

DIRECTOR'S DESK

It does not take too long in a conversation on religious matters to make a deduction of whether one is a conservative or a liberal. However, this can be a bit tricky, for example an Old Order Amish might call someone in their group liberal whom the rest of us think is very conservative. Context is important. One should know what we mean by those terms and what the particular context is.

There have been many painful divisions in the Body of Christ due to the differences between liberals and conservatives. This happens in all denominations. We become strangers to each other. Here I would suggest a different approach. What if we would acknowledge that yes, in some respects we are strangers to each other in how we approach certain issues, but we also give thanks for it? Instead of denying our estrangement or bemoaning it, why not embrace it as a gift from God? How's this for a model of the church, a company of strangers who—like Abraham and Sarah—set out for a new place because “from a distance” all of us, in our own unique ways, have glimpsed the promises of God and greeted them, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. (Heb. 11:13)

As Christians, we are strangers and pilgrims in this world. We should feel “out of place” and not become too familiar with the trappings of this world. We are also witnesses of Christ. Can liberals and conservatives keep up a healthy dialog without forever breaking apart into our own little camps where we soon have a new set of liberals and conservatives? What I am suggesting is that we Christians loosen up a bit and live with a degree of ambiguity. Liberals and conservatives need each other. This will be possible if we keep Christ and his gospel at the center of our conversations. Let us agree we will not compromise the teachings of Jesus.

—Joseph Yoder

You can now get the current issue of *Reunion* on line at www.mennohof.org. Also get our **Ponderings from the Hof**, (short meditations) and up-to-date happenings under “*What's Happening*” on our website. We welcome your response by email or regular mail.



MENNO-HOF

AMISH-MENNONITE VISITORS' CENTER

P.O. Box 701

Shipshewana, Indiana 46565

*See and Hear
the Amish-Mennonite Story*

VISITOR COMMENTS

“Wonderful explanation of beliefs and differences.”

“We are Mennonites from Indianapolis. It was wonderful to have our teens experience Anabaptist history in such a rich, interactive way.”

“It was just wonderful—both informative and also caused us all to desire to live after God's own heart.”

Visitors:

January – April 2007
3,554

May '88 – April '07
758,714

Reunion is published quarterly to keep our friends informed of happenings at Menno-Hof. Direct questions or comments to Joseph Yoder, director, at jyoder@mennohof.org

Menno-Hof Amish-Mennonite Visitors' Center

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RADICAL

By Joseph Yoder

At Menno-Hof in one of our 24 different venues we have a *dungeon room*. This is often a very somber experience for our visitors. On the wall we have a tongue screw. This instrument is a clamp-like device that has a screw on the end to tighten on the tongue. This instrument was used on Anabaptists in order to keep them from their last word of witness as they were delivered to the stake where they were burned alive in public.

Often I tell the story of Maeyken Wens, a courageous Anabaptist woman who was burned at the stake in October of 1573. She was severely tortured in prison from April to October, but she refused to recant her Christian beliefs that differed from the state church. She wrote a number of stirring letters to her 15-year-old son Adriaen. She also had a 3-year-old son named Hans. On the morning of the execution Adriaen took his little brother Hans and headed to the city square in Antwerp, Belgium because he knew this would be the day of her execution. Poor Adriaen passed out as his mother was brought to the stake with her mouth bleeding from the tongue screw. As people left the scene of the execution little Hans was crying and finally woke up his older brother. On page 980 of the *Martyr's Mirror* ...Continued on page 3

The Menno-Hof Newsletter

reunion

Liberal or Conservative?

By Loren Swartzendruber

Are you a conservative or a liberal? This appears to be a simple, straightforward question, yet my answer is never simple. It is: “I don't know. I am both, and I am neither. It depends on the issue. It depends on the person or group to which I'm being compared.”

Since my ordination in 1975, I have preached in more than 230 congregations, most Mennonite, but some other traditions. Frequently I have engaged folks in Christian education conversations and interacted with members and leaders over a meal. Though I am optimistic by nature, I have detected a trend that concerns me: I am troubled by the loss of identity among many who call themselves Anabaptist.

I am not referring to such simplistic identity labels as “conservative” and “liberal.” Do these really matter? I meet church members who eagerly embrace one in opposition to the other, as though it is actually possible to be consistent across the spectrum, whether theologically or politically. As one of my Anabaptist mentors used to say rather frequently, “On some social issues I am rather liberal... because I take the Bible very seriously, which is a conservative position.”

I have a deep concern that Anabaptist Mennonites have been derailed theologically by the influence of so-called Christian radio and TV. I grieve that we are increasingly unable to stand up for the Jesus of the New Testament who called us to another way. We are also subject to derailment from liberal theology that down plays the significance of Jesus' invitation to salvation.

The problem with drinking from other theological wells is that we are subtly lulled into thinking that all Christians share similar perspectives. Yet all do not read the Bible the same way. Many believers have a “flat book” view of the Scriptures. The logical result is that Old Testament perspectives are put on the same level as those in the New Testament. Jesus himself demonstrated a different approach: “You have heard it has been said..., but I say...”

My Anabaptist theological ancestors interpreted the Old Testament through the eyes of Jesus and through the lens of the unfolding revelation in the New Testament. Unfortunately, that's a perspective not heard from most speakers in the popular Christian media. Either my Anabaptist forebears were deluded, or they were right. I'm throwing my lot with them. They believed the example and words of Jesus must be our guide, and so do I.

What practical difference does this make? Some years ago I was guest preacher for several days just prior to a U.S. presidential election. One individual told me, in all seriousness, that she would not vote for a particular candidate because “he would take away all of our Bibles.” The same person appeared surprised when I responded that Jimmy Carter may well have been the most “Christian” president of

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Liberal or Conservative? ...cont. from page 1

my lifetime. At least he attended church regularly, openly confessed his faith, and has been a life-long Sunday school teacher.

I wish I could report that her concerns were unusual. I've heard the wild claims of what might happen "if so-and-so were elected" all too often. Never mind that I doubt any U.S. political leader would denigrate the Bible, I have to ask the obvious question from a New Testament perspective: "What difference would that make?" I've always understood that the strength of the church, and the faith-based stances of its believers, are not subject to the "state."

What kind of faith is demonstrated if we insist on being legitimized by government? Our friends in Ethiopia saw people flock to the underground church during a time of prolonged persecution. They didn't need governmental support for the church to flourish, even as they would certainly appreciate, as we do, the freedom to worship in peace.

My observation is that many of us who grew up Mennonite have struggled to come to peace with our past experiences. We remember the days when we were, in fact, very different culturally. It was embarrassing to stand out in the crowd. It is so much easier psychologically to "fit in" with the multitude. And, now, particularly in the U.S. context, we fear the possibility of being ostracized by our neighbors if we dare to challenge prevailing assumptions.

What does this have to do with Mennonite education? I've devoted most of my adult life to this mission for one simple reason: I believe Mennonite Anabaptists have had (and still have) a unique theological perspective—and practice—that is needed in our world. I am disappointed with the headlong rush to "be like everyone else" as though our theological forebears were badly mistaken.

Frankly, I think the burden of proof is on those who have embraced the majority culture. Again, the New Testament hardly promises that the followers of Jesus will enjoy majority status.

I've frequently said that I am "proud" to be a Mennonite, though I always add with a smile, "I'm proud in a humble sort of way." That's not because I value being Mennonite above being a follower of Christ. I do believe, however, that it's not possible to be a generic Christian. We are all part of theological streams with historical wellsprings, whether we are charismatic, Pentecostal, Lutheran or Anabaptist—and whether we realize it or not.

If our Mennonite schools and colleges are not unique and thoroughly committed to being Anabaptists as followers of Jesus, there is little reason for them to exist. There are hundreds of

good, academically strong institutions that do a great job of educating young adults.

I am astounded at the number of parents around the church who aren't aware of this simple fact: we're different from other colleges. Even other educational and denominational leaders recognize we represent something unique. One university president from South Dakota, himself a Baptist, told me recently, "You Mennonites are among the few in the whole country who are making any sense right now."

It may seem strange for a university president to say that he doesn't really care if his institution exists in the year 2026, 20 years from now. And I don't, not for the sake of the university itself. But, I do care, with all my heart and soul, that the church's witness is strong in the year 2026. I'm convinced it will only be so if a substantial number of our youth receive a Mennonite education.

To those who have stuck with me to this point in my "sermon" and who are surprised at my audacity and passion, I made a similar speech to the EMU Parents' Council one morning last spring. I made it totally off the cuff, after I had forgotten I was to join them, and then I apologized for my passion. I reflected that perhaps I'm getting old, and that I no longer feel as if I have much to lose. They were slightly stunned, I think, and then said, "Put it in writing. You're preaching to the choir."

My life would be blessed if the "choir" would carry the message and deliver their young adults in large numbers to all of our Mennonite schools—and most blessed when those graduates have become the faithful members and leaders of the church tomorrow.

Loren Swartzendruber is President of Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

(Reprinted with permission of *OurFaith Digest*, Volume 7, Number 1, Spring, 2007)



Image courtesy Mennonite Church USA Archives - Newton

Visitors

If you're a tour guide at Menno-Hof the world will literally come to you. Even though the small town of Shippshewana has fewer than 600 actual residents it is frequented by a very diverse global group. For example here is a small sampling of people who have visited or will visit Menno-Hof in April and May. Our goal is that all of our visitors will encounter the "face of Christ" while they learn about the uniqueness of the Anabaptist world.

- St. Mary's College, Notre Dame—Center for Women's International Cultural Leadership- 20 women in various leadership roles from Australia, Ghana, Singapore and the Philippines.
- Forest Grove School—Amish Parochial School from Middlebury, Ind.- 42 students, teachers and parents celebrating their last day of school (many Amish schools visit us as a field trip at the end of their school year).
- Portage Central High School, Portage, Mich.—Sociology students who are studying the uniqueness of another culture in close proximity to their school.
- BBC (British Broadcasting Company), Wales, UK—Mish Evans and Andrew Tait, researchers for the BBC, spent 2 days hosted by Menno-Hof in hopes of procuring material for British TV.
- Au Pair in America—Some 50 single young girls who will be working as nannies in the United States visit Menno-Hof as part of their orientation to America.
- Bridge Folk—A group of Catholic and Mennonites meeting together to facilitate greater understanding between denominations.
- Y-Press with *Indianapolis Star*—A group of 4 bright young aspiring journalism students, ages 12-17, visited us and spent the afternoon interviewing Amish people as they prepared newspaper articles.
- Northern Illinois University—International Training Office- Muslim and Christian high school students from foreign countries.

RADICAL cont. from page 1

there is a picture of Adriaen searching for the tongue screw in the ashes of his dead mother. This he kept in memory of their mother's Christian witness.

The question I pose is this: Was Maeyken Wens a conservative or a liberal? I doubt that she bothered with terms like this, but rather she was a true **radical**. The word radical comes from the Latin (radix, root). Wens went to the root of Christianity which is none other than Christ. Perhaps as sincere followers of Jesus, we should claim the term radical, and let the chips fall where they will, since we are attached to the root, Jesus.

Long-term Volunteers

Fred Tillery found his way back to Menno-Hof, returning November 18, 2006 from a period of service with Spruce Forest Retreat in Maryland. He has served here previously and is again residing in the west apartment and using his expertise in hosting our visitors who come in for the tour. He also spent a great deal of energy with the winter cleaning during the slow time. It is good to have him back!

The month of March brought Leroy and Marion Friesen from Henderson, Nebraska to help in the day-to-day operation here at Menno-Hof. Their energy benefited Menno-Hof in a variety of ways as they helped with the winter cleaning and serving as tour host and hostess. An added benefit for them was being able to spend time with their daughter, Carla and Allen Weldy and grandchildren. Marion also found time to piece several quilts and Leroy worked at his hobby of creating stained glass objects. We were grateful for their presence and perspective of life.

—Miriam Yutzky

Through Service Opportunities for Older People, we were able to arrange for a short term placement at Menno-Hof during April/May. As volunteers at Menno-Hof we have numerous opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations with visitors as we share our faith and traditions from an Anabaptist perspective.

In the last few years we have been involved in a number of volunteer positions. We have worked with refugees through the Newcomer Centre in our city and distributed toys and hampers to families struggling with finances during the Christmas season. From 2000 to 2003 we served for three years with Mennonite Central Committee in Vietnam as university teachers as well as Country Representatives. This was a challenging and rewarding experience. Working in the teaching profession before retirement also provided us with opportunities to live and work in England and Australia.

Although we enjoy cultural benefits of travel, we are always grateful to return home to spend time with our children and grandchildren in Red Deer, Alberta.

Volunteering helps us to stay involved and engaged with the world around us. It provides an opportunity to make a small contribution to others in our world community.

—Allan & Louise Epp