

Vincent Harding and the Mennonites

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 by Patty Friesen, November 15/20

Apostle Paul's grim meditations in 1Thessalonians 5 inspired hope and gave comfort to the early church under persecution because it told them their persecution would come to an end. Indeed, they yearned for The Day of the Lord, because permanent union with the Lord in the future was about God's desire for believers to come together on earth as in heaven. Mennonite prophet Vincent Harding provided such a vision of union for Mennonites in the 1950' s and 60' s.

While studying the history of Christianity at the University of Chicago, a young black student named Vincent Harding encountered Anabaptists for the first time. Their record of self-sacrifice, commitment to nonviolence, uncompromising refusal to place the state before the church, and a "radical commitment to the Christ of the open arms" impressed and attracted Harding. He then learned to know the heirs of the Anabaptist tradition who gathered at an integrated Mennonite congregation in Chicago's Woodlawn neighbourhood. On

October 20, 1957, Woodlawn Mennonite Church installed Harding as their associate pastor to work with lead Delton Franz. Amid much publicity and fanfare, the General Conference Mennonite Church made it known that they now had an outspoken, talented, and forthright black church leader. To Marie Regier, a white Woodlawn member, Harding appeared as a “modern prophet” sent to awaken the church.

Within a year, Delton Franz and Harding had organized a “Seminar on Race Relations” that brought Mennonite leaders from across the country to Chicago. Harding gave a stirring address in which he called on the church to reject an “comfort” gospel of salvation that did not also address racial injustice. He declared, “[W]e have loudly preached nonconformity to the ways of the world, and yet we have so often been slavishly and silently conformed to the American attitudes on race and segregation.” A few years previously, Mennonite Church leaders had passed a statement delineating all the worldly sins Mennonites should avoid in order to be nonconformist. As Harding inferred, however, while the list referenced union membership, secret societies, tobacco, alcohol, sports,

cards, pool, dance, movies, gossip, and the taking of oaths, it made no mention of racism.

In 1959, Harding and four of his fellow churchmen – two black and three white – travelled through the South to visit sites of civil rights activism. The meetings only served to sharpen Harding's calls for Mennonite engagement with the civil rights struggle. Quoting a leader from Montgomery, Harding passed on this invitation: "We'd be tickled to have you Mennonites come down here and teach us a few things; you're the folks who know all about this."

Harding at points seemed uneasy about his Mennonite identity. In 1959, college professor, church leader, and theologian Guy Hershberger noted that Harding often felt like an "exhibit" on display "–our token black Mennonite pastor." As Harding attended more and more national-level church meetings, a note of impatience entered his commentary as he repeated and repeated again his call for Mennonites to make their peace stance count in situations of "race tension." Nonetheless, he continued to speak of himself as a Mennonite and

employ first-person plural pronouns – we, us, ourselves – when discussing the Anabaptist community.

The Hardings then dove deeper into both the Mennonite community and civil rights activism as they moved from Chicago to Atlanta in 1961. At the invitation of the Peace Section of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), they accepted an assignment to work at “interracial reconciliation.” The Hardings established “Mennonite House” just around the corner from Martin and Coretta King’s home. Even as Martin Luther King, Jr., had reached out to Mennonites the previous year when he accepted speaking engagements at Bethel College in south-central Kansas and Goshen College in northern Indiana, he reached out to the Hardings and regularly employed them in the campaigns of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Vincent even wrote King’s famous Beyond Vietnam speech delivered in New York City in protest of the war.

Much of the time civil rights agendas and Mennonite agendas dovetailed. As Mennonites, both Hardings placed a strong value on, in Vincent’s words, “reconciliation... where mistrust, and fear, and prejudice have so long prevailed.”

Expressed both in the practical matters of living in a racially integrated household and in meeting behind the scenes with white leaders in order to open a way forward in the midst of highly contentious civil rights campaigns, the central value of reconciliation held together their civil rights activism and their Mennonite identity.

Yet by 1962, tensions had already begun to appear. MCC's Peace Section administrator Edgar Metzler emphasized in written reports that the Hardings served primarily in a "pastoral" capacity to civil rights groups like Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Southern Christian Leadership Conference in order to avoid any "blanket endorsements" of such activist groups. Some leading theologians of the era as well as many congregants at the grassroots felt that participating in marches or sit-ins – indeed any sort of demonstration – violated the community's commitment to nonresistance because they ultimately relied on coercive force for change, even if a nonviolent variety.

Such tensions erupted into the larger Mennonite community after Harding's arrest in Albany and his subsequent speech before the Mennonite World Conference. Rather than avoid what he knew to be a sore spot – one that caused his MCC supervisors no small amount of discomfort – Harding pressed down hard on the need for Mennonites to become engaged with the black freedom struggle. His words bristled with prophetic barbs. “We let our Mennonite culture become our God,” he declaimed, adding, “We have allowed ourselves to be pressed into the mold of the white, Western world, a world on the decline.”

Frustrated, Harding distanced himself from Mennonites. Yet his legacy is part of our Mennonite history. Harding felt that we are all given a “magnificent calling” to wrestle with “something that is powerful.” His life and articulation of that call still tweak our consciences in 2020. Prophets can be difficult to hear sometimes and sometimes have a hard time finding a home in the church, yet we need them to help move us.

Our own congregation had this experience in 1976 when Eldorado Nuclear bought land in Warman for a uranium refinery. Some of our local farmers banded together to resist the project. It took five years and caused tension in families and in the church between whether to be activist and prophetic or silent and prayerful. We need both gifts in the church. There' s a great write up and photo about the struggle in the September 14 issue of the Canadian Mennonite. Our people are so young and good-looking in that photo.

When Alliant Technology in St. Paul, Minnesota began building one of the components for landmines destined for war zones around the world in the 1980' s, Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis formed a protest committee and marched in front of Alliant Tech. It also caused some tension between the prophets and the prayer-ers in families and in the congregation but the congregation worked through affirming the gifts of prophets and prayer-ers and showed unity when the prayer-ers brought muffins to the front-line protestors.

Herein lies the challenge of encouraging each other and building each other up in the faith as we continue to hope for The Day of the Lord and peace

and racial reconciliation. Because of Vincent Harding's example, we may still learn to embrace prophets in our midst. (Tobin Shearer Miller, A Prophet Pushed Out: Vincent Harding and the Mennonites, Mennonite Life, 2015, Vol.69)

Let us pray: We thank you our God for the prophets you send among us even we may have trouble hearing or understanding them. Help us to look back on our history and learn how you may be moving among us in the past and among us today. Amen.