The Church as Employer

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Four years ago when I came to Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM), I was awed by the legacy which we inherited. At the turn of the century, except for limited mission initiative in Indonesia led primarily from the Netherlands, Mennonites were essentially a North Atlantic people; almost without exception Mennonites were persons of European ancestry. One hundred years ago, in response to a famine, the first mission workers were sent by North American Mennonites to India. Soon others followed, going to Argentina, then Brazil, and ultimately to all six continents. From this worldwide web of witness to Jesus Christ the Mennonite peoplehood was profoundly transformed. Mennonite World Conference reported in 1997 that the center of gravity in the Mennonite movement has shifted south. There are now more Mennonites of color than otherwise.

What a remarkable legacy! But would it be continued in a new century? That's the question we were concerned about when I came to leadership at MBM. Previous generations, and in particular the World War II generation, were unquestioning and generous in their support and commitment to mission. The generation that followed, the baby boomers, for various reasons did not seem to share an equal enthusiasm for mission. Few people at MBM could remember when we had a year that hadn't experienced a decline in contributions. Our programs were shrinking. Rather than blame/shame the constituency, we chose to ask what we needed to do differently and we asked the church to help us. Through a process of listening and discernment called the Cana Venture, we heard many things from the church and, by the grace of God and the permission of our Board, we undertook a transformation of the organization.

For two years we were in the wilderness. The year we spent preparing for the transformation there was hope among some, cynicism among others, and resignation among yet others. In the year we designed a different organizational reality and began to fully implement the changes, there was

great anxiety and stress. Those were difficult days, wilderness times. We had left behind the familiar, but we weren't yet where we wanted to be. During those days our only currency was vision. To be a leader then required a lot of grace and much prayer. Eventually, however, desired change did come. Two years ago we still saw a decline in contributions but the gradient had moved toward a more level pitch. Then last year we received $100,000 more than the previous year. At the mid-point of this year we had received $300,000 more than a year ago and $150,000 more than budget. In these last years I have known the perception of curse and blessing.

Wilderness experiences without secure walls and structures, full of dissent, turmoil, and a search for new meaning are a part of the current reality of life within organizations. The epoch when there was uniformity of assumptions about the world across the generations is long past. Each of us and each of our institutions function in the midst of fragmented, dissociated, competing, incongruent, narrowly focused fields of meaning and interest. As George Cabot Lodge wrote back in 1970 in the *Harvard Business Review*: "The ideological framework that related the timeless values of our civilization to the real world and guided the activities of our institutions has become palsied and obscure."[1]

In this context does the church look for road maps with which to chart its course through the turbulence and turmoil in the corporate world, or does it do something fundamentally different? Some believe that the peculiar nature of the church places it beyond correlation with other organizations in society. They argue that the supernatural, dynamic, and divine origin of the church leave it essentially without comparison among human institutions. By the same token and, perhaps to a larger degree, many businesspersons (and behavioral scientists) blithely claim that the problem with the church is that it has not adopted enough of the modern organizational practices of the corporate world. The first position claims that only categories conceived by the church make sense as tools for analysis. The second allows for no significant difference between the phenomena of a business organization and a churchly institution. In my opinion both views are wrong.

In my view the church is a human institution, a social reality whose forms and practices can be studied on the same terms as other social systems. At the same time there is a transcendent dynamic to churchly bodies which

creates unique realities. While the church and its institutions are grounded in the specificity of human time and event, the revelation of God through the church–the community of the Holy Spirit–invests it with a special meaning and purpose. It is perhaps that specialness of nature and purpose which creates extraordinary expectations. No matter how much each generation is reminded that the church (and its institutions) is made up of fallible, sinful human beings, the expectation persists that the church will deliver. Too often it doesn't. This results in a strange duality of perceptions about the church. Perfection is expected on the one hand. On the other, the workaday theology of many seems to be that the grace of God is powerful enough to renew individuals but that institutions are hopelessly demonic and sinful. This reality led Michael Novak to posit that the fundamental problem facing the church is to discover and decide "which choices of human polity for the structure of a community and for individual life contribute most, over the long run, to fidelity to the revelation of Jesus Christ."[2]

Every organization has a set of values which shape the kinds of behavior sanctioned by the system; they influence the role expectations and pressures that prevail and help specify the nature of legitimate interaction by the organization with its environment. The church also has such a system, but the service it offers seeks to provide not only a universal value system but also people who demonstrate those values. "Practice what you preach" is a dictum widely applied across society. While most organizations are not inured from living by this dictum, none is forced to be as articulate and consistent with its ideology as often as the church. People reflexively look to churchly institutions for particular services. The nature of those services is unapologetically intangible. It is grounded in trust, self-acceptance, and identity. The church and its institutions are expected to teach and embody these values. The degree of congruence between what we say and do is crucial if people are to find truth voluntarily rather than from the blatant imposition of authority.

Amitai Etzioni characterizes institutions that rely on control through charisma, symbolic reward, esteem, acceptance, peer approval, or a high degree of personal identification with the leadership as "normative-power-oriented."[3] The church is probably one of the most outstanding examples of an organization relying primarily on normative power. This presents a peculiar

challenge. First, charisma cannot be institutionalized. Personally attractive, life-filled, and life-giving people are not so easy to come by as are technically proficient, professionally trained replacements for the correct slot in the organization's chart. Second, the sources of power for the church are increasingly limited. Through much of the 1970s and '80s there seemed to be a growing trend to limit the areas in which the authority of institutions would be accepted. During this period in many Mennonite churchly institutions there appeared to be a devaluation of leadership. Leadership became risky business, and followership became more complex.

Reflecting on the nature of followership, Daniel Katz postulates three kinds of belonging to an organization–symbolic, normative, and instrumental.[4] *Symbolic attachment* refers to "emotionally held attitudes in which the symbols represent absolute values and have a life of their own." *Normative involvement* is "the acceptance of specific legitimate requirements of the system necessary for system membership" (for the organization to work well I must live by its norms, i.e., approved ways of behaving). *Functional involvement* has to do with "commitment to the system because its demands are instrumental to his/her needs" (physical, material, and spiritual needs).

The trend toward membership based on functional and normative versus less symbolic involvement is a movement toward greater reliance on personal choice and away from the forces of tradition. Much of the traditional authority of the church has derived from the power of symbolic involvement. If Katz is correct–and from the MBM experience I believe he is, since we have transformed our organization and seen the mean age in it drop dramatically (in at least 8 job transitions we have replaced people whose average age was 63 with persons whose average age is 31)–symbolic involvement in our institutions is giving way to a commitment based directly on a functional interdependence. This interdependence says, "If I belong to your organization I will accept your standards of membership–the nature and degree of commitment desired–provided you can show me that they are necessary for the organization to be effective, and provided that membership gives me the rewards I am seeking." The result of this trend simply reinforces the point that our institutions are laboring under a tremendous erosion of their traditional authority. All of our institutions are having to rely more and more

on controls/incentives based on a normative and functional perspective. This circumstance creates a significant challenge.

Before I address that challenge I want to recognize a related observation made by Thomas Bier, who describes three fundamental orientations toward organization:[5] 1) Formal–persons who assume formal lines of authority, accept direction without questioning; 2) Social–persons who enjoy discussion and agreement and work toward consensus and mutual goals; 3) Personal–You do your thing and I'll do mine, is the expectation. The prime value is on being oneself.

The person with a formal orientation is at home in the traditional bureaucratic organization with well-defined structure and tasks. Those with a social orientation are more comfortable with complex tasks whose shape continually changes as the result of interaction, collaboration, and consensus. An individual with a personal orientation may have difficulty functioning in any type of setting. In the last two decades environmental and social factors in the Mennonite church have entrenched the social orientation as the preferred organizational form. In that period, the church has shed many of its formal bureaucratic tendencies and has come to operate much more on the basis of mutualism, shared goals and tasks defined in collaboration. The personal orientation in many of our recent recruits is requiring a shift to a connective or coordinating style. Switchboarding–making connections so that people are helped to do their thing (and if by chance it is congruent with someone else's thing, so much the better)–is the direction in which our organizations are being pushed.

When you have churchly institutions composed of persons with all three kinds of orientation, it creates the inevitability of significant conflict, internally and externally. Many of the tasks of churchly organizations require collaboration with highly diverse interest groups. This reality creates an institutional dilemma–that of maintaining a trustworthy contract with a wide range of persons. The authority of the institution can no longer assure compliance, much less commitment. Commitment more and more involves cooperative endeavor based on congruence between individual interest and organizational goals. The loss of power to ensure compliance results in organizations having to deal with conflicts of interest–varieties of psychological contracts–in the hope of securing commitment. This requires

that leadership must understand the psychology of power and politics in situations pregnant with conflicting interest.

Conflict is a particularly challenging issue in Mennonite institutions because cultural forces embedded there militate against the recognition and constructive use of differences. Even though we probably have some of the more highly skilled and trained conflict entrepreneurs in the Mennonite church, for many the word "conflict" is not to be used in churchly settings. There is a widespread implicit agreement that no matter how you feel individually, debate, disagreement, political posturing, or the voicing of opposing views has no place in church, particularly if it might arouse ire or emotion. Even if persons as individuals learn that it is important to learn creative ways of expressing, understanding, and utilizing differences, a cultural veneer still remains that says, "No, no, not here!" The curious situation then arises in which the existence of a norm suppressing conflict in itself generates conflict, and leads to the struggle to find a positive strategy that can deal with conflict avoidance, the submergence of differences, and the repression of dissent which fosters dysfunction and ill-health in the life of the organization. Part of the curse is that we have no easy way of dealing with conflict.

Our institutions are an expression of our need to universalize our best hopes and wishes for our world. But we need to remind ourselves of the fallacy of confusing the wish with reality. The church should be the first place where this fallacy is recognized–the last place to confuse the hope of the Kingdom/Reign of God with the actual life and work of the institution. No institution can ever perfectly embody humanity's best hopes and dreams. However, we can learn to embody commitment to a continuous search for deeper wisdom, a fuller understanding, and the hope of healing flowing through us and then into the world.

Notes

[1] George Cabot Lodge, "Top Priority: Renovating Our Ideology," *Harvard Business Review* (September-October 1970): 40.

[2] Michael Novak, "The Meaning of Church in Anabaptism and Roman Catholicism Past and Present," in *Voluntary Association,* ed. D.B. Robertson (Richmond, VA.: John Knox Press,

1966), 91.
[3] Amitai Etzioni, *Modern Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice- Hall, 1964), 59.
[4] Daniel Katz, "Group Process and Social Integration," *Journal of Social Issues* (January 1967): 18.
[5] Thomas E. Bier, "Contemporary Youth: Implications of the Personalistic Life Style for Organizations," Ph.D diss. (Case Western Reserve University, 1967).

(2) *Rudy Siemens, Administrator*
Tabor Manor, St. Catharines, Ontario

Power and authority should not be self-proclaimed but mandated by God and the community within which we work. Without recognition of authority within our constituency, the claim to have authority from God may well be a deception.

My framework for this topic comes from within the "secular" arm of the church, that is, institutions owned and operated by the Mennonite Brethren Conference. In this wider context I have worked for fourteen years with the mentally ill and disabled, and eight years with seniors.

Let me begin with Bethesda Home, a mental health facility, which was founded by a farm couple, Henry and Maria Wiebe. The authority and power to operate lay with them at first. As the project grew, the Mennonite Brethren Conference took an interest, and eventually the operation became Canada-wide. Power and authority went through marked stages. Initially services were provided to mentally ill residents at no cost to the taxpayer. Eventually the cost became burdensome and now the operation is covered totally through tax dollars.

I have observed that the relationship between the church and the state in this power sharing creates some problems. Before the state entered, the church was, and needed to be, totally involved. Without it the work would fail. The church had a stake in the project. There was much voluntarism, visitation and interest in special events. With total government funding, the scenario changed quickly to polite interest, reduction in voluntarism and eventually to very low interest. Power and authority had been transferred from the church to the state. The mission statement is still church-driven and a church-elected board still oversees the project, but fewer staff have church

affiliation and the decision making is quite remote from the church. This is not to criticize the churches or the board of directors. Yet the power and authority in such projects (and Bethesda is not alone) has largely been relinquished by the church.

My present position as administrator of two facilities for seniors gives me another perspective on the power and authority of the church in this mission. Both facilities are relatively modern, and the power structure in their operation is more tax-base-oriented than church. The body which controls the funds generally has the authority. However, we live in a political environment which is probably unique: while our homes must meet rigid standards, considerable authority is left to the churches which run them.

I see no government interference with the mission statement which is biblically based and specifically oriented to "the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). Since more than half our funding comes from the Ontario Ministry of Health, the power and authority to run the Home obviously needs to be a negotiated model. We meet standards outlined by the Ministry, but day-to-day operation is carried out by staff hired by an elected church board. Some years ago we lobbied the Ontario government to allow us to give preferred admission to those of our ethnic and religious persuasion. The government was quite willing to negotiate its power and authority in this area.

How is working for a church-owned operation funded by the government different from, say, working at a municipal or privately-owned Home?

1. We live in a fish bowl. That keeps us accountable and gives us support. But it also leaves us open to detailed scrutiny by our 4,000 plus owners who can come in from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m..

2. We have a unique staffing flavor which is very obvious to most people who work and live here. The flavor is ethnically Mennonite but also Christian. We dare not rest on this, but it is a major strength.

3. Staff/management relationships are different, usually better. Presently our Homes are not unionized. A staff association acts on behalf of staff and keeps communication and awareness alive. We have, I believe, better morale and a better staff commitment than in non-church Homes, as testified by new staff, families, and the Ministry. This does not mean things are always smooth and everyone is happy. It does mean our staff have a

commitment to the mission given us by the church and greater empathy with our residents.

4. Handling difficult staffing issues is more humane–at least that is our goal and intent. Often in a church setting, disciplining or correcting staff is not handled well because we are afraid to offend fellow believers. Here I have learned much from the secular model of dealing with people. A blend of Christian beliefs and acquired skills seems to work well in receiving, delegating, and sharing power and authority.

5. Our board is small but decisive, tenacious, and supportive. There is long-term vision and regular contact with administration. We have a good balance in power and authority. Because board members are volunteers and cannot devote as much time to the work as staff, directions need to be fleshed out by staff. No major decisions in direction, capital purchase, and even in hiring supervisory staff are made without board involvement at some level. Because our board is small, it does not work through committees.

I feel empowered by my board and our constituency, and my continuous plan is to empower and support our staff. Power and authority in their various forms need to be directed totally to serve residents better and not to further personal agendas.

(3) *Sue C. Steiner, Pastor*
Waterloo North Mennonite Church, Waterloo, Ontario

I grew up during the fading days of the bishop era in the Franconia Conference (Pennsylvania) of the Mennonite Church. My first minister was my Dad's Uncle Jake. Recently it occurred to me that this discussion–on the congregation as employer–would have been incomprehensible to Uncle Jake. For, you see, Moyer & Son was Uncle Jake's employer. Or, to be more accurate, he employed others at the family feed mill he owned with my grandfather. Uncle Jake got love offerings from his congregation, but his livelihood came from bookkeeping and managing at Moyer & Son.

This discussion would have been incomprehensible to Uncle Jake for another reason. Souderton Mennonite Church didn't appoint a search committee of lay persons to sift through a stack of resumes, then present Jake

to preach a trial sermon, after which he would be approved for a three-year term as minister following a secret ballot by the congregation. Nor did they appoint a review committee after three years to decide whether Uncle Jake's ministry style and emphases were still compatible with the needs of the congregation. Rather, Jacob M. Moyer was ordained by lot. That is, the Franconia Conference bishops discerned that the Souderton congregation needed a pastor. They invited the membership at Souderton to put forth the names of godly men from within the congregation who could serve in this way. Then, in a public meeting at the church, each of these men chose a hymnbook with a slip of paper hidden in it. The slips of paper in the other hymnbooks were blank. But in Uncle Jake's book the slip of paper said: "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord" (Prov. 16:33).

By this means, Uncle Jake became a pastor at the Souderton Mennonite Church in l9l3 at the age of twenty-three. His authority came from God and his appointment was for life. The only way out was to get sick or die. In his book, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship*, John Ruth describes Jacob M. Moyer as a sometimes severe shepherd, ready to work obediently within the old authority structures. When told by the church's deacon to comb his hair down over his forehead, he did so. When asked by the bishops to enforce dress standards, he did so. When asked to review teaching materials for doctrinal purity, he did so.[1] But by the late l950s, Uncle Jake was in big trouble. The whole authority structure by which he had lived his life came crashing down around him as lay leaders wanted to take charge in matters previously reserved for ministers. The last straw was when the Sunday school superintendents began leading teacher training sessions in the church. Uncle Jake got sick, and soon his generation passed away.

Gradually, authority became vested in congregations. And ministers became–among other things–employees. I remember certain churches I visited in the 1960s and '70s, the ones in full revolt against the authoritarian era. There was lots of talk about "the priesthood of all believers." This seemed to mean that everybody was supposed to pitch in and do the work, and to develop and use their gifts to the full. But no one–either lay or ordained–was allowed to lead, since no one was given authority apart from the group. I saw pastors who were hired to be coordinators go through intricate dances

with their congregations in order to claim some authority without seeming to do so.

As I look back, I am sad both for the Uncle Jakes of the late bishop era and for the hired coordinators of the era which immediately followed. I read both kinds of experiences as cautionary tales. I don't want to spend my time choreographing elaborate dances with the congregations I serve in order to claim some authority without seeming to. But as I claim authority as a pastoral leader, I want to hold it lightly. I don't want to lapse into a kind of control from which sickness or death is the only escape. Sometimes I wonder what they'll say about our era fifty years hence, after the old givers die off and congregations lose their tax-exempt status and everything changes. Will they wonder how we could have been taken in by the spirit of the age and professionalized spiritual leadership? Will they shake their heads at us and wonder how we could have possibly imagined that employees of congregations could also lead those congregations?

In my part of the Mennonite world, pastors *are*–among other things–more or less professionalized employees. That is a given. I have been an employee of four congregations as either a pastor or interim pastor. With each, I have had a memo of understanding–which would have appalled my great uncle Jake–detailing such things as salary and benefits and supervision and reviews and sabbaticals, following the guidelines supplied by our denomination almost to the letter. As a pastor, I clearly am an employee.

Yet I refuse to define myself by that part of my reality. I work in a part of the church which remembers both the Uncle Jakes and the hired coordinators. What has worked fairly well for me is to define myself as one who shares in leadership authority with other ministers and lay leaders within whichever congregation I serve, and as one who tries to model a way of leading which invites others in. The authority in which I share comes first of all from Jesus Christ, who gives the church as a whole the right and the power to act in his name. Power and authority resides first in God, then in the church, then–on a seconded basis–in individuals for the benefit of the group. Celia Hahn, who is one of my heroes, puts it like this: "I give my religious leader authority, so I can receive it back again with power. Authority belongs to everybody, and the function of leadership is the empowerment of all."[2]

I believe that when ministers and lay leaders can model shared authority in ways that empower congregations, we are making a major contribution that takes us beyond both Uncle Jake and hired coordinators. The first step is to lose our fear of the word "power" so that we can exercise it appropriately–neither giving it away out of fear nor abusing it for our own ends. I still run into many church situations in which power is seen to be so negative that we can't acknowledge we have any, either as pastors or as lay leaders. The most challenging lay leader I've ever encountered was the church chair in a congregation where I served briefly as a consultant. I quickly found that in this congregation one couldn't use the word "power" or the word "authority." In fact, one could hardly even use the word "leadership." Repeatedly what happened was that individuals rose up and attempted to exercise control, only to be batted down by the group. Then I met the church chair. He was a likeable man, a successful business owner, always on the cutting edge, very astute, very aggressive, and a risk taker. He appeared to be quite comfortable with the way he functioned as a business person. The problem was that when he pulled into the church lot, he became an entirely different person. He believed that in the church setting, power was bad–a word that should not even be mentioned–so as a consequence he imagined that his role as church chair was to refuse to exercise any leadership. In fact, he became downright passive while all sorts of power plays continued to erupt all around him. From my vantage point, his refusal to lead contributed to the culture of havoc in that congregation.

At this point I need to give my definition of power: the ability to act and have influence based on the resources, position, and trust we have been given. The way I can survive as an employee and lead appropriately is to recognize the power I have as a pastor and name it, to invite other leaders to recognize the power they have and name it, and then to model how we can empower others and work together for common ends. Power can be used to empower others or for our own ends. The role of leadership is to help the congregation see the power it has together as the body of Christ in this particular place.

I need to be very alert to the power I do have, and I need to use it very carefully. For instance, in one congregation that I served, I had power simply because I was a middle-class person rather than one who lived in poverty. In another, I had power because I had more education than most members of the

congregation. As a pastor I always have power because I'm at the centre of the information flow of the congregation and in a position to see the whole picture, because I'm given permission to enter the sacred spaces of people's lives in ordinary times but also in times of high vulnerability, and because I'm privy to all sorts of confidential information. I carry significant power and authority in matters of spiritual direction, pastoral care, and preaching (simply because I have more air time than anyone else). This can be used to empower and guide members in their spiritual journeys and help set a direction for the congregation. Or it can be used to control, dominate, and diminish.

To be a faithful leader, I also need to be very alert to the kinds of power I don't have. I don't have the power to coerce others to do as I wish–or even to see the situation as I do. I don't have the power to force dying persons out of denial, or the power to get persons in self-destructive spirals to stop. Furthermore, to be a faithful leader I need to be alert to the times I'm tempted to give up power. If, for instance, I'm in a position to see the whole, I may be unfaithful if I keep quiet about what I see.

"Servant leaders," says Celia Hahn, "are neither controlling nor passive, but active, responsible . . . working collaboratively with their fellow servants to do what's needed."[3] These understandings, I believe, enable me to lead in a congregation where I am also an employee.

Notes

[1] John L. Ruth, *Maintaining the Right Fellowship* (Herald Press, l984).
[2] Celia Allison Hahn, *Growing in Authority, Relinquishing Control* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, l994).
[3] *Ibid.*