

# Is CMC Losing Its Peace Theology?

The great-grandchildren of Greenwood Mennonites who refused to pledge to the flag are now at RBC. They give a mixed answer to the pacifism question.

by Kevin D. Miller

Alena pronounces it “pledge-alletee.” She’s home from her second day of kindergarten at Flint Springs Elementary School. As I walk into the kitchen after work, her first words to me are, “Papa, they pledge-alletee to the flag today and I didn’t!”

In the months leading up to school, we had talked about the pledge of allegiance and what she wanted to do about it. Already in June, she had declared to me—out of the blue and from the back seat of the car as we drove to a violin lesson—that she agreed with Mommy and me and wouldn’t say the pledge at school.

“We should only pledge-alletee to God, not countries,” she said, nearly parroting the words Lydia and I had used to explain why neither of us had said the pledge as schoolchildren.

“What will you tell your teacher if she asks?”

“That Jesus said we cannot serve two masters,” she answered, “and because pledge-alletee is promising to kill for the president if there is a war.”

Now, standing in my kitchen and looking into this suddenly less-innocent face that beams at me with both resolution and accomplishment—this wisp of a girl barely five years old—I, the father who has indoctrinated her into this hard position just as my parents did me, feel a sense of ... what? Pride? Yes, that she can stand true in her newly formed convictions. But also a rawer emotion: an aching for what she will go through—the standing so alone while the rest of the class repeats those forbidden words: **“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America ....”** Face red, the uncovered heart beating wildly.

## A Conference Founded on Peace

As someone living outside a Mennonite community but still attempting to raise my children to take seriously the New Testament teachings on peace and nonconformity to the world, I knew immediately what I would report on when Rosedale Bible College asked me if I would want to write for this issue of the *Brotherhood Beacon*. It would be the issues of church-state relations my daughter and I had just been working through.

RBC had approached me a year ago during the annual meeting of the Conservative Mennonite Conference. Just that day John Roth from Goshen College had talked on peace and biblical pacifism in the Mennonite church and our conference. And the night before RBC had given a report on its mission of educating students into “true evangelical Anabaptism.”

I was anxious to take the pulse of the Conference when it came to nonresistance, peace, and love of enemy. Was this historic conviction of the Conference still being taught to our young people? Thinking of my daughter’s flag-and-kindergarten experience, I also wondered what the smaller indicators like pledging allegiance to the American flag would tell us about the present state of Anabaptist faith and practice that formed the core of the Conservative Mennonite Conference when it was founded nearly a century ago.

One way I had explained our view on the pledge to Alena was to tell her a story from early in the Conference’s history: the story of the Greenwood Mennonite School in Delaware in the 1920s and how it was started when the Mennonite children in the community were told not to return to school the following week if they would not repeat the pledge. Had the convictions of those Greenwood leaders who founded the first Mennonite school in America in the 1920s been transmitted to the young people of Greenwood Mennonite today?

I looked for answers by interviewing four individuals with Greenwood, Delaware roots, all of whom shared an ancestor. They were Jon Showalter, professor of the class



Alena Miller

Peace, Justice, and Simplicity at RBC; Jon's mother, Rhoda (Swartzentruber) Showalter, who was one of the Mennonite students kicked out of the Greenwood public school when she was 8 years old in 1928; and two students in Jon's class this past fall term from Greenwood—Carmen Heatwole (parents: Jerrel and Alma Yoder), and Joe Slaubaugh (parents: Lambert and Sarah Yoder). All four trace their lineage back to a Bender family that was influential in the founding of Greenwood Mennonite School. Siblings in that family included Amelia (later Swartzentruber), Savilla (later Yoder), and Nevin Bender.

Jon Showalter stands in the gap between that Bender generation's children (his grandmother was Amelia) and that Bender generation's great-grandchildren, now old enough to be attending Rosedale.

### Carmen Heatwole's Search

As an instructor for RBC's Peace, Justice, & Simplicity course (known as PJs on campus), Showalter provides a unique vantage point for assessing what Conference young people believe about biblical nonresistance and peace. What he sees leaves him uneasy.

"There's been a steady shift towards students less certain about the extent to which they share the convictions of their parents and their church in this area," he says.

An example is Carmen Heatwole, 18, a Greenwood student in Showalter's class this past year. Soft-spoken and deferential to a fault, she exudes the humble self-consciousness befitting her covering-and-cape-dressed foremothers. But her answers, while still affirming biblical nonresistance, belie an uncertainty that would have seemed odd to her great-grandmother, Savilla Bender Yoder. A residual conviction for her family's historic convictions about peace and nonresistance remains, nonetheless. An excerpt from my conversation with her reveals a mixture of yearning for conviction but second-guessing her statements even as she asserts them:

*If a military conscription were reinstated and this time females had to answer to draft board members too, would you tell them you would be willing to serve in the military?*

"A scary thought! I would probably ask to be a conscientious objector and ask to serve my country a different way. That's what I'm leaning toward. I'm still on the fence. If I were drafted to go to war, I don't know that I could do that."

*If they then say, 'How do we know you aren't just a coward? What do you mean by conscientious objection?'*

"I'd probably say that as a follower of Christ I cannot shoot my brothers even if they are my enemy. I couldn't kill someone or help kill someone. Oh wow... that is really hard!"

*That's a good start.*

"Yeah, but I think I'd probably need to give them more than that!"

*Okay, take another go at it. If a panel member says, 'Well, I served in Vietnam as a Christian. Why can't you?'*

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— Jon Showalter, Rosedale Bible College academic dean

"I would probably say that God tells us to love our neighbors more than ourselves and to pray for them when they persecute us or cause us pain. I would be willing to serve our country and pray for our leaders and our troops over there. But I just can't join in the killing and serving in the Army when God calls me to forgive and love."

Heatwole grew up going to Laws Mennonite Church until age 9. Then her family began attending Hickory Ridge Community Church, an evangelical congregation in the Greenwood community. But from grades 6 through 12, she attended Greenwood Mennonite School. Following graduation, she came to Rosedale. It was at Rosedale that her mother, Alma Yoder, met her father, Jerrel Heatwole, in the 1970s. Her grandfather, Mark B. Yoder, the son of Savilla (Bender) Yoder, is one of the Conference's long-time ministers.

Heatwole is not unaware of her family heritage, and she may be anchored by it more than she realizes. She says that while she does not recall many conversations in her family about peace, nonresistance or the flag, "It was just something we all understood." She adds: "I'm pretty sure if my grandfathers were ever drafted, they went as conscientious objectors."

She says the Peace, Justice, & Simplicity class made her think about the heritage she would want to leave to her children someday. I ask her if she would marry a young man who didn't share her reservations about going to war. She answers, "Probably not." I press her further: If you were dating someone, and he were drafted into the Army, how would you counsel him?

"I would tell him I would be really strongly against it," she says. "I would probably tell him that, yes, war is necessary and does happen and we have to obey government authorities, but there comes a time when we have to obey God before men. In the end he would have to make his own decision and pray about it, but I would be strongly opposed to it."

The PJs class also helped her clarify the differences between biblical pacifism and just war theology. But questions still nag her.

"God sometimes used war to ..." Her voice trails off. It is as if words ringing in her head from a Jon Showalter lecture or a reading assignment won't let the direction of her reasoning continue unchallenged. "But then, like, that's in the Old Testament. I go back and forth. God really used war at one point in history for his plans. With the war in Iraq, I kind of feel like it was a necessary war. But should it have been done the way it was done? It seemed like we needed to go in there ..."

Again a pause born of discomfort. I break the silence by asking who she means by "we" in her last statement. Together we delve into material from her class about two

kingdoms and where a Christian's identity lies. Heatwole agrees, her voice hesitant: "Yes, that's it. That's right, I think."

## Becoming Worldly

This tentativeness, Showalter says, isn't surprising given the sociological forces pressing in on students like Heatwole. They are pressures her grandparents and great-grandparents didn't face to the same degree. When Greenwood Mennonite School was started in 1928, the Benders and Yoders and Swartzentrubers who founded the school held to nonresistant pacifism in a context of social isolation and nonconformity. The agenda for the 1934 annual CMC conference, which was held in Greenwood that year, includes this telling discussion point: "Worldly conformity in dress: indoctrination and discipline concerning the same." (The three other agenda items are "The evils of strong drink," "The great commission and open door," and "Unity of the body of Christ.")

Such concerns, says Showalter, reflect and reinforce a posture of social isolation that made the theological position of nonresistance relatively easy to teach and maintain. But over the intervening decades, doing so became increasingly more difficult as church communities like Greenwood and their young adults came into greater daily contact with non-Mennonites.

"The emotional weight of theological questions is different when we know people who disagree with us and we respect them," Showalter says, noting that his students often say one reason they question the peace position is because they know committed Christians who serve in the military. "As long as almost all the Christians I know agree about something, that conviction will be relatively easy to hold and maintain and teach and preach. To the extent that I live and preach and teach in a context of theological pluralism, it is much more difficult."

The shift away from cultural isolationism is also seen in the increasing number of students—even those from Mennonite families—who come to Rosedale from interdenominational Christian churches (Carmen Heatwole is one example) or from non-Mennonite Christian schools. In such schools they often study alongside conservative evangelical or fundamentalist Christians who disagree strongly with biblical pacifism. Showalter notes that a notable number of students come to Rosedale from the small ACE schools that have proliferated across the country and which use curricula developed by God-and-country Christian patriots.

"The point," he says, "is simply that as those sociological and cultural shifts happen, they raise new questions about how to teach peace and nonresistance."

## Silent Pulpits

Showalter makes another observation that hits closer to home. In addition to saying their doubts are fed by knowing people in the military who are committed Christians, the stu-

dents in the PJs class often tell him: "I don't know that much about teachings on peace. I know that my parents have convictions about this, and I guess my church does. But I don't hear it talked about."

Showalter is quick to say that there are still students who come to RBC each year who have been taught peace and nonresistance carefully and who fully embrace and can articulate those teachings. But more and more he sees evidence of students heralding from churches where there seems to be

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little or no teaching or preaching on nonresistance. And these include students from long-time, traditional CMC churches. Typically, these churches have made a conscious decision to focus on outreach and downplay nonresistance for the sake of

becoming more relevant to the people in their community.

"It feels to me like sometimes there's an intentional decision to downplay parts of historic Anabaptist Mennonite theology that aren't readily understood or appreciated in the American evangelical mainstream. I see pastors who are completely willing to be silent in this area for the sake of appeal to a broader audience in a highly competitive church environment in North America."

Showalter sympathizes with the pressures such pastors face. He himself serves on the pastoral team at a rural church near Rosedale, Ohio (Shiloh Mennonite Church). Even though the church is in a non-urban setting, he finds his leadership team is often tempted to dress up the gospel to make it appealing to people evangelistically.

"On one level," he says, "we need to be careful to present the gospel in its purity—as free of its cultural accretions as we can. But when that becomes the driving motivation for the crafting of a theology and an approach to preaching and teaching, you don't have to look very far around the church to see all sorts of things being done in the name of cultural relevance. Think, for example, of gay and lesbian accommodations in the name of cultural relativity, or the dangers in changing the gospel in the process of sanitizing it for a generation of Willow Creek investment bankers."

## Looking Back to See the Future

CMC may be in danger of becoming just another mainstream evangelical American church. But Showalter also holds to a hope that in the longer term the Conference may be able to retain and recover its historic scriptural emphasis on Jesus' way of peace.

The future becomes clearer for Showalter, whose training includes doctoral work in Reformation history at The Ohio State University, by looking back. This is the approach he uses in his PJs class to give his students perspective.

"I tell them: Look at the history of the Anabaptist movement in the Reformation—most of the key convictions of that revival movement have gone mainstream. That is, no one thinks of them as Anabaptist distinctives any longer—such as the idea of a free church. That is the idea that there ought to be freedom of religion apart from the coercive structures of

the state. In the Reformation, that was an Anabaptist position. The Calvinists didn't believe that. The Lutherans didn't believe that. And the Catholics didn't believe that. So a view that in the 16th century was held by only a small minority of Christians in Europe has become the majority view. In the 16th century, there was only one, weak minority voice which held that perspective: it was the voice of the Anabaptists."

He also points to adult, or believer's, baptism. Today, while not the unanimous choice of the Western church, believer's (non-infant) baptism has become the majority view of what Showalter calls "the growing church"—those church movements that are rapidly gaining in numbers and are spreading around the world. Showalter asks his students to think about 1000 years of Christian theologizing on infant baptism in contrast to the radically novel view the early Anabaptists began preaching and practicing.

"I think it is almost impossible to really feel the weight of what they were doing," he says. "They were saying, 'We know what most every Christian believed about baptism for the last 1,000 years. But when we read our Bibles, we think they are wrong and we are prepared to die for this.' And they did."

Showalter then helps his students look forward by telling them that it is not out of the question that sometime in the future of the church the Anabaptist perspective on peace and nonresistance will enjoy the same widespread acceptance that adult baptism and free church theology do today.

"Even today there are voices all over the church that are taking seriously Anabaptist proposals about peace and nonresistance," he concludes. "I tell my students that I think it is probable that the day will come when Christians will look back on an era when they defended just-war theology and shake their heads and say, 'How could we have been so blind!' We do it with respect to slavery. We look back on the Inquisition and Calvin's approval of Servetus's execution in Geneva and say, 'How could they possibly have thought that was Christian?'"

## Joe Slaubaugh and Just War

But the task facing professors like Jon Showalter and Conference leaders and pastors who believe in biblical nonresistance is a daunting one. Showalter's PJs students have never faced a military conscription. Even most of their parents are beyond the generation of those who were classified 1-W during the Vietnam War, which ended in 1973. Consequently, the PJs students have not heard the alternative service and draft board stories that Showalter did when he was growing up.

Joe Slaubaugh is a first cousin to Carmen Heatwole and was in the same PJs class with Heatwole. He represents the challenge facing those in the CMC who care about the convictions of the current generation of Nevin Bender's great-

grandchildren. In the class, Slaubaugh often sided with those seeking to justify Christians going to war. I ask him the same question I had put to Heatwole: If you were drafted, would you go?

"It wouldn't bother me," he says. "Looking at the war in Iraq—was it right for us to go in there and take him out? I would have to say, yes it was. It was the lesser of two evils. I hate to look at it that way, but how else can I?"

"If the United States were under a dictator like that, I would want someone to do something about it. I don't

know how anyone could just sit back and watch. If Saddam would have been here, how many Mennonites would just sit there and watch their families go through what he put them through? I know I couldn't do it if I had a family and my children were being killed. I couldn't handle that."

But when I probe deeper, an ambivalence not unlike his cousin's emerges.

"I don't know if I could kill a person with a clear conscience," he admits. "Being raised Mennonite has made me extremely aware that war is a bad thing in one way. Yet I see the good it has in another way. So I am torn between the two. I still grapple with the issue of being nonresistant. The Bible never

says you can't kill someone, and it says the government is put in place by God. But it also says to love your enemies as yourself. So where does that leave us?"

Slaubaugh's parents Lambert and Sarah (Yoder) met each other when they were students at RBC in the 1970s. Joe and his family first attended Laws Mennonite Church and later Greenwood Mennonite Church. Joe continues to attend there now.

He was homeschooled using the ACE (Accelerated Christian Education) curriculum, which is produced by a group of conservative Baptists that holds large conventions for its students replete with American banners, patriotic music, and videotaped messages from U.S. presidents (when Republican).

The curriculum explicitly teaches students that the U.S. is a "Christian nation" founded by Christians (ignoring the inconvenient fact that a majority of the nation's founders were deists who denied the divinity of Jesus). The curriculum also downplays U.S. atrocities (a social studies text, for example, dismissed the Ku Klux Klan as silly men who liked to dress up in sheets and never meant anybody harm) and exaggerates its righteousness using biblical terms (intended for the church) such as a "city on a hill" to describe the U.S.

Slaubaugh's justification for Christians going to war follows the logic of ACE teaching: "I would like to see my kids grow up in a free country and have the same opportunity to worship that I have. That is the first and main reason why I would lean more toward fighting. I see war as something that is not a wholesome or good thing. But I also see the benefits of it."

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Slaubaugh is in a serious dating relationship with a young woman who attends a CMC church. The two have not discussed their views of war or nonresistance together.

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whole, by showing nonresistance, gain respect with people. Even though some of us don’t agree with it.”

## Re-energizing the Pacifism Question

If Carmen Heatwole and Joe Slaubaugh do represent at minimum a sample of the range of convictions among CMC’s young adults, they paint a murky picture of the future of nonresistance as a teaching of the denomination. But the fact is that they are *struggling* with the question, when for most evangelicals it is a non-issue. They find “being a Mennonite complicates things”—as Slaubaugh puts it—in part because of what they hear on occasion in Greenwood’s Mennonite school and churches and in Rosedale Bible College classes like Peace, Justice, & Simplicity.

Like Heatwole and Slaubaugh, Jon Showalter descends from the Bender Greenwood Mennonites. He remains an influential voice in the Conference on this issue and assures me he finds a receptive audience for his concerns. He has given reports to Conference ministers on the status of nonresistance convictions in the CMC. And he estimates he has been invited to speak on biblical nonresistance in more than 20 churches in the last five years. Just this past fall, RBC held a symposium that was well attended with keynote speakers such as Ron Sider from Evangelicals for Social Action addressing peace theology.

“The faculty,” Showalter says, “is very aware of the swirling sea of ideas and pressure and tendencies and directions that CMC is experiencing right now. We’re just saying, ‘Hey, over here at the Bible college we feel strongly about this and we are going to keep teaching it and we are going to be a voice in the Conference as long as anybody listens.’”

Has there been resistance to that renewed emphasis? I ask.

“There has been strong affirmation for it,” Showalter says.

## A Pledge Postscript

Rhoda Showalter is Jon’s mother and a great-aunt to Heatwole and Slaubaugh. At 87 years of age, she says her memory fails her sometimes, but the details of that day long ago at the Greenwood Elementary School when she was in the second grade come through with clarity as she recounts the story.

“It was the middle of the school year,” she recalls. “We were expelled simply because we wouldn’t salute the flag. It seemed right that we should be expelled because we wouldn’t do what they wanted us to do. And I don’t think we had regrets. We felt we had done what was right.”

To avoid truancy violations, Nevin Bender and other leaders at Greenwood Mennonite Church quickly organized a school in the church building. Nevin served as the first teacher.

“We just used table boards from old tables across the benches. That’s what we used to write on. We knew that we had to be back in school and so we just started the school.”

I ask her why should Conference’s young people still hold to nonresistance and peace, and her answer rings with prophetic clearness: “Because it is in the Word of God. I just think God means what he says. I recognize there are differences of opinion, but when it is said the way it is said in the New Testament, it doesn’t seem like there is any room for war.”

When her son Jon was in elementary school, he didn’t want to say the pledge of allegiance, but he also didn’t want to be noticed. So he placed his hand over his stomach instead of his heart.

“That way I wasn’t actually vowing anything because my hand was on my stomach and not my heart,” he recalls thinking. And he adds: “It actually became a trendy thing in my class. Other students started doing it too, even though they didn’t know why I was doing it.”

It was his way of working out a theology of peace and church-state relations bequeathed him by his parents, his church, and the Conference—just as Heatwole and Slaubaugh are working out theirs.

Even Rhoda Showalter had to work out her beliefs. “I can identify with Jon when he said he was embarrassed in school,” she tells me, almost as if in a Catholic confessional. “I was embarrassed too. I don’t know if I always refrained from pledging allegiance. I might have done it sometimes just to fit in.”

That’s an anecdote not in the record of the Greenwood Mennonite School pledge controversy—and one I will tell my daughter Alena, so she knows matriarchal figures like Rhoda Showalter also trembled under the heavy weight of nonconformity to a world order founded on destroying the enemy rather than loving him. **BB**

*Kevin Miller lives with his wife, Lydia, and their children Alena, 5, and Gregory, 3, in Huntington, Indiana, where he teaches at Huntington University. As a teenager Lydia, who was raised in a Protestant Christian home in the Soviet Union, refused to sign a pledge of allegiance required to join the Youth Communist Party. Not joining the Party denied her the opportunity for higher education and other privileges. She also chose, on biblical grounds which she explained to the INS officers, not to sign the U.S. pledge of allegiance in 2000 when she became a naturalized American citizen.*



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