

REDISCOVERING MENNONITE IDENTITY IN TAIWAN: REFLECTIONS ON MENNONITE MISSIONS FROM AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Chiou-Lang (Paulus) Pan

Introduction

Christianity in Taiwan is a marginal group not only in its small membership but also in its influence on social issues. Although Christian leaders in Taiwan have promoted various revival movements for over two decades, churches in Taiwan, with few exceptions, have had no/low growth for a long time.¹

The Mennonite Church, a direct descendant of the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century, first encountered Taiwanese culture after World War II. Its members face the same problems as their fellow Protestants do. Taiwan Mennonite Churches, as a minority of the minorities, are struggling with both the inward and outward challenges. In this paper, the author will examine the history of the Mennonite Church in Taiwan to reveal what it gradually lost under the pressure of Taiwan's modernization and how it lost it. The author trusts that the findings will not only help the Mennonite Church practice its mission in the changing society of Taiwan, but also offer an alternative voice in the quest for an emerging Taiwanese identity.

1. Review of the Development of the Mennonite Churches in Taiwan

In 1948 the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was invited by a Presbyterian missionary, James Dickson, to come to Taiwan to do medical service. In that year, they established the *Mennonite Mountainous Medical Team* providing mobile medical service in mountainous areas. MCC envisaged its work as a Christian service "in the Name of Christ" and its programs have enhanced respect for the Mennonite Church throughout the island (Pannebacker 1975, 327). The mountain clinic in Hualien expanded to be a hospital with a 35-bed capacity in 1954 (Sawatzky 1970, 126). The Mennonite Christian Hospital

¹ Sociological studies show that churches in Taiwan grew quickly during 1945-1965, especially among mainlanders and aboriginal tribes. The Protestant community increased in number from about 37,000 just after World War II to over 200,000 in 1960 (Qu 1997, 63; Peter Wang 2001, 323). The percentage of Christians on the island rose from 1 percent in 1945 to 5 percent in 1965. (325) Since then this percentage has fallen although the number of Christians has slowly increased. Accordingly to Taiwan Church Statistics (Protestant, including the True Jesus Church which had 29,387 communicants), the total number of communicants was 194,814 in 1972 (published by Overseas Crusades Inc, 1974). Later on, the number of membership was 426,775 in 1989, and the number increased to 610,444 in 2001. The percentage of Christians of the whole population was 3.3% in 2001. Some independent churches grew very rapidly while the mainline churches declined. For instance, there were 26,000 members in Little Flock (Assembly Hall) in 1989 and 91,442 in 2001. There were 34,402 members in True Jesus Church in 1975, 38,496 in 1984, 46,384 in 1995, and 70,359 in 2001. There were 5,168 members in Bread of Life Christian Church in Taipei in 1989, and 22,374 in 2001.

Chiou-Lang (Paulus) Pan, with a MATS degree from AMBS, is pursuing a D. Miss. Degree at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Trinity International University, Deerfield IL

(MCH) has become a milestone of Mennonite medical care in Taiwan.

Due to the expansion of the medical work, the General Conference Mennonite Board of Missions (later Commission of Overseas Mission, or COM) decided in 1953 to take over the work of MCC and to plant churches among the Minnan-speaking (or Taiwanese-speaking) people. The Mennonites did not plant churches among the aboriginals, who were more receptive to the gospel because of an unofficial agreement with the Presbyterian missionary, James Dickson. The first Mennonite church in Taiwan, the so-called Bamboo Church, began on November 7, 1954 in Glen Graber's garage which was made of bamboo. The following year, after negotiations with a Presbyterian church and with the help of a Presbyterian who lent him \$3,500 Glen Graber purchased a Japanese style wooden cabin to serve as the meeting place.² Some Presbyterians transferred to the new Mennonite church. Lu Chun-Tiong, also called Uncle Peng-Hu, a Presbyterian pastor, attracted many Taiwanese people with his folk-like charisma. Many were baptized into the church, and he was the most important contributor to the early church growth of the Mennonite Church in Taiwan (FOMCIT, 39). From 1954 to 1964, seven local churches were established and shepherded by indigenous pastors spread over three areas: Taichong, Hualien and Taipei.³ The Fellowship of Mennonite Churches in Taiwan (FOMCIT) was officially established at the 5th Annual Conference in 1963. From that moment on, under the support of Commission of Overseas Mission of the General Conference Mennonite Church in North America,⁴ new Mennonite churches were gradually established. According to the annual report of FOMCIT, there were already sixteen congregations with a total of 903 members in 1978.

GPS: The Ten-Year Mission Program

On November 20-22, 1972, FOMCIT enthusiastically responded to COM's program by holding a seminar on the development of three criteria for church work: goals, priorities and strategies (GPS) (Lin 1992, 111). COM's program became FOMCIT's vision. The second seminar on GPS was held on September 19-21, 1976. FOMCIT decided to plant one new church every year. FOMCIT also recommended and supported many pastors to study further at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in the United States. However, the training project of GPS has not been successful in some respects.

FOMCIT under the Economic Development Since 1950s

A series of projects of targeting economic and land reform was set up in Taiwan

² Interview with Mr. T. S. Chao, an elder of Linsen Road Church, via email.

³ *The Mennonite Church in Taiwan: 1954-1964*, 12

⁴ A chart of benefit-loss ratio shows the great dependence of FOMCIT on COM. According to the 1976 chart, the total annual income of FOMCIT was NT\$3,064,027.66, but NT\$2,438,141 were received as support from COM. Cf. the 19th annual booklet of FOMCIT, 14-15.

in 1950s. These projects were very successful and improved Taiwan's economic state greatly. As a result, in the 1980s the Mennonite Church in Taiwan was able to fulfill its desire for unity with the global Mennonite community. In order to gain identification with the global Mennonite Church, many church members organized touring groups to attend the World Mennonite Conference assemblies in Kansas, USA, in 1978 and at Strasbourg, France, in 1984. However, the spiritual enthusiasm of a communal relationship with the worldwide Mennonite Church gradually dissolved as Taiwan's modernization progressed.

Cecil Wang (2001) identifies some of the impacts of modernization, particularly on the younger generation, and on the development of independent thinking. Materialism and utilitarianism develop along with rapid economic growth. People become more individualistic. The younger the generation, the less inclined they are to carry out and preserve cultural traditions.(153-155) Taiwan also has adapted the American education system, and professional skills, technology and science are now the major topics of school education. Therefore, education has not only elevated people to a higher social class, but also driven people toward an American individualistic egalitarian ideology.

A leading sociologist, Qu Haiyuan (1997), says that modernization means secularization, and among religious organizations, Christianity is the most influenced by modernization.(71) The Taiwanese have become individualistic and utilitarian, concentrating on their businesses and instant gratification. There were many college students baptized into the church who later became its backbone in the 1960s and 1970s. But the churches were moving away from the majority of Taiwanese people when its members were socially lifted up into the middle class and were spending most of their time and energy on their jobs. In addition, material supports such as milk powder and flour are no longer attractive to those outside the church.

Urbanization drives the churches into a totally different situation. Around 80% of the population of Taiwan lived in rural areas in the 1950s, but currently, the urban population has increased to 75 %. Churches that were surrounded by rice field in the 1950s and 60s, are now surrounded by cement high-rises. Urbanization also changes people's mentality, but not many churches are aware of this change.

From 1977 to 2000, the social services of FOMCIT continued to be developed with three institutions being founded. Otto Dirks founded New Dawn Retardation Developmental Center in 1977 in Hualien for taking care of those who suffer from physical or mental disabilities. In 1992, the Taiwanese government allocated 126 million Taiwan dollars to move the center to a seven-story building because of New Dawn's respectable service. New Dawn, now seeks to be a professional skill-training center for the disabled in east Taiwan. The Good Shepherd Center was also established in Hualien in 1986 for rescuing child prostitutes, young girls who have suffered sexual abuse, and women who are the victims of domestic violence. They also regularly visit tribal communities and give hygiene lessons and legal advice. After a series of expansions with support from Christian organizations in North

America and Germany, the Mennonite Christian Hospital became a 206-bed regional hospital in 1981. It later gained a favorable island-wide reputation when Dr. Roland Brown's story, who was a medical doctor and a long-term Mennonite missionary to Taiwan, was broadcast on television in the mid-90s. The Taiwanese were surprised that a "Taiwanese Schweitzer" had lived among them for 40 years. Large donations from the Taiwanese accomplished the third expansion project and made MCH a modern hospital with a 600-bed capacity and the latest medical equipment. The visions of these three institutions are still expanding. However, during this same period of time, FOMCIT planted only four new churches, two of which are already closed. There were nineteen congregations and 1,071 active members in Mennonite churches in Taiwan in 2001.

The Phenomena of Religious Revival and Competition

From 1971 onward, churches in Taiwan began to pursue a revival. The different schools of Buddhism and the new folk religions in Taiwan applied methods of business administration, mass media, and organizational reconstructions to increase their influence on intellectuals, especially in the late 90s. The revival of Buddhism in Taiwan in the 1970s stimulated the Christian churches by giving the Christians a feeling of crisis. Many churches tried various church-growth models from Korea, Singapore, and North America as a remedy. The church leaders held a number of church growth lectures, seminars and conferences. Responding to the AD 2000 Evangelism Movement, FOMCIT also held a seminar on "The Mennonite Ten-Year Project Toward the Year 2000," meeting on June 23-24, 1990. Five issues were dealt with in this seminar and many goals and strategies were developed for each issue (Lin 1992, 113-114). However, due to the difficulties of executing the strategies, most of goals of this seminar did not amount to much.

The Emergence of a Taiwanese Identity

The intertwined complexity of ethnic identity and national identity has been a hot issue since 1987, the year Taiwan's democratization officially began. The aborigines, Hakka, Ho-Lo, and the Mainlanders who came to Taiwan in different periods have divided Taiwan's society and created disharmony around the country. The focus of their arguments is Taiwanese-ness vs. Chinese-ness. Finally in the mid-1990s Taiwan Priority (臺灣優先) or Taiwanese Consciousness (臺灣意識) became "politically correct". The idea of a New Taiwanese identity emerged.

The New Taiwanese identity exists alongside a series of political events. To some extent, it is an artificial distinction. But it is not solely a product of the manipulation by the politicians on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, but rather has emerged from ordinary people's reactions to these political events. Mythologized Taiwanese-ness has developed into a cultural hegemonic project, looking for the significance of the origins of a Taiwan-centered identity (Chu 2000). However, ideological Taiwan-centered identity (Taiwaneseness), an

ethnic identity mixed with national identity, could potentially lead to warfare because political leaders frequently use ethnic identity to motivate and justify warfare (Brown 2001). The extreme form of Taiwanese indigenization toward ethnic nativism could be absolutely disastrous.

The Christian churches in Taiwan have inevitably been involved in this hot issue. Language usage reflects this situation. Speaking mother languages has become a label of political identity. Phenomenologically, Mandarin-speaking churches favor missions to China, but the Minnan-speaking churches are reluctant to do so. What are the reasons which make Mandarin-speaking churches send their resources to the overseas Chinese, and Minnan-speaking churches keep contact with overseas Minnan Taiwanese? At the very least, there are different “senses of origin,” a sort of ethnic identity influenced by the political national identity, among Christians in Taiwan. The main reason why different churches in Taiwan act so differently is not theological, but political. Both groups are influenced by patriotic sentiment. They are merely reacting to the Great Chinese Nationalism, which has long been imposed by the KMT (the Chinese National Party).

Assimilation Crisis

The Mennonites came to Taiwan under the invitation of the Taiwan Presbyterian Church. The Mennonites have helped the Presbyterian Church establish about 400 mountain churches among tribal people, and many Presbyterians helped the Mennonite Church grow in the early stage. However, many Mennonite pastors and believers coming from Presbyterian background also carried their Presbyterian baggage with them. Worship procedures, hymnbooks and even church regulations are similar. FOMCIT has only 1,071 active members while the number of the Presbyterians is more than 200,000. Therefore, many Mennonites cannot distinguish whether FOMCIT is “Mennonite Presbyterian or Presbyterian Mennonite”.⁵ If FOMCIT continues to use the same hymnbook, worship procedures, speaking the same dialect, same ethnic identity, and similar attitude toward Taiwan’s international status, then it is just a matter of time before it will be assimilated with the Taiwan Presbyterian Church.

The diversity of churches can reveal various facets of the Christian gospel. Unfortunately, Christianity in Taiwan seems to be reduced to three “denominations”: the aboriginal churches, the Mandarin-speaking churches and the Minnan-speaking churches. When Presbyterians in Taiwan began to increasingly emphasize identification with the land and with the people, and to politicize their “Theology of Self Determination”⁶, the

⁵ This term was quoted from James C. Juhnke, *A People of Mission*, 132.

⁶ The term is a translation of “Chhut-Thau-Thi theology” which is an adjustment of the Homeland Theology by Po-ho Huang, a Taiwanese Presbyterian theologian. Cf. *A Theology of Self-Determination: Responding to the Hope for “Chhut Thau Thi” of People in Taiwan*, 1996. See also *Ching Feng* 39(2), June 1996, 105-114.

Mennonites failed to look to their own traditions, like nonconformity, to address the issues (Loewen 1988, 420). They did not have an answer to the question which an American historian, James Juhnke raised, “What would it mean to be a faithful Christian and a Mennonite in Taiwan in the 1980s and beyond?”(1979, 144) Although the Mennonite Church in Taiwan has been in existence for over 50 years, it has gradually lost its distinctive identity in the process of Taiwan’s modernization.⁷ The future of Mennonites in Taiwan relies upon their rediscovering their theological vision from their historical origins and “letting Mennonites be Mennonite.”

2. Rediscovering the Mennonite Identity

Historical Origins

In the sixteenth century, Anabaptism was a church reform movement born at the time and in a context of the traditional church being secularized, society rapidly changing, and the Protestant Reformation being unsatisfactory to the grassroots. The Mennonite Church is a direct descendant of the Anabaptists who began their religious reforms spontaneously from the grassroots of several geographical and ideological points of origins. They insisted that baptism should be conducted for adults alone even though they had already received infant baptism. In the context of sixteenth century Europe, re-baptism was not only a religious practice, but also challenged the socio-political hierarchies, threatening the uniformity of religious confession and practice in political territories. (Snyder 1995, 1) For this reason, the Anabaptists were usually persecuted by both the authorities and other reformers. Nevertheless, the Anabaptist movements spread all over Europe, from the Netherlands to Poland to Slovakia. (Snyder 1999, 7-8)

Who Were the Anabaptists?

Emperor Charles V considered the Anabaptists to be a social plague. He searched out the Anabaptists and executed those who received re-baptism. The Reformers thought of them as heretics, and some considered them polygamists and demon-possessed bandits. Troeltsch (1931) classifies them as Christian sectarians. Preserved Smith criticizes the Anabaptists, calling them the Bolsheviks of the Reformation.⁸ Roland Bainton (1953) considers them the “left wing of the Reformation” because they clearly withdrew from the social system. George H. Williams (1992) classifies them as Radical Reformers. Mennonite

⁷ Whether FOMCIT has lost their Mennonite identity or never gained it is arguable. Japanese Mennonite pastor Yamada criticized FOMCIT for being too similar to the Presbyterians in 1960s. Juhnke argued that FOMCIT did not carry out Mennonite convictions such as pacifism. However, FOMCIT showed great interest in attending the Mennonite World Conference and enthusiastically hosted the Asian Mennonite Conference in the early 1980s. It seems that FOMCIT had a vague Mennonite identity mixed with Presbyterian elements. Even so, it was gradually lost.

⁸ Bender, H. S., “Anabaptist Vision” in *the Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. by Guy F. Hershberger, p.35.

historian C. J. Dyck (1993) thinks Anabaptism was a wave in a series of reformations since the Constantinian shift. Another Mennonite historian, Walter Klaassen (2001), considers Anabaptism the third way of church movement in his book: *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*. More radically, Oosterbaan (1977) argues that Anabaptism should not be put in the spectrum of the Reformation, but should be thought of as the Reformation of the Reformations after analyzing the differences between Anabaptist doctrines, such as Christology and the meaning of faith, and those of other Reformers. Sixteenth century Anabaptists identified themselves as “the followers of Christ.” Therefore, they called each other brothers or sisters. Then what does it mean “to be a follower of Christ in Taiwan?” A deeper reflection on ‘who they really are’ is the key to the question of how Taiwanese Mennonites can be faithful disciples of Christ in the current Taiwanese socio-cultural environment. Therefore, Mennonite ecclesiology is relevant for the Taiwanese as they reflect on their identity.

Menno Simons, the most outstanding leader of the sixteenth century Anabaptists⁹ and after whom the Mennonite churches were named, mentions that the church is a community of believers. The church that completely observes the Lord’s commandments is the true church, otherwise it is the church of the antichrist.¹⁰ In their Confession of Faith, the contemporary Mennonites refine the definition of church to say

the church is the assembly of those who have accepted God’s offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The church is the new community of disciples sent into the world to proclaim the reign of God and provide a foretaste of the church’s glorious hope. The church is the new society established and sustained by the Holy Spirit. The church, the body of Christ, is called to become ever more like Jesus Christ, its head, in its worship, ministry, witness, mutual love and care, and the ordering of its common life.¹¹

Accordingly, the church is a visible missional community of brotherly love which exemplifies the true humanity of Christ and mediates in the hostile world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

A Visible Community

The church as the body of Christ is visible, made up of those who have openly chosen to positively respond to God’s grace in Christ. The church itself is also “the visible manifestation of Jesus Christ. The church exists as a community of believers in the local congregation, as a community of congregations, and as the worldwide community of faith.”¹² Therefore, “the church would not simply be known to God alone,” as Arnold Snyder (1999)

⁹ George, Timothy, *Theology of the Reformers*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press), p. 255.

¹⁰ Wenger, J. C. ed. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1956, p.734.

¹¹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, article 9, published by Herald Press, 1995, 39.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

says, “but should be evident to any human observer.” It is persuasive to say that “wherever the church is, Christ is there.” The church itself is the presence of Christ.

The Household of God

Mennonites insist that a true church is a brotherhood-love church. “Only in the fellowship of the body of Christ can the believer realize his convictions that he cannot come to God in good conscience except with his brother.”¹³ The concept of a brotherhood church implies that salvation is not only an individual positive response to God’s grace, but also a socio-economic commitment. The one who converts to Christ also simultaneously commits to a new faithful community. Therefore, the church is the brand new household, or family, of God. Life Together is an eye-catching character of the new community. Mutual financial support between parent and child, and between brothers is considered a familial responsibility in Taiwan. Economic sharing in a church could be an extraordinary witness to Taiwanese that the church is a new heavenly family in which the relationship of its members goes beyond kinship.

Suffering as a Mark of a True Church

When the Taiwan Presbyterian Church, responding to the crisis of Taiwan’s loss of membership in the United Nations in 1971, announced their Declaration on the Destiny of Taiwan and their Declaration on Human Rights, which resulted in a long-lasting surveillance of Presbyterians by the Kuomintang, the Mennonites sympathized with the Presbyterians, but kept silent, because they feared that the small Mennonite community would not survive if opposing the government. They did not object in public to compulsory military service for the same reason. Although the Taiwan Presbyterian Church has served as pioneer in socio-political reform in Taiwan, as Rubinstein (2003) comments, “the church could not act in the political realm without risking its own destruction as a religious body.” (248-249) Mennonites, however, should characterize their political identity differently. Volf (1996), who is not a Mennonite, notes that “religion must be de-ethnicized so that ethnicity can be de-sacralized.” (49) Christians have to distance themselves from their own cultures (Volf 1996, 50).

The cost of being faithful followers of Christ is always very high. First generation Anabaptists all died within five years, from 1525 to 1530. The publication of *The Bloody Theater* (or *Martyr’s Mirror*, the defenseless Christians who baptized only upon confession of faith, and who suffered and died for the testimony of Jesus, their Saviour, from the time of Christ to the year A.D. 1660) symbolizes the Mennonite concept of radical discipleship. Nowadays, talking about a suffering church in 21st century Taiwan seems strange. But the unwillingness of suffering of a Christian body for the sake of Christ will inevitably hinder

¹³ Friedmann, Robert, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, (Herald Press, 1973), 81. Quoted in Sawatzky 1980, 206.

its witness. Christians should be faithfully taking their own cross and following after Jesus Christ regardless what the cost is, even unto death like the early Anabaptists did.

In-betweenness: the Church in the World

The sixteenth century Anabaptists developed a Christ-against-culture two-kingdom theology that sharply separated the church from the world. Their doctrines included the views that the church is the true presence of Christ and has participated in the perfection of Christ, and that the “world” is outside of the perfection of Christ. Although the Mennonites modified it to a more moderate form, the Mennonites still distinguish the church from other worldly organizations or institutions. The early Anabaptists had already presupposed that the church, the physical members of Christ’s Body, incarnated the Christ who had risen and was now sitting next to God the Father (Snyder 1995, 351). True communion and unity with Christ is possible only in the place where a congregation is gathered. However, on this side of heaven, Christians live in this world not as permanent residents, but as campers in an alien country. Therefore, the deepest identity for Taiwanese Mennonites is not to be Taiwanese, nor Chinese, but Christians, true humanity redeemed through Jesus Christ. Christians’ primary identity should be “resident aliens” because their ultimate citizenship is in Heaven. Therefore, ethnic or national loyalty is always secondary, second to the loyalty of following Jesus’ example and loving one’s enemies/neighbors. Racial or cultural nationalism is NOT compatible with Christian theology. A proper Christian theology of identity should integrate the message that “[a]t the very core of Christian identity lies an all-encompassing change of loyalty, from a given culture with its gods to the God of all cultures” (Volf 1996, 40). Accordingly, Taiwanese Mennonites should be more confident with their new identity in Christ and become more sectarian. They can confidently declare that we are members of the visible household of God. We are a part of God’s new creation in Christ. We are partakers of the community of hope through the Holy Spirit. We are heavenly citizens who happen to live in Taiwan. We are now in-between this world and the coming consummation of the new heaven and new earth at the return of Jesus Christ. Our goals are to rebind the fragmented churches in Taiwan into one new Christianity, to mediate the hostile ethnic groups into one new Taiwanese-ness, and to pacify the restless parties on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait into one new humanity.

Mennonites in Taiwan would better proclaim a Christian gospel which is interpreted as the power of loosing and binding: loosing the people from earthly bondage and binding them to a heavenly relationship. (Matt. 16:19) Through Christ, the church is the new creation, and the members of the church belong to the new creation. They belong to the new, so their activities and behavior have also been renewed. They live according to their new heavenly origin, not to the old earthly origin. They now anticipate the coming consummation by God’s grace. They love one another like family members, although they are not brothers from the perspective of natural genealogy. Mennonites believe that it is

God's Gospel which comforts social orphans when their parents forsake them. (Cf. Psa. 27:10) The Gospel promises that whoever does the will of God is Jesus' brother and sister and mother. (Matt. 12:50) The Gospel tells the Taiwanese "when anyone is in Christ, there is a new world; the old order has lost its power, the new one has been created." (2 Cor. 5:17)

Conclusion

Taiwan's socio-economic situation has changed in more recent year, but Mennonites believe that the Christian gospel is always relevant to the Taiwanese. The Mennonite Church in Taiwan when it fully rediscovers its theological insights from its traditions can be an example of an alternative new Taiwanese identity, speaking to the whole of Taiwanese society with a different voice.

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The Mennonites trace their origins particularly to the so-called Swiss Brethren, an Anabaptist group that formed near Zürich on January 21, 1525, in the face of imminent persecution for their rejection of the demands of the Zürich Reformer Huldrych Zwingli. The great persecutions of Mennonites and other Anabaptists during the 16th century forced one group of Mennonites to emigrate from the Netherlands to the Vistula River area in what is now northern Poland, where their communities flourished. After their last martyr died in the Netherlands in 1574, the Mennonites finally found political freedom there, and by 1700 baptized membership in the Mennonite churches of the Netherlands had reached 160,000.