

Race Relations in Virginia Mennonite Conference

by Elwood Yoder

The history of race relations in the Virginia Mennonite Conference spans three eras, beginning in 1775 when Mennonites first purchased land in Rockingham County. During the [era of enslavement](#), which lasted until the end of the Civil War in 1865, about 10-12% of those who lived in Rockingham and Augusta Counties were enslaved. During the [era of segregation](#), from 1865-1955, Mennonites lived alongside African Americans but seldom included them in their churches. In 1955, Conference ministers repented of their former spiritual immaturity, ushering in an [era of reconciliation](#).

The story of Margaret H. Rhodes reveals the antislavery sentiment held by most Virginia Mennonites before the Civil War. A widow in her thirties with five young children, Margaret harbored conscientious objectors to the war in her home. She helped to send them to freedom along the Unionist Underground Railroad, the largest collective act of defiance ever carried out by American Mennonites. Margaret worked to keep her farm operating a few miles west of Harrisonburg, though Union and Confederate soldiers took whatever livestock and farm supplies they wanted. In a rare glimpse into the thinking of mid-nineteenth century Mennonites, Margaret stood before a Southern Claims Commissioner and declared that both she and her former husband were members of the Mennonite Church, and “we did not believe in slavery and had no sympathy with the war.”

Very few primary source documents remain that show Mennonite opposition to the enslavement of African Americans before the Civil War. As a church, Mennonites did not join the abolition movement, nor was there much thinking about enslavement. Mennonites lived in small religious communities, and though they engaged in the Rockingham and Augusta County business networks, Mennonites appear to have seldom challenged the region’s entrenched institution of enslavement.

During the [era of racial segregation](#), 1865-1955, Virginia Mennonites had many interactions with the formerly enslaved in their churches and communities. Mennonites at the Bank and Weavers Mennonite Churches would have known Uncle Jack. Soon after the Civil War ended, Uncle Jack, who lived from 1820-1900, was baptized as a member at Bank Mennonite Church near Dayton, Virginia. His baptism date is unknown, but Uncle Jack was likely the first African American to join a Mennonite Church in the United States. Four unmarked graves of the formerly enslaved are buried next to Uncle Jack in the Bank Mennonite Church cemetery.

Resistance to integration and the introduction of harsh Jim Crow laws in Virginia kept the races apart during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1909, when the Middle District ministers considered whether Lydia Hines and her two daughters, African Americans, could become members of a Mennonite Church, Bishop Lewis J. Heatwole recorded in his journal that Lydia and her daughters could be received “separately from white converts.” It would take another forty-six years until African Americans were welcomed into full participation in Virginia Conference congregations.

During the 1930s, students at Eastern Mennonite School initiated a witness among African American children in Harrisonburg. Soon the Virginia Mission Board got involved and sponsored the work. The Harrisonburg Mennonite Mission, with a building located along Gay Street and later at Broad Street,

grew slowly. It was an era of deep segregation, and many were reluctant to encourage a mission in the Newtown area of Harrisonburg, where the formerly enslaved and their descendants lived.

From 1938-1945, Ernest and Fannie Swartzentruber served in the Harrisonburg Mennonite Mission. They led Summer Bible School for African American Children and attempted to build a congregation, but it was difficult. With World War II underway and nearly seven hundred drafted Virginia Mennonite men claiming conscientious objector status, the Virginia Mission Board and Conference leaders moved slowly on integration. Public schools in Harrisonburg were not integrated until 1966. When Virginia Conference leaders kept communion, footwashing, and the holy kiss separate between the races, Fannie became exasperated when she and her friends could not share the same cup in communion. During a 1944 church service, she bolted out the door of the Gay Street Church, and she and her small daughter walked four miles to their farm. With the stir the Swartzentruber couple raised, seeking equality between the races, the Mission Board terminated their work.

At least ten Virginia Conference Churches conducted integrated Summer Bible School sessions for African American children during the 1940s and '50s. These occurred in Sarasota, Knoxville, Richmond, Newport News, Norfolk, Springdale, Warwick, and three churches in Harrisonburg.

In 1955, Virginia Conference ministers repented of their actions that had segregated the races in their churches. Their repentance marked a turning point toward an [era of reconciliation](#). But changes took time and significant effort. Vincent Harding, an African American pastor, scholar, and civil rights activist, came to Harrisonburg in 1962 and created resistance when he wrote about the “deep patterns of racial segregation” he witnessed. Some students at EMC and the president of the Virginia Mission Board pushed back against Harding’s stark assessment.

Mennonite and Brethren leaders launched the Rockingham Council on Human Rights during the 1960s. They initiated changes in the Harrisonburg theater, the hospital, sports leagues, restaurants, and the workplace. One member of the Council took a stand and insisted that the separate restrooms for the races in the Rockingham County Courthouse end, and it did. In 1964, the Council helped Samuel and Lucille Ewell purchase a house in the all-white Harrisonburg neighborhood of Park View.

The work toward reconciliation in Virginia Mennonite Conference has been slow, deliberate, and with some pain along the way. When the white members of Calvary Mennonite Church, Newport News, Virginia, departed the church in the early 1970s, it was difficult and unsettling for both races. With African American leadership, Calvary changed ministry emphases and rapidly grew. In an event showing a measure of reconciliation, the Calvary Singers with Naomi and Leslie Francisco II came to Trissels Mennonite Church and sang during a Sunday evening program in 1984. Attendees remembered it as lively, energetic, friendly, and spiritually uplifting.

A Conference pastor in 2022 preached to her congregation that seeking racial reconciliation is hard work, and some will resist while others will embrace the changes. Pastor Sarah Piper explained that working toward reconciliation is challenging “when God’s Kingdom has not yet fully come.”

For an expanded history of race relations in the Virginia Mennonite Conference, with stories, details, interpretations, and source citations, navigate to the racial justice tab at virginiaconference.org