

Religious Background

The 5,000 Mennonites in Iowa are members of a Protestant denomination whose approximately 400,000 adherents have churches in at least thirty-one countries around the globe. The Mennonite church had its origins in Switzerland during the Reformation days among the group known as the Swiss Brethren. Believing in the principle of separation of church and state and freedom of conscience long before the major part of Christendom accepted these principles, they upheld the doctrine of the free church, insisting that only those persons mature enough to make their own free decisions should be eligible for church membership. The church, they were convinced, should be a voluntary association of believers. "Repent, believe, and be baptized" was the Biblical order and since infants could not repent and believe, they were incapable of meeting the qualifications for membership in a voluntary church. Those who had been baptized as infants were rebaptized, hence they were called "ana-baptists" or rebaptizers when they became members of the Swiss Brethren churches.

The Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli, with whom the Swiss Brethren Anabaptists were associated,

however, decided not to follow the plan of the Brethren but rather to establish a new state church to which everyone would be forced to adhere. Infant baptism was enforced by law in order to make the state church universal. When public debates between Zwingli's men and the young university trained men who advocated freedom of conscience and a voluntary church did not change the thinking of either side in the disputes, a few days after the disputation of January 17, 1525, the "Brethren," as they called themselves, met in Zurich, organized themselves into a church, and baptized fifteen persons, under the leadership of Conrad Grebel. Thus was organized the first Mennonite congregation of the Reformation days.

The anabaptist movement spread through northern Switzerland, and into southern Germany and Moravia. A similar movement developed in the Netherlands, where Menno Simons came to be the recognized leader after 1536. In some areas the movement became militantly fanatical but Menno established the priority and leadership of the peaceful anabaptists so that eventually all of those in Holland, Germany, and Switzerland who were in this third wing movement of the Reformation were known as Mennonites, or followers of Menno.

Persecuted anabaptists fled to England where they influenced the Independent movement. Later, when the English Pilgrims lived in Holland before

coming to New England, some of them worshipped with the Dutch Mennonites. From the English independent movement came the Baptist church and Baptist historians, along with the Mennonites, claim Menno Simons as one of their religious heroes.

Christians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not yet ready for such advanced ideas as freedom of religion. Anabaptism became a crime punishable by death in both the Protestant and Roman Catholic countries of Europe. The new four-volume *Mennonite Encyclopedia* presents the biographies of approximately 2,000 anabaptist martyrs who died at the hands of their Christian persecutors during those years, the victims of the most cruel punishment that the cunning of men could devise.

Through their four centuries of history the book next in popularity to the Bible in Mennonite homes has been the *Martyrs Mirror*, an 1,100 page volume which relates the stories of hundreds of these martyrs. This book has been most influential in convincing Mennonites of the irreconcilable conflict between the Kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of a worldly society. A shallow theology that argues away human depravity has never seemed realistic to them because of their many experiences with persecuting states, including Soviet Russia. Another popular book among them has been the 800 page *Ausbund*, the nucleus of which

consists of fifty-one hymns written by imprisoned Anabaptists between 1535 and 1540, many of whom died as martyrs. This hymnal is still used in Amish churches in America, although in some Iowa churches an abridged edition is being used.

In spite of these fierce persecutions, anabaptism was not crushed. These men who found a new, vital faith in their first-hand studies of the Bible became the first modern missionaries. Believing that all Christians, ordained and laymen, were commissioned to preach the Gospel, they went about proclaiming the Good News. In time most of the leaders were executed and the remaining members fled to the mountains and other isolated places for safety. Here many won toleration on the lands of the nobility because their diligence and superior farming methods made them desirable tenants. This uneasy kind of freedom tended to dull their missionary zeal, making them a strictly rural people, except in Holland where religious freedom appeared early and where they became a city and an industrial folk.

Oppressive laws remained in the legal codes and the toleration the Mennonites won was a precarious one. When the opportunity came to migrate to Pennsylvania where religious liberty was assured, many Mennonites responded to the invitation. The first permanent Mennonite settlement in America was established in 1683 at Germantown, now a part of Philadelphia. From 1710

down to the Inter-colonial Wars, hundreds of Mennonite families escaped the persecution and economic distress of the Palatinate area and found a refuge in America.

The English-French wars, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution halted immigration for decades, but as a result of the havoc of these conflicts and of the growing militarism in Europe, a new wave of Mennonite immigration to America began after the Napoleonic Wars. In the meantime, Mennonites in America participated in the westward movement, coming to western Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, and Ontario before the end of the eighteenth century. By 1833 they had reached Illinois and by 1839 they had settled in Iowa.

Near the end of the seventeenth century the first major division among the Mennonites had occurred. Jacob Ammann, a native of the canton of Bern, Switzerland, was a Mennonite elder who tried to introduce a strict form of shunning excommunicated members of the church, maintaining that there was to be no social intercourse with such persons. Those who did not agree with him felt that the Apostle Paul's command (I Corinthians 5) meant only that the expelled were to be excluded from communion services. Ammann also insisted upon uniformity in dress and other conservative practices. Contrary to the usual explanation, the issue of hooks and eyes versus buttons

on men's coats was not a part of the controversy although later this became a matter of disagreement.

When he could not persuade most of his fellow Mennonite ministers to agree with his position, Ammann excommunicated them, the result of which was an unfortunate schism that has persisted to this day. The followers of Ammann came to be known as Amish, who in turn during the nineteenth century tended to divide into two groups — the Old Order Amish, and the Amish Mennonites. The latter group has been almost completely absorbed back into the main stream of Mennonite church life but this is not true of the Old Order whose numbers have been increasing steadily in the twentieth century, due largely to their high birth and declining death rates.

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