

# Race and Ethnicity Among Mennonites: Reflections on Three Hundred Years of Mennonite Missions in Philadelphia

*By Freeman J. Miller*

## Prologue

The mission impulse runs deep in Mennonite history. During the Reformation, Anabaptists had a plan for evangelizing all of Europe. They were persecuted, exiled, and martyred for not keeping quiet. They took the command of Jesus to “go and make disciples” very seriously. Some were driven from their homelands because they were considered a threat to society. Eventually, some fled to America where they could practice their faith freely.

In 1683, the first Mennonites arrived in Philadelphia at the invitation of Quaker William Penn, who hoped they would join the Quakers and other groups in his “holy experiment,” of creating a society where all faiths could live and work together in peace.

The first Mennonite immigrants were weavers, merchants, paper-makers, and artisans. Very few were farmers. Many of the subsequent immigrants were farmers who spread to the north and west of the city. They formed peaceful rural communities and eventually became less comfortable in the city, except for marketing the fruits of their labor and other business dealings. (How Penn and other colonists “inherited” and “cleared” huge tracts of land for European settlers is another story altogether and deserves careful analysis, especially since it often involved the “resettlement” or “conversion” of the original inhabitants. But it does provide important historical context for the arrival of European Mennonites and their new settlements.)

After several “great awakenings” in America, the mission impulse began to stir once again among Mennonites, many of whom were still singing German martyr hymns and preaching from German Bibles, clinging to the language and customs they had brought with them from the mother countries—primarily Germany and Switzerland. Like other Protestant groups, Mennonites began forming missionary organizations to send missionaries abroad. “Home Missions” groups also formed, reaching out to local

populations. After all, Jesus had said to “begin in Jerusalem.” Jerusalem was a city. But how do you reach out to diverse urban populations who don’t understand your language, culture, and customs? This raised a new set of questions, which differed from evangelizing back home in Europe, where people already shared language and customs.

This backdrop sets the stage for the first rural Mennonites who sent mission workers to Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and other cities in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

## The Norris Square Mission

Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) sent their first mission workers to Philadelphia in 1899. They began their work near Front and York Streets in the Kensington section of the city where several Mennonite families already lived for business reasons. After establishing the work, they purchased properties on Norris Square near Front and Susquehanna Streets.

Eventually, this became Norris Square Mennonite Church, but in the early days it was known as the Philadelphia Mennonite Mission. Both LMC and Franconia Mennonite Conference (now Mosaic) were reluctant participants, not sure what this new style of mission work might mean for their customs and practices. Later, as the work grew, both became supportive.

Several “sister workers” moved in to begin outreach in the neighborhood via sewing classes, Bible classes, and various ministries for the residents. This led to regular Sunday school and worship services, summer Bible school, evangelistic meetings in the park, and so on, gradually drawing in more and more of the children and local people. Kensington was a bustling neighborhood with various European ethnic groups who had come to work at the ports or in one of the many textile factories in the area. Many languages could be heard on the streets. The Catholics and Presbyterians also had churches on Norris

Square, around the edge of the park. The Mennonites, with their plain clothes and unadorned church buildings, were unusual. The work progressed slowly, but gradually became established. Several other Mennonite churches already existed in the city. However, they were from other conferences and different migrations, so they had little in common and did not work together.

As long as the various immigrant groups were White Europeans, they were welcomed into the activities at the mission. However, as Blacks began migrating to northern cities from the south, some ended up in Kensington. When they began attending the mission in 1934, the White leaders and members were unsure how to respond. Racial tensions and conflicts erupted in the city and occasionally in the church. Sister workers noted that sometimes fights would break out in their Sunday school classes between Black and White children. Summer and winter Bible schools held classes in separate buildings, but at other times, they were all together. Some White parents were concerned that their young people would begin to intermarry, and that made them nervous. Here is a quote from one long-time member, Anna Frederick:

Black people came to our Sunday school and so on and became members. Part of our congregation at that point said, "what happens when our daughters want to marry them, and our sons want to marry their daughters?" . . . and not long after that, the church decided that it would only be best if a separate mission was set up for black people.<sup>1</sup>

It is only fair to note that neighbors living near the church were also alarmed. A threatening handwritten note was found at the church, demanding that the church move its entire ministry at least fifteen blocks away or suffer dire consequences. It was signed by "Imperial Wizard."<sup>2</sup> Sadly, fear of racial integration led to the opening of a new mission for Blacks in 1935, first in a rented property at 191 West Dauphin Street, only a few blocks from the Norris Square Mennonite Church. In 1942, it was moved almost twenty blocks west, across Broad Street, to a three-story row house purchased by the LMC mission board at 1814 West Diamond Street, which eventually became Diamond Street Mennonite Church, which we will discuss next. Thus, Norris Square squandered the opportu-

1. Jeff Gingerich and Miriam Stoltzfus. Statistics and quotations are from *All God's Children: Philadelphia Mennonites of Lancaster Conference, 1899-1999* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Mennonite Historical Committee, 2000), 19.

2. *Ibid.*, 16.



Sister Emma Rudy with classes in the early days

nity to become the first fully integrated, multicultural Mennonite church in the City of Brotherly Love as an expression of Penn's "Holy Experiment."

Racial fear and tension won out over Christ's "whosoever will, may come" and His prayer in John 17, "that they may be one as we are one, so the world will believe." The scars of slavery and racism in America run deep, often marring the work of the church. It is important to note that one of the sister workers, Emma Rudy, moved from the Norris Square mission to work with the new mission, devoting the rest of her life to Diamond Street Mennonite Church. She died at age ninety-seven.

### Diamond Street Mennonite Church

The new work for Blacks mentioned above was initially called "Mennonite Mission for the Colored" but became Diamond Street Mennonite Church years later. It was now located in the heart of the Black community in North Philadelphia, so the White sister workers who canvassed the area in plain clothes and head coverings stood out even more than before. Most Black people were Baptists or Methodists, and some had attended Catholic schools, but who were these strange Mennonites? As the church became established, it was led by White pastors, some of whom moved their families into this Black neighborhood and became part of the local community fabric.

Diamond Street Mennonite Church and community members at City Hall signing papers to receive the large building from the city under their Gift Property program. Pastor Freeman Miller signing the papers in 1979.



Pastor Tee Ron Tinsley leading a celebration at Oxford Circle Mennonite on April 27, 2024.



Gradually, Black leadership emerged, and in 1970, Diamond Street became the first Mennonite church with two Black pastors at the helm: Raymond Jackson and Charles Baynard. Jackson had grown up in the church from boyhood. Charles later became senior pastor. His wife, Barbara, was one of the Allen sisters. The Allen family was the largest local family to become part of the church and were pillars of the church for decades.<sup>3</sup>

Diamond Street Mennonite Church opened a home for local seniors. It began various youth programs and summer day camps that became hugely popular in the neighborhood, as well as camping trips, sewing circles, and partnerships with rural Mennonite farms. They formed an interracial choir, singing Black gospel and other music, performing nationwide and in France at a Mennonite World Con-

ference. The church acquired a large four-story former masonic hall at 17th & Diamond Streets. It was renovated into a church/community center combination, including a holistic health center serving many in the neighborhood.

Freeman Miller, lead pastor at the time, along with Charles Baynard, Assistant Pastor, took a public stance in support of interracial marriage, a stance in direct opposition to the purpose of opening the mission in 1935. During his pastorate, several interracial couples were in the congregation. The 120-member congregation was a mix of Black and European American, with several African and other ethnicities represented.<sup>4</sup>

Various leaders emerged at Diamond Street, many of whom went on to serve elsewhere. One local Black youth who rose to leadership was Ron Tinsley, who, after many years of various youth ministry assignments in the region, is now the Outreach Pastor at Oxford Circle Mennonite Church.

When the church later dwindled in size and could not raise the funds to repay the sizeable loan, some thought that Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) should forgive the loan; others argued for fulfilling the agreement. In the end, EMM offered to absorb the debt and the outstanding loan payments for three years while the church regrouped to reassume ownership. Regrettably, even after various attempts, that did not materialize, and the building was eventually sold to Epiphany Fellowship, which grew out of The Cross Movement, an urban Christian rap group. Today, Epiphany Fellowship is a thriving multiethnic church,

3. Ibid., 35.

4. Ibid., 37.

and it has recently planted new churches across the river in Camden, New Jersey, and elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

### Oxford Circle Mennonite Church

Meanwhile, new developments were happening back in Kensington at Norris Square Mennonite Church. The Reedel family, members at Norris Square, moved into Oxford Village in the Oxford Circle section of the city in 1945, as it provided affordable housing. As they got to know their neighbors, they began holding Bible classes and other activities for the children in the area. Soon, they were taking children and neighbors to church with them, although Norris Square was eight miles away in Kensington. As their ministry grew, they eventually persuaded the mission board to buy a property and build a basement church building at Langdon and Howell Streets, which opened in 1949. Thus, Oxford Circle Mennonite Church was planted as an offshoot of Norris Square to minister to the primarily white blue-collar community. Many Mennonite churches from Lancaster also drove in to help. Once again, several sister workers moved in to build relationships and develop ministries to help the new church grow. Thus, two daughter churches were birthed by the first LMC church in the city: Diamond Street in a Black community and Oxford Circle in a primarily White community.

In its more than seventy-five years of faithful service, Oxford Circle Mennonite Church has become racially and ethnically diverse. It is situated in the most ethnically diverse section of Philadelphia. It has held community festivals and launched a nonprofit that touches the lives of hundreds of its neighbors every week, including multiple services to the many immigrant communities nearby.

In 1999, Leonard Dow became the first Black pastor to lead the church. He was one of the younger members, a local banker, and married to Rosalie Rolon Dow, a Puerto Rican American. Pastor Leonard had a favorite question for the church, "If God loves the people of our neighborhood, how will they know?" The many prayer walks, festivals, and the growing nonprofit have helped answer that question. Pastor Lynn Parks (now lead pastor), the first woman ordained by LMC as a pastor, served for years along-

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5. Freeman Miller, "Whatever happened to Diamond Street?" *The Mennonite* (November 2012). Web. 22 March 2014. [http://www.themennonite.org/issues/15-11/articles/Whatever\\_happened\\_to\\_Diamond\\_Street](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/15-11/articles/Whatever_happened_to_Diamond_Street). In 2008, the old Diamond Exchange was sold for \$650,000 to the non-denominational Epiphany Fellowship, still operating there today. Though attempts to add this fine building to the National Register of Historic Places have failed, it is designated as a contributor to the Philadelphia Register's Diamond Street Historic District.

side Pastor Leonard until he resigned. Recently, the church called Ron Tinsley, the young Black who originally came from Diamond Street, as Outreach Pastor. His Friday Night Live program has brought many new youth from the neighborhood to the church, including some of their parents.

### Arca de Salvacion

Back at Norris Square, when more and more Hispanics moved into the Kensington area, Norris Square Mennonite began to incorporate them into the church, bringing in Hispanic pastors for a separate Spanish worship service and eventually turning the church over to them under Hispanic leadership with a new name, *Arca de Salvacion Iglesia Menonita*, still an LMC church. Thus, Arca became a third daughter church of the original Norris Square church.

The Norris Square church dissolved in 1974, and the few remaining older White members went to other churches. Some went to Oxford Circle, which was mostly White at the time. One of the last White pastors at Norris Square Mennonite was Jim Leaman, who left to go to seminary and later returned to become pastor at Oxford Circle Mennonite, where he served for several decades.

### Where are we today?

LMC Mennonites have come full circle in their 125-year history in Philadelphia, as far as race and ethnicity are concerned, from separation and division to a more unitive approach. In 2000, when *All God's Children* was published, the authors could accurately state that there was "a thriving community" of twenty-two congregations in Philadelphia, with a variety of ethnic groups, "worshiping in eleven different languages, all calling themselves Mennonite."<sup>6</sup> Of those churches, only three were begun as multicultural church plants, and all three have since closed.

Oxford Circle is clearly the most multicultural Mennonite church in the city today and is embracing the call to live out the prayer of Jesus in John 17 to be truly one in Christ, although there have been challenges along the way. To build a truly unified multiethnic church where all have a voice and are equally heard requires prayerful intentionality and hard work. May the Holy Spirit give us much grace and wisdom as we live into God's vision for Christ's church.

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6. Gingerich, 11.