black persons, and others who are "different", and whom God also loves, actually do matter? And how do we contribute to acting on God's vision for the people God has created? How do I, as one elderly white Menno, isolating during the time of Covid 19, and others who are not as old or isolated, think and act, individually and corporately, to help fulfill the call of Micah, and to love God and my neighbor, irrespective of whom he or she may be?

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