Church Leadership: A Historical Perspective

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A historical perspective on church leadership in our Mennonite Brethren (MB) denomination can be of help to us in the present crisis in church leadership. While no one may wish to prescribe a return to the models of 1860 or of 1525 (if there were such!), it may be helpful for us to examine the past to gain a more objective perspective on the present and, perhaps, to reinstitute some things from the past. Our ultimate directives must come from the Scriptures, but sometimes the Scriptures don’t narrowly define sufficiently what we should do. And sometimes we believe that we are strictly adhering to Scriptural norms when in reality we have succumbed to models derived from our own experience. At times the study of history can jolt us out of the complacency of thinking that the newest is the best and that what we are doing is creative and radical or, on the other hand, of thinking that the way we are doing things is the way they’ve always been done.

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In a fairly recent article in a book on Baptists in Canada, John Richards asks the question: “Baptist Leadership: Autocratic or Democratic?” Baptists, he says, describe their leadership as democratic and pride themselves on congregational autonomy. “Autocratic” is a bad word especially in Baptist circles. But he goes on to say that Baptists are less democratic in practice than in theory, and he gives examples such as T. T. Shields and William Aberhart as autocratic types. But such people are often euphemistically called charismatic rather than autocratic. Richards also cites Elmer Towns, the Baptist who wrote a book entitled America’s Fastest Growing Churches (1972). Towns, he says, justifies a nondemocratic leadership style for pastors because it produces fast-growing churches. In general terms, Richards also concludes that traditional Baptist ecclesiology is in jeopardy.

Our thinking today regarding church polity and leadership is still conditioned very much by the various models which were juxtaposed during the Reformation era. The three types or models are: 1) the episcopal, 2) the presbyterian, and 3) the congregational. In fact we have moved much beyond those ideal types and have been influenced very much by modern political movements, such as Western democracy, as well as by modern economics and technology.

The word “democracy” itself is somewhat ambiguous. In ancient Greece democracy was thought of as direct and participatory, whereas modern democracy is more indirect and representative (we vote for people, not on issues). Applied to the polity types we might say that a congregational model is direct and participatory, whereas a presbyterian model is indirect and representative. Both would claim to be democratic. But perhaps the word democratic in either form creates problems for us because we think in terms of voting and majorities and minorities. Certainly we would be more than hard-pressed to find a New Testament example of that! So our claim to be biblical is subject to question from the very beginning.

I would like to begin by making a few statements about the 16th century, then about 19th century Mennonite and MB patterns, and finally something in relation to the 20th century experience in Canada.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The Roman Catholic Church

The Catholic Church believed in apostolic succession. Ordination was a sacramental act which conveyed special grace to the recipient. The church hierarchy (Pope, bishops, priests, etc.) therefore were endowed with special powers. They were more than leaders—they were the church in a special sense. The laity were second-class members of the church. There was a strong distinction between clergy and laity.
It is therefore hardly surprising that the clergy should have been singled out for criticism regarding the corruption of the church during the Reformation. Not only was there in fact often the greatest evidence of corruption among the clergy, but they had presumed to be the essence of the church. The masses, by and large, were blind followers.

**Luther**

Luther is usually given credit for speaking out against the corruption of the church at its centre—the clergy, and especially the Pope. One of the most powerful concepts which Luther popularized was the concept of the priesthood of all believers. He also gave the Bible to the people, and made them religiously literate. The result was that the church became more the church of the people, although the emphasis on the preaching of the Word, training for the ministry, and on the sacraments still maintained the centrality of the clergy to a considerable extent.

Paradoxically also, Luther himself emerged not only as a central figure but almost achieved a stature which militated against the concept of the priesthood of all believers. In fact, those who became opposed to him often referred to him as the new pope of Wittenberg. Luther was seen to have betrayed his cause, and when the masses began reading the Scriptures for themselves, he soon found that they did not necessarily agree with him and a new kind of leadership crisis emerged.

**Anabaptists and Other Radicals**

The Anabaptists are usually seen as a further shift toward giving responsibility to the people. Luther was seen by them as a traitor. The priesthood of all believers was now fully implemented by them. All the members of the believing community were to be full participants and this, of course, involved only adults.

Nevertheless, there were still recognized leaders among the Anabaptists. At first many of these were former priests and {21} well-trained individuals, but as persecution set in many of them became martyrs and a less trained leadership developed out of necessity. There does not seem to have been any real expectation of formal training. In fact, in time, suspicion of formal training seems to have set in. A fairly charismatic style of leadership developed which was largely self-authenticated but was also often formally endorsed by congregations. The mainline reformers often referred to these leaders as Winckelprediger (cornerpreachers), i.e., people without a parish who moved freely and irresponsibly from place to place. They had no formal calling, according to Luther, and therefore functioned without legitimacy. Of course, because of persecution, ordered congregational life was often difficult and leaders could not stay in one place for long. But leaders were also held very accountable to congregations. The Schleitheim Confession makes some very specific statements about shepherds and how they are to function.³

No single model of leadership emerged among the Anabaptists. There were many variations. Menno Simons eventually became the most influential leader in the north. A rather distinctive form also developed. A system of bishops or elders was created, and each bishop was given supervision over a particular geographical area (e.g., Dirk Philips in the east). At least three categories of leadership emerged:

1. Elder, bishop (*Leeraar*)
   The elder was charged with the full ministry, including discipline, ordaining, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper.

2. Preacher, Minister (*Diener am Wort, Vermaner, Prediger*)
   Later these were also called *Lehrer*

3. Deacon (*Armediener*)

In Holland the distinction between a) and b) soon disappeared. In Prussia the distinction was retained until 1945.⁴

On the whole, Anabaptist leadership has often been described as a servant- or shepherd-leadership model. Congregational decision-making has been described as a consensus model. Some have talked about a hermeneutical community or about a Gemeindetheologie.⁵ Some of the attempts to characterize Anabaptist models are undoubtedly idealized, but they nonetheless can be of value to us in sorting out our own dilemmas. The emphasis of Anabaptists was not on an institutionalized leadership but on leadership which recognized giftedness and which remained accountable to the congregation.

**19TH CENTURY RUSSIA**

In Russia in the early 19th century, elders and preachers were usually wealthy landowners who had no special training for their task. There is little evidence of extensive reading or writing. John B. Toews says that the elders produced virtually no theological or edifying literature prior to 1860.⁶ They were maintainers of tradition and establishment. The majority of people supported them in this role of maintaining the status quo.

The main struggle in this early period was not between the role of the elder and the role of the congregation but rather the role of the elder and the role of the Mennonite civil authority. Church and state were one in this Mennonite
commonwealth. It is not surprising that serious conflicts should emerge. There were also divisions between elders and segments of their congregations, but the issues tended to be not so much the role of the elder as the orientation of the elder with respect to specific issues (e.g., elder Bernard Fast and his progressive views re: Bible societies, etc.).

By 1850 in the Molotschna, the elders had banded together to form a **Kirchenkonvent** (Council of Elders) which supervised the religious life of the colony. They were conservative and suppressed religious inquiry. Each elder supervised a number of congregations which constituted his **Gemeinde** and each congregation had its own preachers.

In contrast to elders, teachers at first had little respect, status, and authority. But by mid-nineteenth century, teachers began to have a much more significant status. Gradually, more and more ministers (elders and preachers) were selected from the ranks of the teachers.

**The Early Mennonite Brethren Church**

In the early MB Church, the role of the ministry was a key issue not only in regard to the reason for the secession, but also in relation to the nature of the conflict in the initial years and in relation to the internal life of the MB Church as it sought to establish itself. In the document of secession, the old church [23] leaders are harshly criticized for their own lifestyle as well as for their inability to discipline erring members. The elders of the old church in turn applied very harsh measures against the secessionists.

The initial group of secessionists did not include any ordained leaders or persons who had held religious office. A number of them appear to have come from the ranks of the teachers, although they were obviously without theological training. Others were merchants, millers or estate owners, but conspicuously absent were representatives of the colony farmers who constituted the establishment. The church functioned under the guidance of a number of lay ministers, although there was also the unique office of administrator (**Regierer**) for a time. The secession document recognizes two types of calls to the ministry: 1) by God alone, and 2) by the believers. This, no doubt, was an attempt to protect themselves, much like the early Anabaptists, from charges that they had no legitimacy.

The first elders were ordained in 1868 (Huebert) and 1869 (Unger). Elders functioned in the traditional Mennonite pattern as superintendents of districts or parishes. At the 25th anniversary in 1885 there were four elders in the six main churches and 35 other ministers. [10]

The role of the elder began to be questioned by about 1900. In 1909 Elder David Schellenberg was deposed from the Rueckenau church. According to A. H. Unruh the Rueckenau church came to the interpretation that all ministers are elders. The ministers together functioned as a kind of council of elders and the leader was “the first among equals.”

**DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTH AMERICA**

This section will deal primarily with Canadian developments with only brief references to the United States (U.S) and to the entire North American context.

In the U.S. the elder system was retained until about 1920. None was apparently ordained after 1919. In general, U.S. leadership developments preceded Canadian developments by about a generation. In Canada however, according to J. A. Toews, no elder was ever ordained, although a number who had been ordained in Russia migrated to Canada (e.g., Franz Friesen in Coaldale). [24]

The first generation of leaders in Canada after the mass immigration from Russia in the 1920s were men who had already risen to the status of leaders in Russia and were educated in Russia. These included particularly men like B. B. Janz and A. H. Unruh. [12]

Janz became leader of the Coaldale church in 1928. Toews characterizes the Coaldale church as one which fostered a vigorous open democracy. Church members often admonished and on occasion humiliated their leaders. Janz was criticized for a leadership style which was too pompous and unspiritual and for insisting on his own viewpoint. But Janz showed a real concern for the church and its witness in the community (e.g., the issue of the **Reiseschuld**). Conflicts within the church were dealt with forthrightly (e.g., disputes over distribution of irrigation water). For a time Janz had to give up his leadership position and then resumed it reluctantly later on. Circumstances did not allow him or other leaders to escape the tensions of his own church and opt for another. Somehow brothers had to learn how to live with one another.

A. H. Unruh is characterized by David Ewert as a man whose influence was second to none in the Canadian brotherhood. When he was moderator of the Conference he did not necessarily demonstrate competence in executing parliamentary procedures, but he did manage to preserve a spirit of brotherliness. Ewert also states that Unruh had a deep-seated fear of episcopalianism (autocracy?) and that he had the profound conviction that authority was vested in the brotherhood. [15] He was irenic by nature and regarded himself simply as one of the brethren. His sense of humor
In the past generation, other men including F. C. Peters and J. A. Toews were well-recognized leaders. They were men who promoted what was referred to as a brotherhood concept of the church, a multiple lay ministry, and an interdependence of churches. A number of significant articles on church polity were written by Peters and Toews. Peters also taught a specific course on church polity at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College for a time. In one essay, Peters discusses four models of church government: 1) Anarchy, 2) Brotherhood, 3) Democracy, and 4) Authoritarianism. In local churches where he pastored, F. C. Peters always discerned gifts in young men and encouraged them to share the pulpit with him.

The single most significant change that developed first in the U.S. and then in the Canadian context was the shift from a multiple lay ministry to the professional pastoral system. At first the shift was to a single full-time pastoral system which still necessitated or permitted considerable lay leadership involvement even in the preaching ministry. The shift has continued, however, so that now many churches have a multiple full-time staff. Most churches in Canada have undergone a significant transition in leadership patterns in the past thirty years.

Another significant issue for Mennonite Brethren has been the issue of the autonomy of the local church. This issue, although it may appear to be new, is not really new. Gerry Ediger holds that there is a growing tendency toward congregational autonomy, probably true especially in recent years.

In Russia the pattern of an itinerant ministry helped to tie the various scattered congregations together. A similar pattern developed in Canada in the early years and carried on for some time. Later the Bible College teachers served as itinerants. The institutions themselves as well as missions and other projects tied the Conference together. But there were always voices which spoke loudly in favor of the autonomy of the local church and resented leadership voices from outside.

At the General Conference level, in 1951 the North American Committee of Reference and Counsel proposed the establishment of a Board of Elders to be a supervisory body related to spiritual and theological affairs. This evoked much debate and opposition and in 1954 the proposal was withdrawn and most of the duties envisioned for such a board of elders were assigned to the Committee of Reference and Counsel. The greatest fear, apparently, was the threat to the autonomy of the local church. According to Unruh, some were very much influenced by the Baptist conception of the church and others were very reluctant to go back to the old practices of MBs in Russia.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This brief historical survey suggests that while significant changes have taken place in the history of our denomination, many issues remain unresolved. It also appears unlikely that consensus can be reached on the fundamental polity issues pertaining to leadership. We may have to be more willing to recognize that precise patterns are not easily drawn from the Scriptures. We will also have to recognize that we easily borrow from the cultural patterns surrounding us and that we must be sensitized to some of the dangers inherent in these, including management theory and contemporary political structures. Probably the dynamics of brotherhood (which may not be a particular polity model but rather a quality of church life) can be realized in a variety of ways.

Some of the important things that our history can tell us include the following:

1. We need safeguards against autocracy and despotism. This can be learned especially from the role of the elders in the Old Church in nineteenth-century Russia and from the role of “charismatic” leaders in the “joyous movement” of the early MB Church. Some leaders obviously used their power arbitrarily to the detriment of the church.
2. We need safeguards against the divisive tendencies of a democratic conception of the church and of an overemphasis on the local autonomy of the church. The frequent splintering of our churches and the lack of denominational unity give evidence of this tendency. The North American emphasis on individualism, rights, and democratic principles undermines the spirit of mutual submission.
3. We need to safeguard a serious level of congregational participation in the work of the church at every level. The professionalization of the ministry will otherwise erode participation to such an extent that we will lose the concept of the priesthood of all believers completely. North American churches are often churches of spectators.
4. We need to reawaken a concern for leadership discernment. Leadership must be earned and granted, not sought and grasped. Especially is this to be taken into account when people are formally trained for the ministry. People who opt for formal leadership training can easily bypass the discernment process.
5. We need to learn the difference between gifted (charismatic) authoritative leadership and autocratic or authoritarian leadership. How do we recognize leadership that is exploitive, manipulative, political and self-serving? When is leadership genuinely authoritative rather than autocratic? How often is a good leader really a reluctant leader?
6. A consensus model is an ideal which in practice is bound to lead to frustration. We need to learn how to deal with disagreements with integrity and have opting out mechanisms which don't destroy the fabric of our churches when there are serious differences.

ENDNOTES


2. Richards, 232.

3. Part of the article on shepherds reads, “The office of such a person shall be to read and exhort and teach, warn, admonish, or ban in the congregation . . . . But should a shepherd do something worthy of reprimand, nothing shall be done with him without the voice of two or three witnesses.” The Legacy of Michael Sattler, tr. and ed. John H. Yoder. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973, 39.

4. For more details see the article by Cornelius Krahn entitled “Elder” in the Mennonite Encyclopedia 11.


10. J. A. Toews, 304.


15. Ewert, 129.


18. See Unruh, 591.

19. Ediger, 50.

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