

## How His Mind Was Changed: John E. Zercher, Nonresistance, and the Power of Motivated Reasoning

By David L. Weaver-Zercher\*

Of all its contributions to twentieth-century theological reflection, the most important gift of *The Christian Century* was its recurring series “How My Mind Has Changed.” Inaugurated by editor Charles Clayton Morrison in 1939, the series offered scores of first-person accounts detailing how influential Christian theologians had changed their views, if not completely, then at least in part.<sup>1</sup> How did Karl Barth come to conclude that the humanistic subjectivity of theological liberalism is no match for the objective reality of the Word of God?<sup>2</sup> How did Martin Luther King Jr. make the switch from the gloomy theological realism of Reinhold Niebuhr to a more optimistic view of human potential and, in turn, embrace a theology of nonviolence?<sup>3</sup> How, more recently, did Sallie McFague become convinced that an essential task of Christian theology is to expose the sin of ecological degradation?<sup>4</sup> In the pages of the *Christian Century*, readers could locate the answers to these and many other questions, answers written after the fact by the very people whose minds had changed in some significant way.

How do minds change? I’ve often wondered how my father, John E. Zercher, came to conclude that his World War II military service was more a matter for repentance than a cause for celebration. Indeed, how did this willing participant in the so-called Good War become one of the Brethren in Christ Church’s most determined proponents of the denomination’s

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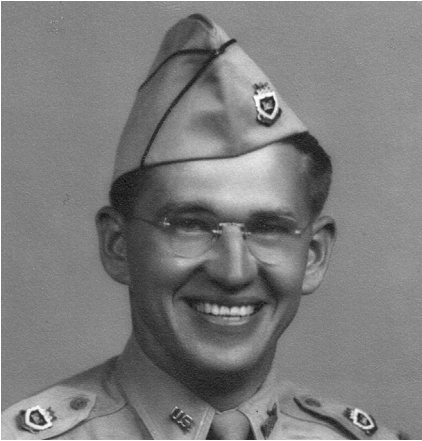
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<sup>1</sup> The first series featured thirty-four different theologians and ran for eight months, from January 1939 through September 1939.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, “How My Mind Has Changed in This Decade,” *Christian Century*, September 13-20, 1939, 1097-1099, 1132-1134. Barth himself argued that this was not a change in his thinking, but was rather a view that had been more fully confirmed in his mind.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” *Christian Century*, April 13, 1960, 439-441.

<sup>4</sup> Sallie McFague, “An Earthly Theological Agenda,” *Christian Century*, January 2-9, 1991, 12-15.



John Zercher, US Army, circa 1943.

peace position? In the years leading up to World War II, the Brethren in Christ peace position was typically called nonresistance, a term derived from Jesus's command that his followers should "not resist an evil person."<sup>5</sup> In light of that verse, and a range of other biblical passages that point to Jesus's rejection of violence, the denomination concluded that Christians should not contribute to their nations' war efforts as combatants, noncombatants, or defense industry workers. For my

father, who came to accept that view in the years following World War II, the idea of nonresistance eventually came to include more activist components—for instance, criticizing America's military endeavors and the nationalistic attitudes that undergirded them.

My father is perhaps best remembered in Brethren in Christ circles for having been the editor of the *Evangelical Visitor*, a post he filled from 1967 to 1979. To his contemporaries, however, he was more than an editor who put together a 16-page periodical twice a month. He was "pastor to the denomination," a church-minded editorialist who often advocated the denomination's position on a particular issue, especially if he felt that Brethren in Christ ministers were disregarding it.<sup>6</sup> One of the views my father sought to advance was the church's peace position, a countercultural perspective not just in the world at large but also in the evangelical Christian networks the denomination had joined during my father's lifetime.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes he promoted that perspective behind the scenes, as

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:39 (KJV).

<sup>6</sup> This descriptor, cited by Brethren in Christ Publication Board chair Isaiah B. Harley, can be found in Harley's introduction to E. Morris Sider and Paul Hostetler, eds., *Lantern in the Dawn: Selections from the Writings of John E. Zercher* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the denomination's move toward the evangelical mainstream, see Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas, "Born-Again Brethren in Christ: Anabaptism, Evangelicalism, and the Cultural Transformation of a Plain People," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90, no. 2 (April 2016): 203-237.

he did in a letter to Arthur Climenhaga objecting to the slate of speakers—all military men—at the Midwest meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1966.<sup>8</sup> At other times he expressed his views on peace in the pages of the *Evangelical Visitor*, as he did in a 1969 editorial that enjoined Brethren in Christ pastors to proclaim the “good news” of nonresistance at the height of the Vietnam War.<sup>9</sup> My father was hardly alone in promoting the denomination’s peace position in the 1960s and 1970s, and a handful of Brethren in Christ championed it more vigorously, but few of these more spirited advocates sat in seats of denominational leadership. And none of them, except for my father, had military pasts.<sup>10</sup>

How did he come to inhabit that theological space? Unlike the *Christian Century*’s writers, my father never wrote a detailed retrospective on how his mind had changed on this or any other subject. He did leave behind some evidence, however: a philosophy of life statement he produced at Franklin and Marshall College in 1946; two apologies to the Grantham District of the Brethren in Christ Church, written in 1948 and 1949<sup>11</sup>; answers to two ministerial licensing exams from the early 1950s; and two handwritten outlines charting his transformation that he produced in the 1970s. Just as important, his papers include a cache of personal letters from the 1940s: about 20 letters he wrote to family and friends while serving in the army in the mid-1940s, and scores of letters that other people, including his future wife, Alice Grace Hostetter, wrote about him in the late 1940s. Together these sources offer a window into his changing views and how these transformations came about.

What we find, I suggest, is a classic case of what moral psychologist

<sup>8</sup> John E. Zercher to Arthur M. Climenhaga, June 13, 1966, John E. and Alice Grace Zercher Papers (hereafter Zercher Papers), MG 55.19.14, Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives (Mechanicsburg, PA).

<sup>9</sup> John E. Zercher, “The Light and the Bushel,” *Evangelical Visitor*, December 1, 1969, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Bolder advocates included Ronald J. Sider, Nancy Heisey, and John Stoner, all of whom were considerably younger than my father.

<sup>11</sup> The Grantham Brethren in Christ congregation, led in the late 1940s by Pastor Albert Engle, was part of the Grantham District of the Brethren in Christ denomination, overseen by Bishop C. N. Hostetter Jr. Most Brethren in Christ districts at the time included multiple congregations, but for many years the Grantham District was a single-congregation district, Grantham only. In the late 1940s, the Grantham District included two other congregations, but they were very small. Hence, Grantham District council meetings, semi-annual business gatherings that included all the district’s members, were for all practical purposes meetings of the Grantham congregation.

Jonathan Haidt calls “motivated reasoning.”<sup>12</sup> In Haidt’s view, rationalist models of moral judgment, which claim that our moral judgments are made purely by the process of reasoning and reflection, rarely stand up to real-world facts. Haidt proposes instead a social intuitionist model, wherein the act of making a moral judgment is best understood as an interpersonal process. One feature of this process, at least in many cases, is motivated reasoning, which includes one’s desire for harmony and agreement. More specifically, and perhaps more pertinent to my father’s case, motivated reasoning includes “the desire to hold attitudes and beliefs that will satisfy current social goals.”<sup>13</sup> In proposing his social intuitionist model, Haidt does not deny that conscious, mindful reasoning is actually happening; the person arriving at a particular ethical view is indeed wrestling with ideas, as opposed to waiting for a flash of insight or a revelation from God. But the person is neither disembodied nor impassive. He/she is, in Haidt’s apt metaphor, “an emotional dog” with “a rational tail.”

Haidt does not claim that his social intuitionist model provides a normative guide for how one should go about making moral judgments. One need only to visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, to see how motivated reasoning, including the desire to maintain one’s standing in a malevolent society, can sometimes lead people to justify vile acts. Nor does Haidt deny that many “emotional dogs” think long and hard in the course of arriving at a particular judgment. Still, Haidt says, it’s important to be honest with ourselves, and the social intuitionist model captures more accurately the way people actually go about making their moral judgments, despite straight-faced claims to the contrary. My father’s journey to nonviolence provides one example.

### **John Zercher: Army man, 1941-1946**

My father was inducted into the US army in October 1941, two months before Japanese bombers attacked Pearl Harbor. He was a 25-year-old bachelor, a junior college graduate of Messiah Bible College, and a member

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment,” *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (2001): 814-834.

<sup>13</sup> Haidt, 821. Haidt takes this quotation from Serena Chen and Shelly Chaiken, “The Heuristic-Systematic Model in Its Broader Context,” in *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology*, ed. Shelly Chaiken and Yaacov Trope (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 73-96.



*The Zercher family: Ira and Anna, John, and Harold, circa 1940.*

of the Grantham Brethren in Christ congregation, where his younger brother, Harold, and his parents, Ira and Anna, were also members.<sup>14</sup> My father would later say that the Brethren in Christ Church's teaching on non-participation in war was not as strong in the 1930s as it became during the war, and that may in fact be true.<sup>15</sup> In any case, he did not find the church's perspective convincing, especially in the shadow of Hitler's imperialistic ambitions. When he and Harold were drafted, they both chose to enter the military rather than pursue conscientious objector status. My father underwent

basic training in Mississippi and, after graduating from an officer's candidate course, he was sent to Tennessee, then overseas, first to London (October 1943) and then, after D-Day, to France and Belgium (September 1944-February 1946). As an officer in the Army Corps of Engineers, he oversaw the construction of roads, hospitals, and ports, many of which had been destroyed in the war. He witnessed firsthand some of the war's consequences (in one letter home he recalls traveling through a French town that had been "simply pulverized"), but he did not engage in combat.<sup>16</sup>

His reflections on issues of faith and military participation during this time are few and far between, though in the occasional comments he does

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<sup>14</sup> Casualties of the Dust Bowl and eager to enroll their sons in Messiah Academy, the Zerchers had moved from Dickinson County, Kansas, to Grantham in 1933.

<sup>15</sup> Sider, "Biography of John E. Zercher," in *Lantern in the Dawn*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> John E. Zercher to Ruth Zercher (cousin), September 24, 1944. Hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, letter in author's possession.

make, he demonstrates nuanced thinking. In one letter, written while in training camp to Jacob Kuhns, a member of the Grantham congregation (and an English professor at Messiah Bible College), he mentions attending a church service led by an army chaplain. He was favorably impressed. The chaplain had preached an honest but restrained sermon about the prospects of death that was “especially fitted for soldiers” but was not, in my father’s estimation, “repulsively militaristic.” Moreover, my father writes, the chaplain refused to resort to the crude determinism that my father found among so many of his fellow soldiers, in particular, the idea that “When your card comes up, you’re a goner.” All in all, my father concludes, the spiritual quality of the chaplains’ sermons at the camp had been very high. In fact, “I have to feel that they are doing a much more positive good in their witnessing than are our own ministers in their attitude towards the situation.”<sup>17</sup> Although he doesn’t elaborate on what he considers the less-than-helpful attitude of Brethren in Christ ministers, he almost surely meant to underscore their refusal to become military chaplains, a stance that guaranteed the absence of their spiritual input.

Disenchanted as he was with his church’s approach to the war, my father was not alienated from his Brethren in Christ family and friends. Many people wrote to him during his time in the military, and he wrote them back. In his letter to Kuhns, my father expresses a desire to resume their bookish conversations, then primes the pump by telling his friend that he’s halfway through Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*.<sup>18</sup> He also asks Kuhns for a favor: to convey his thanks to a Sunday school class that had thrown him a going-away party. Years later, as the war draws to a close, my father is still receiving letters from his Grantham friends, including a five-pager from a woman who updates him on congregational activities and scolds him for not writing his mother often enough.<sup>19</sup> In addition to receiving mail (one birthday greeting carried the signatures of 45 Grantham Church

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<sup>17</sup> John E. Zercher to Jacob [Kuhns], February 1, 1942, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.2.

<sup>18</sup> John E. Zercher to Jacob [Kuhns], February 1, 1942, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.2. Kuhns loaned my father books to take along with him to training camp, and he promised to mail him more if the camps’ libraries were inadequate. My father’s verdict on *Crime and Punishment*? “So far I have not been as impressed with the book as I had expected,” he wrote, though he also acknowledged that reading it “by snatches” did not lend itself to a fair judgment.



*John Zercher at Camp Forrest, Tennessee, 1943.*

members), my father enjoyed in-person contacts with Brethren in Christ people at various points along the way. Sometimes Brethren in Christ people went to see him, as they did when he was based in New Cumberland, Pennsylvania, though he also traveled to see them. In March 1943, while stationed in Tennessee, he spent a weekend leave visiting a Brethren in Christ mission

outpost in southern Kentucky.<sup>20</sup>

Social ties such as these lasted through the war, and would prove important in the long run, but his esteem for the Brethren in Christ approach to life fell nonetheless. In a philosophy of life statement he wrote in 1946, just months after leaving the military, he refers to his church background as “ultra conservative,” comparing it to Lancaster County Mennonitism for the benefit of his Franklin and Marshall professor.<sup>21</sup> He still thinks of himself as conservative, at least in comparison to the larger world, but he considers himself “liberal, especially in my religious beliefs,” when compared to the Brethren in Christ Church.<sup>22</sup> In fact, he is quite convinced that “any youth who has come into contact with the outside world,” as he had done through his reading, work, and travel, would “rebel against the dogmatic conviction that such a small group could be the only people completely correct in their concept of God.”<sup>23</sup> That said, he proceeds to express an appreciation for the moral seriousness of his Brethren in Christ upbringing, a posture he hopes to maintain. He concludes that the best way for him to live would be to

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<sup>19</sup> Grace Stoner to John E. Zercher, January 1, 1945.

<sup>20</sup> John E. Zercher to Ruth Zercher (cousin), March 14, 1943.

<sup>21</sup> John E. Zercher, “My Philosophy of Life,” unpublished paper for John Boyer Noss’s Practical Ethics course, Franklin and Marshall College (Spring 1946), 21-22; paper in author’s possession.

<sup>22</sup> Zercher, “My Philosophy of Life,” 22.

<sup>23</sup> Zercher, “My Philosophy of Life,” 22.

integrate the ethical sobriety of his Brethren in Christ background with “what I have been forced to believe as a result of learning and experience.”<sup>24</sup>

Of course, some of his newfound beliefs were not easily integrated with what most Brethren in Christ people believed. In his philosophy of life statement, he acknowledges that God’s creative activity, including the creation of human beings, was “evolutionary” in nature, the “result of natural laws placed into effect by God.”<sup>25</sup> As for the Old Testament, he considers it divinely inspired, but he also believes that parts of it are best understood as “folklore,” not historically reliable accounts.<sup>26</sup> Most important for our purposes, he continues to maintain a perspective on war that contravenes official Brethren in Christ teaching on the matter. War is “the inevitable judgment” that nations bring upon themselves when they fail to act justly, he writes. Moreover, when a war represents a clear conflict between right and wrong, the individual “is duty bound to align himself with the cause of right,” an alignment that requires able-bodied citizens to take up arms. There are limits to this duty, to be sure. In fact, “national pride to the point of ‘my country right or wrong’ has no place in this present age.”<sup>27</sup> My father’s concern about unchecked nationalism would remain with him through the years, a concern that sometimes appeared in the pages of the *Visitor*.<sup>28</sup> At this point, however, he drew a clear distinction between nationalism, which he considered immoral, and morally justified war-making.

Given his views about war, convictions that continued beyond his discharge from the army, it’s quite possible that my father returned to the United States as a former member of the Brethren in Christ Church. Not that he had taken any action in that regard. Rather, his name was likely removed from the Grantham District’s membership roster during his time in Europe, the consequence of a denominational resolution in 1942 that stated that any church member who undertook military service, including noncombatant

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<sup>24</sup> Zercher, “My Philosophy of Life,” 23.

<sup>25</sup> Zercher, “My Philosophy of Life,” 3.

<sup>26</sup> Zercher, “My Philosophy of Life,” 5.

<sup>27</sup> Zercher, “My Philosophy of Life,” 20.

<sup>28</sup> Judging by the responses he received, one of his most controversial editorials was one he wrote in 1975 urging Brethren in Christ people in the United States to temper their celebration of the US bicentennial. John E. Zercher, “The Need for Discernment,” *Evangelical Visitor*, October 10, 1975, 3.



service, “automatically declares himself to be out of fellowship with the Brethren in Christ Church, and suspends his membership.”<sup>29</sup> There is no indication in the Grantham District council minutes that the district took formal action on this point, nor is there any indication that my father was informed of a district decision. But once he returned home, it would have become clear to him that he was no longer a member in good standing.<sup>30</sup>

This loss of standing may have bothered him, but it probably didn't. In fact, were we to encounter my father in the spring of 1946, now 29 years old and heading off to Franklin and Marshall College—or better yet, were we to look at surviving photographs of him from that time—we would conclude that his days in the Brethren in Christ Church were a thing of the past. We would be wrong.

### **John Zercher: Questionable character, 1946-1948**

“John Zercher is coming more regular now.” This sentence about my father, the only words devoted to him, appears at the end of a July 10, 1948, letter written by my maternal grandmother, Beula Hostetter, and sent to my grandfather, Henry Hostetter, then bishop of the Manor-Pequea District.<sup>31</sup> My grandmother mailed this letter halfway around the world from their Lancaster County home, where it eventually caught up to my grandfather in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia. By the time her husband received it,

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<sup>29</sup> Minutes of the Seventy-Second Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church, Article XIII, no. 9, June 10-15, 1942) 26, housed in Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives, Mechanicsburg, PA. Hereafter, all minutes referenced are available in the Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives, Mechanicsburg, PA.

<sup>30</sup> Some people, offering their recollections decades later, maintained that the Grantham District, and Bishop C. N. Hostetter in particular, showed my father lenience by placing him on probation instead of disfellowshipping him. Their memories suggest that my father was never formally removed from the district's membership rolls. While it may be true that the Grantham District never took formal action while my father was in the military, subsequent records (from 1948) say that my father's “membership in the Church was forfeited by action of the General Conference for accepting military service.” It therefore makes more sense to interpret the probation he was granted in October 1948 as a partial restoration of his membership, which had become null and void in 1942. For these later recollections, see Mary Jane Heisey, *Peace and Persistence: Tracing the Brethren in Christ Peace Witness Through Three Generations* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2003), 119-120; for the Grantham District record, see Minutes of the Semi-Annual District Council Meeting, Grantham, Pennsylvania, October 4, 1948, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Beula Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, July 10, 1948. In 1948 the Manor-Pequea District comprised four Lancaster County congregations: Manor (near Mountville), Pequea (near Willow Street), Refton, and the Lancaster city mission.

approximately two weeks later, he was in the fourth month of an 11-month tour of Brethren in Christ mission stations that took him through southern Africa, East Africa, and India.<sup>32</sup> Along the way he received nearly 150 letters from family and friends. More than 40 of those letters came from my grandmother, and another dozen came from their daughter—my mother—Alice Grace. Single at the time, my mother would marry my father two years later, in August 1950.

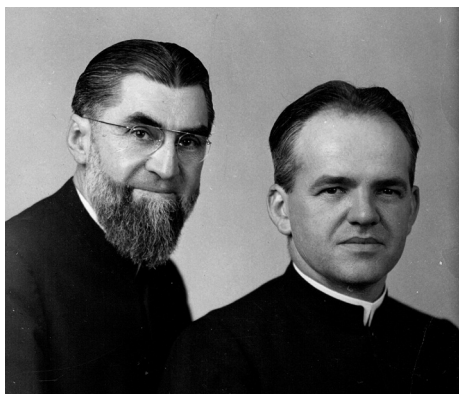
The phrase “coming more regular now” refers to my father’s attendance at the Manor Brethren in Christ Church, my maternal grandparents’ home church. Having graduated from Franklin and Marshall in June 1947, my father accepted a job in the business office at Millersville State Teachers College, a 10-minute drive from the small, rural church. It’s not clear when my father first attended Manor, nor is it clear why he made his initial visit, though it’s possible my mother’s presence there had something to do with it. If her presence didn’t generate his first visit, it almost certainly guaranteed further ones. Two days after my grandmother’s letter noting his attendance at Manor, my father wrote to my mother, inviting her to a steak roast at his cousin’s home in Lancaster,



*Beula, Henry, and Alice Grace Hostetter, at New York City harbor, 1948.*

<sup>32</sup> My grandfather, along with his traveling companion Graybill Wolgemuth, left New York City on April 23, 1948, and returned to Savannah, Georgia, on March 31, 1949. Their trip included a three-week voyage to Cape Town at the outset, and a four-week return voyage from Calcutta. See Graybill Wolgemuth and Henry Hostetter, “On Our Way,” *Evangelical Visitor*, June 28, 1948, 2; and “Missions Deputations—Gratitude and Farewell,” *Evangelical Visitor*, April 25, 1949, 2, 13.

<sup>33</sup> John E. Zercher to Alice G. Hostetter, July 12, 1948, and Alice G. Hostetter to John E. Zercher, July 14, 1948, both in Zercher Papers, MG 55.23.2. The cookout took place at John and Anna Martin’s home; John was my father’s first cousin.



*Graybill Wolgemuth and Henry Hostetter, 1948.*



*Henry, Beula, and Alice Grace Hostetter, at Washington Boro farm, 1948.*

an invitation she promptly accepted.<sup>33</sup> Two weeks later, on July 27, 1948, my mother and my grandmother both wrote letters to my grandfather, apprising him of my parents' budding relationship. My grandmother expresses reservations—my father had been in the military and, moreover, he was nearly 10 years their daughter's senior—and she wonders how many people might have heard about their courtship.<sup>34</sup> For her part, my mother downplays the friendship, offering only mundane details of their early outings, which also included a Saturday evening camp meeting.<sup>35</sup>

John Zercher was indeed a questionable figure, not just to my fastidious grandmother, and not only because of his military past, but also because of his worldly present. Photographs from the time show him in stylish suits, often sporting a tie. Fashionable dress was slowly making its way into Brethren in

Christ churches in the late 1940s, but at Manor it remained a cause for concern, a sign that the wearer was willing to flout church authority and was perhaps bound for a more progressive church. "Here is something you won't like to hear," my grandmother warned my grandfather in a February 1949

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<sup>34</sup> Beula Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, July 27, 1948.

<sup>35</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, July 27, 1948.

letter. “Martin Heisey is starting to wear a tie!” My grandmother took her responsibility as the bishop’s wife seriously, and that meant reporting to her husband what she saw as nonconforming behavior. “[He] had it on Sunday and again at Council on Tuesday evening,” she continued, underscoring a pattern that only heightened her concern.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, it was one thing for Martin Heisey to wear a tie to church; it quite another for her daughter’s suitor to wear one, which he did.<sup>37</sup> My mother, an only child, born six months before Queen Elizabeth II, was about as close to Brethren in Christ royalty as a Lancaster County girl could be. Granddaughter of C. N. Hostetter Sr. (former bishop and former president of Messiah Bible School), daughter of Henry (bishop and well-known evangelist), niece of C. N. Jr. (bishop and current president of Messiah Bible College) and niece of John (pastor, evangelist, and editor of the *Evangelical Visitor*), she grew up expecting to go into “Christian service,” which for her meant being married to a Brethren in Christ pastor or missionary or, if marriage was not in the cards, serving singly on the mission field.<sup>38</sup> After attending Messiah Bible College for two years, my mother completed a BA in Home Economics at Goshen College in 1946, did graduate work at Temple University, then returned to Grantham to work as the college’s dietician—a temporary position, in her mind, until she could enter Christian service proper. She lived on campus, but during the year that my grandfather was abroad, she traveled home most weekends, assisting my grandmother in various ways, which included keeping an eye on the Manor congregation. She was not always impressed by what she saw, complaining to her father that some people weren’t pulling their weight. And, much like her mother, she feared the loss of members looking for greener, more progressive

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<sup>36</sup> Beula Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, February 10, 1949. <sup>36</sup> Born in the world as another man’s property, Sawyer, by unknown means, acquired an education by 1866. Among his first actions as a freedman involved the construction of Black schools in Southampton, Virginia. A few years later he served in these schools as a teacher and in the community as a pastor.

<sup>37</sup> My grandmother was glad to note that my father was wearing “very conservative ties, usually black or dark blue.” Beula Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, November 22, 1948.

<sup>38</sup> We will return to my mother’s idea of Christian service, a phrase that appears repeatedly in her letters to her father. For one example, see Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, September 28, 1948. Her definition of the term was common in Brethren in Christ circles at the time. For an example, see C. N. Hostetter Sr., “Advice to Those Looking Forward to Christian Service,” *Evangelical Visitor*, May 31, 1948, 4-5.

pastures.<sup>39</sup>

Now, however, the very image of progressive living was knocking on Bishop Hostetter's door, picking up his daughter for dates and spending evenings in their home. They didn't sit together in Manor church services, a restraint that my grandmother appreciated, but through the fall of 1948, their evenings together grew more frequent.<sup>40</sup> There is no question which of the two sought to push things ahead: my father was the pursuer, my mother the pursued.

In August, while on a trip to New England, he mailed her a card or gift every day. In October, he sent her a bouquet of roses for her birthday. "This young man seems much interested in our girl," wrote my grandmother the day the roses arrived, a comment that, despite its understatedness, was intended to grab my grandfather's attention.<sup>41</sup>

My father's desire to move the relationship along was the product of two factors: he was 32 years old in the fall of 1948, and he wanted to be married. Indeed, his desire to be married, sometimes coupled with comments about his age, is one of the more prominent themes in the letters he wrote home while serving in the army from 1943 to 1946.<sup>42</sup> Most of his extant letters



*John Zercher, Millersville State Teachers College, 1948.*

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<sup>39</sup> In one letter to my grandfather my mother complains about a friend who had married a non-Brethren in Christ man. "Hearing about her made me do some pondering," my mother added. "Would I ever do such a foolish thing?" Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, September 28, 1948.

<sup>40</sup> "I must give her this—she has been very conservative with her dating. No time have they gone to church and sat together. And you think of the other young folks around here, the first time they went together they would do that." Beula Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, September 10, 1948.

<sup>41</sup> Beula Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, October 8, 1948.

from that period are ones he wrote to two female confidantes: Ruth Zercher, his first cousin, and Ruth Brechbill, who he knew from his teenaged years in Grantham and who was now engaged to his brother, Harold. In letters that toggle back and forth between playful and somber, he asks them for dating advice, sometimes mentioning the names of women he dated in the past or is currently corresponding with.<sup>43</sup> In a series of warmhearted letters to his future sister-in-law, he acknowledges his longstanding practice of playing the field, a practice that had extended to his across-the-Atlantic letter-writing practices.<sup>44</sup> He appears to recognize his indecisiveness is a problem, but he's not ready to abandon his romantic ideals. "What I want to do Ruth," he confesses at one point, "is find the right girl and then fall in love so bad I lose my appetite, can't sleep at nights, no work in the daytime. Then I'll be ready to tie up."<sup>45</sup> Without access to her letters in response, we can't know the full content of Brechbill's advice, but it appears that she told him to quit casting around for the perfect woman, home in on a good one, and demonstrate some commitment.<sup>46</sup>

By the time my father and mother began dating in July 1948, my father had been home from Europe for two and a half years. His dating résumé during those years is lost to history, and it's not entirely clear when he first set his sights on my mother. Neither is it clear how he came to choose her as prospect for marriage. Did he find her attractive? Did he know that she was smart, educated, and capable? Did he think that marrying into a well-regarded Brethren in Christ family would serve his interests in some way, and if so, what did he imagine in that regard? We don't know the answers

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<sup>42</sup> "A lot of moonlight has gone to waste for me in the past three years...I guess I will have to make up for lost time when I get home. One gets very eager to meet a nice girl and spend an evening with her. It is not a bit normal to be without feminine comfort at my age for long a time. But it is the war." John E. Zercher to Ruth Brechbill, September 24, 1944.

<sup>43</sup> For instance, John E. Zercher to Ruth Zercher, May 2, 1943; and John Zercher to Ruth Brechbill, January 10, 1945.

<sup>44</sup> "I can't marry four girls, so one of these days I am going to make up my mind or I'll be left. John E. Zercher to Ruth Brechbill, July 30, 1944; and five months later, "If I don't soon make up my mind I'll be afraid to come home and face the girls who will be there with my letters in their hands. Probably the best thing for me to do is dismiss them all and start from scratch, and I'll probably have to do some scratching." John E. Zercher to Ruth Brechbill, January 10, 1945.

<sup>45</sup> John E. Zercher to Ruth Brechbill, January 10, 1945.

<sup>46</sup> See John E. Zercher to Ruth Brechbill, September 21, 1945 (letter in author's possession), in which he thanks Brechbill for her advice on courtship and marriage and identifies a particular woman as the one he's most interested in.



*Dating: John Zercher and Alice Grace Hostetter, circa 1948.*

to these questions, though it probably played to his advantage that, in the summer of 1948, my mother was coming off a relationship that she had hoped would lead to marriage.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, she was fast approaching her 23rd birthday, an age that exceeded by two years the median age for female first marriages in the late 1940s.<sup>48</sup> John Zercher may have had his shortcomings, but Alice Grace Hostetter was, for her own reasons, not opposed to his overtures. As her mother observed to her father, “[Alice Grace] feels it would be nice to someday leave [her college job] and plan her own home.” After all, “that is the ambition of a normal girl.”<sup>49</sup>

“Normal” or not, my mother did possess that ambition, admitting to her father, who was now traveling through India, that she longed “to have a home of my own for Christ and the church.”<sup>50</sup> But along with her desire to be married, she believed that she was called to Christian service. As the

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<sup>47</sup> The former suitor’s name appears in a number of letters, for example, Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, September 14, 1948.

<sup>48</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average median age for first marriages among females in 1948 was 20.4 years of age. See Table MS-2 at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html>, accessed January 12, 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Beula Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, September 2, 1948.

<sup>50</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, September 14, 1948.

fall of 1948 turned toward winter, she remained unsure that my father was Brethren in Christ enough for her, let alone the right person to help her fulfill her calling. She appreciated his sincere spirit and his searching heart, but he had not arrived at the place she needed him to be. It was time to put him on probation.

### **John Zercher: On double probation, 1948-1949**

One way to tell the story about my father's renewed commitment to the Brethren in Christ Church goes something like this. When he returned to Pennsylvania after serving in the military, he found himself out of fellowship with the Grantham congregation. He wanted to rejoin the church, but the district's leaders were not sure he was sufficiently transformed, so instead of taking him back as a member in good standing, the district awarded him probationary status, a half step toward full membership. In the course of the next year, the district's bishop, C. N. Hostetter Jr., counseled my father on the doctrine of nonresistance. Hostetter's counsel, gentle but firm, was ultimately effective, leading my father to renounce his past actions and resign his commission in the army reserves. He was then restored to full membership, a success story in the annals of Brethren in Christ church discipline.<sup>51</sup>

This story is accurate, as far as it goes, but it's much too tidy. One thing it leaves out is the fact that my father returned from Europe in February 1946, and he was not awarded probationary membership until October 1948, two and a half years later. During that time he completed a BS in Economics at Franklin and Marshall College, explored job possibilities in Washington, D.C. and Texas, and took a business office position at Millersville State Teachers College, actions that suggest a trajectory away from the Brethren

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<sup>51</sup> For the outlines of this narrative, see E. Morris Sider, *Celebration: A Centennial History of the Grantham Brethren in Christ* (Grantham, PA: Grantham Brethren in Christ Church, 2009), 161-63; and E. Morris Sider, *Messenger of Grace: A Biography of C. N. Hostetter, Jr.* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1982), 163. See also Laura Fox, "Carving Out Her Own Identity: Alice Grace Hostetter Zercher," in *Celebrating Women's Stories: Faith Through Life's Seasons*, ed. Rebecca L. Ebersole, Dorcas L. Steckbeck, and E. Morris Sider (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 2002), 312-313. Fox's biography of my mother notes that many people gave my mother credit for catalyzing my father's return to the Brethren in Christ Church, but Fox gives my mother's denial of her influence the last word on the matter. My view, as outlined in this article, is that her influence was essential to his return.



## WEAVER-ZERCHER: How His Mind Was Changed



*John Zercher in business office (top left) at Millersville State Teachers College, 1948.*

in Christ Church, not a return.<sup>52</sup> What happened along the way that bent that trajectory back toward the Brethren in Christ Church, as opposed to away from it?

The answer to that question is not fully apparent, though it almost certainly had to do with social and familial ties that remained important to him. While a student at Franklin and Marshall College, he spent many evenings in the home of his cousin and cousin-in-law, John and Anna Martin, a practice that continued after graduation.<sup>53</sup> Even while living in Lancaster, he drove to Grantham regularly, where he visited his parents and sang in the college's Oratorio Society, a choir that included people from throughout central Pennsylvania, many of them Brethren in Christ

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<sup>52</sup> For the job possibility in Washington, see Jack H. Tyler to John E. Zercher, May 16, 1946. For the job possibility in Texas, see George J. Helis to John E. Zercher, March 6, 1947, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.2.

<sup>53</sup> John E. Zercher to Alice G. Hostetter, July 12, 1948, Zercher Papers, MG 55.23.2. John Z. Martin was married to Anna (Brechtbill) Martin, the sister of my father's sister-in-law, Ruth (Brechtbill) Zercher. In his letter to my mother, my father refers to the Martins' Lancaster residence as his "second home."

(including my mother).<sup>54</sup> He also attended Messiah College alumni events that reconnected him with longtime friends, again, many of them Brethren in Christ. In the meantime, my father's brother, who like my father had violated the church's strictures against military participation, had decided to make amends and cast his lot with the church. In his



*John and Harold Zercher, circa 1948.*

statement of repentance, which he submitted to the Grantham District's leadership in advance of the district's March 1948 council meeting, my Uncle Harold apologized for violating the denomination's stance on military participation. "As I now look back over the situation I do not feel that I should have entered the service," he wrote. "I feel that it is definitely contrary to the teachings of Christ to take human life."<sup>55</sup> How and why my uncle arrived at that conclusion is not clear, though his marriage to Ruth Brechbill, a dyed-in-the-wool Brethren in Christ woman from Grantham, would have provided an impetus to get right with the church.<sup>56</sup> In any case, the district leadership board found Harold's apology adequate, and it recommended his reinstatement as a full member, a recommendation the

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<sup>54</sup> The 1949 Messiah College *Clarion* lists both my father and his father, Ira Zercher, as well as my mother, as members of the 200-member Oratorio Society. The two prior yearbooks, for 1947 and 1948, do not provide the choristers' names, but my father and mother appear in each of the group photographs.

<sup>55</sup> See Minutes of the Semi-Annual District Council Meeting, Grantham, Pennsylvania, March 6, 1948, 11-12. According to the diary of my paternal grandmother, Anna Zercher, my father visited their home in Grantham that same day, so it's possible that he attended the council meeting in which his brother apologized; diary in author's possession.

<sup>56</sup> Harold and Ruth married on December 29, 1945, just weeks after he was discharged from the army. His conclusions about war may have also been connected to his gruesome responsibilities during the war. A noncombatant, my uncle trailed the Allied forces across Italy and North Africa, gathering up battered corpses and giving them proper burials.

district council approved.<sup>57</sup>

My father's official reinstatement process started seven months later, in October 1948, and lasted much longer. In fact, his willingness to rethink his military past stretched back to at least July of that year, when he attended a Brethren in Christ young adult gathering in Lancaster County that included speakers on the topic of nonresistance.<sup>58</sup> My mother was also there. "The talks were all very good," she told my grandfather in one of her early cross-the-Atlantic letters to him, then added a quick aside: "I would have given more than a nickel to know . . . John Zercher's thoughts."<sup>59</sup> Written one day before my father invited my mother to the Lancaster steak roast (their first actual date), this passing comment constitutes the first reference to John Zercher in the many letters that my mother would write to my grandfather during his year abroad.<sup>60</sup> Given my mother's curiosity about my father's thinking, it's possible that she was already aware of his interest in her. It's also possible he knew by that time that dating her seriously would necessitate a change of heart.

Whatever my father's ruminations in July 1948, his thinking had progressed by late September to the point of offering an apology to the Grantham congregation. Unlike his brother Harold's apology, however, my father's confession was deemed insufficient—a good start, to be sure, but not up to the council's standard. In the letter of apology my father sent to the Grantham District's leadership board, he acknowledged that he had taken a stand contrary to the church's teaching, and he asked to be forgiven for the "reproach" his actions might have brought upon the church's "high mission." At the same time, he also acknowledged that, while he supported the doctrine of nonresistance in the realm of personal interactions, he could not bring himself to apply it to situations like World War II. With

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<sup>57</sup> Minutes of the Semi-Annual District Council Meeting, Grantham, Pennsylvania, March 6, 1948, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Young People's Meetings in the Manor-Pequea District extend back to the 1910s. In the aftermath of World War II, the denomination sometimes used Young People's Meetings to provide instruction on the church's peace position.

<sup>59</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, July 11, 1948.

<sup>60</sup> Morris Sider suggests that my parents' first date was a car ride to a planning meeting for a Messiah College alumni gathering. That car ride did, in fact, take place before the steak roast, but I doubt my mother considered it a date, especially since one of her aunts, Pauline Hess, was also in the car. See Sider, "Biography of John E. Zercher," 18; and Fox, "Carving Out Her Own Identity," 313.

that caveat in view, he asked to be reinstated as a member of the Grantham congregation, noting that “I firmly believe that the Brethren in Christ Church is the church in which I should and could serve most effectively.”<sup>61</sup> The district leadership liked much of what my father wrote, but in their estimation, his confession didn’t clear the bar: “Since [John Zercher] could not at this time fully subscribe to the terms for readmission by a declaration of harmony with the doctrine of the Church on peace and nonresistance, . . . the Official Board recommends that membership privileges be extended on a probationary basis.”<sup>62</sup> On Monday evening, October 4, 1948, my father appeared before the Grantham District council to ask for forgiveness and plead his case for reinstatement.<sup>63</sup> The district council voted unanimously to forgive him, but it also approved the board’s recommendation. And with that, my father became the first, and probably the last, probationary member of the Grantham congregation.<sup>64</sup>

The district’s bishop, C. N. Hostetter Jr., who had met with my father before the council meeting, would continue to meet with him over the next year, counseling and perhaps even cajoling him. We don’t know how often they met, nor do we know the content of their conversations, but if any Brethren in Christ Church leader was well situated to change my father’s mind, it was C. N. Hostetter Jr.<sup>65</sup> President of Messiah Bible College and the bearer of two master’s degrees, Bishop Hostetter had a keen mind, informed by both reading and experience.<sup>66</sup> Nine years earlier, in 1939, he and my father had corresponded about my father’s interest in sales, with

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<sup>61</sup> John E. Zercher to Members of the Official Board of the Grantham District, September 30, 1948, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.5.

<sup>62</sup> Minutes of the Semi-Annual District Council Meeting, Grantham, Pennsylvania, October 4, 1948, 10-11.

<sup>63</sup> For my father’s appearance before the Grantham District council, see Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, October 18, 1948. According to my paternal grandmother’s diary, my father’s father, Ira, attended council meeting along with my father; Anna Zercher diary, in author’s possession.

<sup>64</sup> What did it mean for my father to have membership privileges on a probationary basis? That’s what my mother wanted to know. Writing to her father two weeks after the council meeting, she recounted to him the council’s decision, then asked, “Did you ever hear of such a thing?” Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, October 18, 1948.

<sup>65</sup> Letters to my grandfather indicate that my father and C. N. Hostetter Jr. met at least twice (September 27, 1948, and December 19, 1948), but my mother later recalled that they met much more often than that. See Ethel Engle to Henry N. Hostetter, September 24, 1948, and Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, December 19, 1948. See also Sider, “Biography of John E. Zercher,” 17.

<sup>66</sup> One of Hostetter’s master’s degrees was in theology, from Winona Lake School of Theology, and the other was in education, from the University of Chicago. See Sider, *Messenger of Grace*, 101.



C. N. Hostetter Jr., Messiah College president, 1948.

Hostetter, who had sold peanut butter as a young man, offering counsel on maintaining a Christian witness in the business world.<sup>67</sup> Now the topic had changed to the virtues of war and peace. According to my mother's recollections, her uncle gave my father books on nonresistance to read between their sessions, books that almost surely included E. J. Swalm's *Nonresistance Under Test*, an autobiographical account of Swalm's experiences as a conscientious objector in Canada during World War I.<sup>68</sup> Bishop Swalm was a family friend of my Hostetter grandparents, and his daughter, Lela, was a friend of my mother.<sup>69</sup> Needless to say, the social webs tying Brethren in Christ families together in the 1940s ran thick, securing intergenerational relationships with likeminded people. These same webs made the case for nonresistance more plausible to those ensconced within them.<sup>70</sup>

Decades later, in the 1970s, my father scribbled a pair of outlines delineating his reasons for embracing the church's peace position.<sup>71</sup> Some of the points he listed were experiential, noting for instance the moral decay he saw in army life (military service "did not make me a better Christian," he wrote) and the devastating consequences of war on civilian populations.

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<sup>67</sup> Sider, *Messenger of Grace*, 45.

<sup>68</sup> E. J. Swalm, *Nonresistance Under Test: The Experiences of a Conscientious Objector, as Encountered in the Late World War by the Author* (Nappanee, IN: E. V. Publishing House, 1938). The 1948 edition of Swalm's book included additional chapters making the case for nonresistance, including ones by the Hostetter brothers, C. N. Jr. and Henry.

<sup>69</sup> In one letter to my grandfather my mother tells him about Lela Swalm becoming engaged to Paul Hostetter. Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, December 1, 1948.

<sup>70</sup> For religious plausibility, see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990).

<sup>71</sup> These outlines can be found in Zercher Papers, MG 55. 19.5. They are not dated, but my father's handwriting suggests they were completed later in life.

Other points were generically theological: Christians' commitment to God needed to override their commitment to any other entity, including their nation. But the bulk of his outline focused on biblical texts that, taken together, reveal a nonviolent Messiah who instructs his disciples to follow his nonviolent ways. These were the same texts that forced Reinhold Niebuhr, a forceful critic of pacifism on the eve of World War II, to admit that nonresistant Christians ("absolutists," he called them) had Jesus on their side.<sup>72</sup> All that to say: for those willing to take their cues from gospels, as opposed to taking them from the broken world, there are cogent arguments for nonresistance that can change people's minds, or at least legitimate new ways of thinking. C. N. Hostetter Jr. surely would have pointed my father to these arguments in the course of their conversations.

As crucial as Hostetter's counseling sessions were to my father's transformation, however, equally critical were my father's interactions with Hostetter's niece, that is, with my mother. By the time the October 1948 council meeting rolled around, my parents had been dating for three months, and from all indications he was eager to push things ahead. Their dates were often fun-filled, though many of them concluded with long conversations about spiritual matters. Sometimes they discussed nonresistance ("I know the Lord gave me good thinking abilities to do a little explaining," my mother wrote after one late-night conversation), but their topics ranged widely, from plain dress to reading newspapers on Sunday to the fact that my father, during his years in the army, had played cards, attended movies, enjoyed beer, and even danced.<sup>73</sup> All of these activities, standard fare for American soldiers, were forbidden, or at least frowned upon, in the midcentury Brethren in Christ Church, a fact that was not lost on my "churchified" mother, a term she once applied to herself.<sup>74</sup> For his part, my father was hard-pressed to deem these things immoral, though in time he began to see how his unwillingness to follow the church's guidelines

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<sup>72</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist," in Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 1-32.

<sup>73</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, September 28, 1948 ("good thinking abilities"); Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, August 9, 1948 (Sunday paper). Also, Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, October 18, 1948 (cards, movies, etc).

<sup>74</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, December 1, 1948.

on them could signal an arrogant spirit.<sup>75</sup>

My mother's letters during this period, from August 1948 through January 1949, reveal a spiritually earnest young woman in considerable distress. She clearly wants to do the right thing, but she can't figure out what that is, and the one person best suited to help her make a decision—her father—is half way around the world. Her tenderhearted letters to him follow a similar pattern: they begin with mundane news, offer some church or college gossip, and then transition to her dating life, sometimes with jarring honesty. They frequently identify some of my father's good points—he's well-mannered, he's kind, and he's sincerely seeking God's will—but they also mention his shortcomings, in particular, his inability to conform to Brethren in Christ practices to the degree my mother thinks he should. Somewhat surprisingly, by the middle of October, my grandmother appears to have been won over by my father, but my mother remains unsure.<sup>76</sup> In fact, at the end of October, four weeks after my father's confession at the Grantham District council meeting, she decides to end the relationship. The evening she plans to break things off comes and goes, but even then, she tells my grandfather, it will soon need to happen: "If things don't work themselves out in a week or so," she confides in early November, "then the end must come."<sup>77</sup>

The end did not come, of course, and one year later, in November 1949, they became engaged. In the meantime, however, my father underwent a second sort of probation, this one placed upon him by my mother, who decided that, while they could continue to spend time together, they would see one another less frequently.<sup>78</sup> This social distancing, she believed, would afford my father space to figure things out on his own. Indeed, she wanted to be sure that any changes he underwent were directed by God, not by her.<sup>79</sup>

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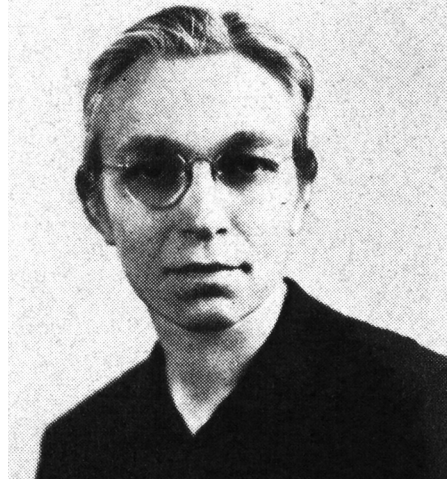
<sup>75</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, August 14, 1948; October 18, 1948; December 1, 1948.

<sup>76</sup> "Mother tells me that I had better consider very carefully because I won't find many fellows in the Brethren in Christ Church with his manners, kindness, and taste. I'll admit she is very correct, and Grandma [Ella Hostetter, married to C. N. Sr.] thinks he's wonderful." Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, October 18, 1948.

<sup>77</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, November 2, 1948.

<sup>78</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, December 19, 1948. Although this letter was sent before Christmas, it notes that the new arrangement would not go into effect until after the holidays.

During this probationary period, which appears to have run from late December 1948 into the spring of 1949, she confided in a family friend, Ethel Engle, who worked in the president's office at Messiah Bible College.<sup>80</sup> My mother's relationship with Engle was long and deep, and the two women often stopped to chat when they encountered each other on campus. My mother knew she could trust her parents' longtime friend to provide her with honest advice about her relationship with a man that Engle, as a Grantham mainstay, knew relatively well.



*Ethel Engle, assistant to President C. N. Hostetter Jr., Messiah College, 1948.*

Unbeknownst to my mother, Engle was acting as a double agent of sorts, keeping my grandfather apprised of what she saw unfolding between my father and my mother. In her January 26, 1949, letter to my grandfather, the last of four letters she sent to him reporting on my parents' relationship, Engle registers her approval of my mother's decision to place my father on probation: "It's a pleasure and satisfaction to realize that . . . there are those who remain steady in the midst of difficult problems," Engle writes. "I feel that A.G. is doing that very thing; and she is keeping her head up right now when associations with John are less frequent because her better judgment seems to tell her it cannot be otherwise for the present."<sup>81</sup>

Engle included another important point in her late January 1949 letter to my grandfather, whispers that my father was reconsidering his vocational future. Engle had obtained this information from Anna Zercher, my father's

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<sup>79</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, December 19, 1948. I appreciate my mother's sensibilities here, though my argument in this essay is that her role in my father's transformation was essential.

<sup>79</sup> In 1928 my maternal grandmother, Beula Hostetter, wrote a letter to Engle. She wrote it in my mother's three-year-old voice, talking about her "Papa" and "Mamma" and their various activities. [Beula Hostetter] to Ethel Engle, November 4, 1928, Zercher Papers, MG 55.23.2.

<sup>81</sup> Ethel Engle to Henry N. Hostetter, January 26, 1949. Engle's other letters to my grandfather, all in my possession, were written September 10, 1948; September 24, 1948; and November 19, 1948.



mother and Engle's fellow member at the Grantham Church. Ira and Anna were pleased, Engle reported to my grandfather, not only with my father's increasing conformity to the Brethren in Christ Church, but also with his growing dissatisfaction with his job at Millersville. In fact, Engle wrote, "he is thinking in terms of something else—Christian service—for the future."<sup>82</sup> This may have been news to my grandfather, but it probably wasn't. In mid-December, my father had written to my grandfather, the first and only letter he would write to his future father-in-law on his yearlong trip. The letter was ostensibly part of a Christmas project sponsored by a Manor Church Sunday school class, but it gave my father a golden opportunity to connect with his girlfriend's father. As he drew his letter to a close, my father referenced his work at Millersville, which he said was going well. Nonetheless, he said, he had begun to lose his enthusiasm for the work and, in fact, was thinking quite seriously of going to seminary in the fall, to "prepare for service more definitely Christian."<sup>83</sup>

Of course, Christian service was the work to which my mother had long felt called—not simply being married to a good man, or even to a good Brethren in Christ man, but to a Brethren in Christ pastor or missionary. In September 1948, shortly after my parents had begun dating, my mother talked to one of her friends who knew my father well. The friend, Esther Dourte, had talked to my father earlier that summer and, in the course of their conversation, asked him what he was looking for in a wife. According to Dourte, who in September passed this information along to my mother, my father wanted "a good mother to his children and a good entertainer." My mother was not impressed with this conventional answer, not because of its gendered assumptions, but because it didn't sync with her sense of calling. Shortly after her conversation with Dourte, my mother reiterated her sense of calling to my father, making sure he knew full well the implications of dating her. He responded to her in writing later that week, complimenting her on her approach to life, which he considered superior to his. "I feel that I have a pretty fair theory of life," he wrote, "but I am not so certain that it is working so good." My father went on to tell my mother about a recent

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<sup>82</sup> Ethel Engle to Henry N. Hostetter, January 26, 1949.

<sup>83</sup> John E. Zercher to Henry N. Hostetter, December 14, 1948.

sleepless night, the result, he said, of unresolved issues that he hoped she could help him resolve. “Sometime [when] we have a good long evening to talk,” he said, “we can go over some of the things that I have been thinking about.”<sup>84</sup>

The resolution of longstanding questions rarely happens in the aftermath of one sleepless night. It took my father months to come around, not only to the church’s view on nonresistance, but also to the place where he could exchange the business world for the world of Christian service. Once he came around, there was no looking back.

### **John Zercher: On the road to Christian service, 1949-1950**

When my mother took my father off probation is not entirely clear. Nearly all we know about their courtship is found in letters that were sent overseas to my grandfather—by his wife, his daughter, and his Grantham informant, Ethel Engle—and the last of these letters was written in mid-February 1949.<sup>85</sup> At that point, it seems, my mother was still trying to determine how serious my father was about pursuing Christian service. She was also waiting for my grandfather to return to the United States, eager to hear his advice before finally deciding what to do. My grandfather left Calcutta on March 1, and after a four-week ocean voyage he arrived in Savannah, Georgia, then hightailed it to his home in Lancaster County. If he and my mother had a conversation about my father at that point, we have no record of it, but they almost certainly did. What we do know for sure is that seven months later, in November 1949, my mother and father became engaged.<sup>86</sup> Two months later, at the dawn of the new year, they sent out engagement announcements featuring two overlapping hearts, one labeled “John” and one labeled “Alice Grace.”<sup>87</sup> They were married at Manor

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<sup>84</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, September 28, 1948. In this letter to my grandfather, my mother recounts her conversation with Esther Dourte and quotes from my father’s letter, which does not survive. Esther Dourte would go on to marry Paul Snyder who, along with my father, attended Princeton Theological Seminary in the early 1950s.

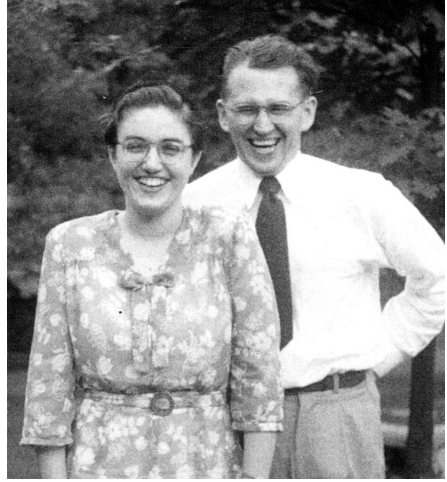
<sup>85</sup> Of the 33 letters sent to my grandfather overseas that were written after Christmas 1948, only one mentions my father at any length, the one from Ethel Engle, written on January 26, 1949. My mother mentions my father only twice, in two short notes she appended to the end of letters written by my grandmother, December 26, 1948, and January 19, 1949.

<sup>86</sup> They became engaged on November 12, 1949, though apparently they did not make their engagement public right away. See John E. Zercher to Alice G. Hostetter, November 14, 1949, Zercher Papers, MG 55.23.2.

## WEAVER-ZERCHER: How His Mind Was Changed

Brethren in Christ Church in August 1950, two years after they first began to date.

In the meantime, the Grantham District, like my mother, had removed my father from probation. His release from probationary status came in October 1949, one year after the council meeting in which he offered his initial apology. This time around his confession was unequivocal, attesting to a more complete change of heart on the issue of nonresistance. His statement, submitted in advance to the district leadership, was much shorter than the one he wrote in 1948. It provided no biblical rationale for his intellectual transformation, simply the acknowledgement that his views had undergone a change “to the extent that I could not again engage in military service in the event of another war.”<sup>87</sup> Months earlier my father had resigned his commission in the army reserves, a financially costly action that most council members would have known about as they prepared to vote.<sup>89</sup> According



*Engaged: John Zercher and Alice Grace Zercher, 1950.*



*Married: John and Alice Grace Zercher, 1950.*

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<sup>87</sup> One engagement announcement remains, in Zercher Papers, MG 55.23.13. A note added later by my mother says they sent out their engagement announcements at New Year's. Her biography, however, which is based on oral interviews with her in the early 2000s, says they sent them out on Valentine's Day. See Fox, "Carving Out Her Own Identity," 313.

<sup>88</sup> See Minutes of the Semi-Annual District Council Meeting, Grantham, Pennsylvania, October 1, 1949, 3.

to the meeting's minutes, the council voted unanimously to reinstate my father as a full member.

My father did not attend the October 1949 council meeting, perhaps because his reinstatement was a foregone conclusion, but also because he was in his first semester of seminary in Princeton, New Jersey.<sup>90</sup> In the course of dating my mother, he had decided to become a minister in the denomination that, three years earlier, he had labeled “ultra conservative,” a term he had not intended as a compliment.<sup>91</sup> My father's decision to enter the ministry had become certain enough by March 1949 that he applied to Princeton Theological Seminary, citing in his application essay both the “call of my church” and the encouragement of “personal friends” as his reason for attending seminary.<sup>92</sup> Choosing to attend Princeton—indeed, choosing to attend seminary at all—was practically unheard of in the Brethren in Christ Church in 1949, though my father had three good reasons to do so. First, although he owned a bachelor's degree, he was not anticipating ministry as an undergraduate, so in his mind, at least, additional training was necessary.<sup>93</sup> Second, his good Brethren in Christ friend, Paul Snyder, now married to Esther Dourte, had also decided to attend Princeton, which no doubt made enrolling there less intimidating. Third, and perhaps most important, Princeton offered my father an educational context that was both academically rigorous and theologically moderate, a seminary that, in the liberal-conservative spectrum, sat somewhere in the middle.<sup>94</sup> In that sense, Princeton was a place that enabled my father to pursue the *via media* that he had identified in his philosophy of life statement, a place where he could integrate the best of his Brethren in Christ upbringing with more worldly, scientific learning. Thanks in part to Princeton, my father never

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<sup>89</sup> My father's resignation letter is dated November 18, 1948. See Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.5.

<sup>90</sup> He was informed of the council's decision in a letter from C. N. Hostetter Jr., sent to him at Princeton. See C. N. Hostetter Jr. to John E. Zercher, October 3, 1949, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.5.

<sup>91</sup> Zercher, “My Philosophy of Life,” p. 22; in author's possession.

<sup>92</sup> John E. Zercher to C. N. Hostetter Jr., March 16, 1949, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.4. In this letter my father asks Hostetter to send a letter of recommendation to Princeton Theological Seminary; the request includes a copy of his application essay.

<sup>93</sup> According to my mother's biographer, my father used funds from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the “G.I. Bill”) to help pay his Princeton tuition. See Fox, “Carving Out Her Own Identity,” 313.

<sup>94</sup> James H. Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012).



*At Princeton Theological Seminary: John and Alice Grace Zercher, Esther and Paul Snyder, 1949.*

felt constrained to reject his view that the creation of humanity was the result of an evolutionary process superintended by God, nor did he discard the notion that the biblical writers operated by standards of history that were different from those of modern historians. In these and other ways, my father did not always conform to the mid-twentieth-century Brethren in Christ theological mainstream, a divergence that he kept under wraps, at least in certain settings.

Three years in Princeton, New Jersey, also afforded my father space as the Brethren in Christ Church began moving away from its plain-dressing past. My tie-wearing father was never as convinced about the virtue of plain dress as my mother, telling her in one of their late-night conversations that wearing a tie was not inherently sinful, that the wrong, if it existed, resided in a person's unwillingness to abide by the church's standards.<sup>95</sup> In a ministerial exam he completed in the spring of 1950, he notes that attempts to keep up with the world's changing styles can easily lead to "immodesty and extravagance," and he proceeds from there to identify jewelry and

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<sup>95</sup> Alice G. Hostetter to Henry N. Hostetter, December 1, 1948.

“other means of artificial beautification” as things to be avoided, for they tended to symbolize pride.<sup>96</sup> Four years later, in 1954, my father wrote a second doctrinal exam that, like the first, required him to outline his views on Christian apparel. “Christians will dress modestly and unostentatiously,” he writes in this second exam, though he now roots his views on dress in the principle of stewardship, noting that keeping up with changing styles demands money that would be better used to clothe the poor. More significantly, and with denominational decisions giving him leeway to move in this direction, he now dismisses the notion of uniform dress as a way to keep pride in check. In fact, he says, the wearing of uniform dress can easily become “camouflage for a proud heart.”<sup>97</sup> Of course, by the time my father wrote this second doctrinal exam, the entire denomination had started down the road to discarding plain dress.<sup>98</sup> Like many Brethren in Christ men and women of his generation, my father was just a few steps ahead.<sup>99</sup>

As for nonresistance, these two doctrinal exams, written four years apart, reveal that my father continued to stand by his October 1949 statement to the Grantham District council. In light of ongoing national debates about peacetime conscription, he spends more time in his 1950 doctrinal exam discussing conscription than he does addressing the more basic issue of nonresistance. In it he argues that conscription “has never prevented war,” though it has at times “glorified the militarists” and thereby led to war. Therefore, he says, “as a believer in nonresistance, I cannot approve [of] the attempts by our country to initiate military conscription.”<sup>100</sup> Four years

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<sup>96</sup> John E. Zercher, “Examination Questions: For Bishops, Elders, Deacons, Evangelists, and Missionaries” (1950), 6, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.6. By “means of artificial beautification,” he almost certainly meant women’s makeup. <sup>92</sup> Mabel Washington, “Fairview Golf Club Lists Girl Members,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 7, 1929.

<sup>97</sup> John E. Zercher, “Ministerial and Examining Board of the Brethren in Christ Church Doctrinal Questionnaire” (1954), [6-7], Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.6. <sup>94</sup> “Boston Ready for National Golf Championships,” *Chicago Defender*, August 9, 1941.

<sup>98</sup> At the 1952 meeting of the General Conference, the denomination deleted its description of church uniforms that had entered the church’s doctrinal literature in 1937. In its place, the denomination offered less prescriptive dress guidelines, most of them pertaining to women’s dress. See Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 350-356, 486-487.

<sup>99</sup> Of course, many of the men who were a few steps ahead of the denomination on the issue of dress left the church, which was one reason the denomination moved away from strict, uniform dress standards. See Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience*, 480-481.

later, in 1954, he again affirms his commitment to nonresistance which, he says, extends beyond the context of person-to-person relationships to “any situation where those things [a Christian] stands for, believes in, and loves, are in jeopardy.” Showing nascent signs of an activist approach to peacemaking, he also suggests that nonresistance can serve as a “positive” approach to life, one that employs the “means of love and kindness to overcome the evil situation.”<sup>101</sup> This conviction that nonviolence could be marshalled to overcome evil would soon become foundational to the work of Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>102</sup> There’s no evidence that my father was an early supporter of the Civil Rights Movement, but he would eventually become one, praising King’s nonviolent resistance and criticizing those who suggested that ministers like King had no business marching for justice in America’s streets.<sup>103</sup>

My father’s advocacy of a more activist approach to nonviolence, which eventually included his criticism of American militarism (both during and after the Vietnam War), did not always win him friends in the denomination, but he moved in that direction nonetheless.<sup>104</sup> How and why he adopted a more politically-engaged approach to peacemaking, and to what extent he made those views known, remains a topic for another article.<sup>105</sup> The point of this article is less about the long-term trajectory of my father’s commitment

<sup>100</sup> Zercher, “Examination Questions” (1950), 6, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.6.

<sup>101</sup> Zercher, “Doctrinal Questionnaire” (1954), [5], Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.6. For this shift to a more activist approach in the Mennonite world, see Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

<sup>102</sup> King’s leadership in the Civil Rights Movement began in 1955, when he organized the Montgomery bus boycott. See Taylor Branch, *The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 5-12.

<sup>103</sup> John E. Zercher, “Thoughts on Memphis,” *Evangelical Visitor*, April 22, 1968, 2. See also his letter to the editor of *Christianity Today*, March 18, 1968, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.15. In his letter, he asked why the periodical made provision for clergy to write articles in support of the Vietnam War, while at the same time it criticized clergy who were using their platforms to fight racial and economic injustice.

<sup>104</sup> For instance, John E. Zercher to J. N. Hostetter, May 16, 1972, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.15. In his letter to Hostetter, who served as the Brethren in Christ representative to the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), my father laments the NAE’s unwillingness to condemn America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. “What one misses in the resolution,” my father writes, “is any suggestion that our national pride and our obsession with power have had something to do with the destruction of a people and of their land on the pretext of saving them.”

<sup>105</sup> It’s possible that the roots of this engagement can be found in my father’s Franklin and Marshall philosophy of life statement, in which he criticized a sectarian approach to life. Despite his return to the Brethren in Christ Church, my father seems never to have reclaimed the sectarian assumptions he saw in the church of his youth.



*Honeymoon-bound: Alice Grace and John Zercher, 1950.*

to nonviolence than it is about his initial embrace of it. He got there, I suggest, not by reason alone, but by motivated reasoning. C. N. Hostetter Jr., college president and Brethren in Christ standard bearer, no doubt played a crucial role in my father's intellectual transformation, helping him see and develop arguments about nonresistance that were biblically based and theologically sound. But President Hostetter's work may well have been in vain if not for the steadfastness of his niece, the woman my dad hoped to marry, indeed, the one he eventually did.<sup>106</sup>

### **John Zercher: A church discipline success story?**

The decision of the 1942 General Conference to deem military personnel out of fellowship with their congregations raised questions almost immediately. One year later, at the 1943 General Conference meeting, the Oklahoma State Council petitioned the General Conference to reconsider its stance, registering its unhappiness with the denomination's refusal to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants.<sup>107</sup> A petition from

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<sup>106</sup> In answer to a question on his 1950 ministerial exam, my father summarized the months my mother placed him on probation in this way: "During the winter 1948-49, God reclaimed me and I dedicated myself to God." Zercher, "Examination Questions" (1950), 3, Zercher Papers, MG 55.19.6.

<sup>107</sup> Minutes of the Seventy-Third Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church, Article LI, June 3-5, 1943, 84-85.



the California State Council said much the same.<sup>108</sup> In response, the General Conference appointed a committee, chaired by C. N. Hostetter Jr., to review these concerns and report back to the full body before the conference's end. The committee's report contained a recommendation that was quickly approved. It left in place the automatic forfeiture of combatants' membership, but it gave individual congregations discretion with respect to noncombatants, a compromise that succeeded in keeping the issue off the General Conference agenda for the remainder of the war.<sup>109</sup> In 1948, however, the General Conference revisited the entire issue and, in hopes of strengthening the church's nonresistant identity, it once again applied disciplinary strictures to noncombatants. The membership of the "transgressor," combatant or noncombatant, said the 1948 statement, "can be regained only upon satisfactory acknowledgment of his error, a declaration of his acceptance of the Bible teaching on this doctrine of nonresistance, and subscription to the tenets of the church."<sup>110</sup>

This 1948 resolution was passed in June, six weeks before my mother and father went on their first date, four months before my father's first confession to the Grantham District council, and 16 months before his second, more robust confession. A decade later, in 1958, the denomination's Peace, Relief, and Service Committee conducted a survey to determine the extent to which denomination's young men had embraced the church's nonresistant stance in the intervening years, a stance that continued to bump up against U.S. conscription laws. The committee's findings were disappointing but not surprising. Nearly 50 percent of the Brethren in Christ men conscripted between 1951 and 1957 had chosen military service over alternate service. Of the men who had chosen to join the military, less than 20 percent had had their membership revoked by their local congregations, and of those who did, only a third had responded to church discipline in

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<sup>108</sup> Minutes of the Seventy-Third Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church, 1943, 85.

<sup>109</sup> Minutes of the Seventy-Third Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church, 1943, 86-87. The recommendation said that congregational and district leaders shall "be responsible to deal with those at fault in much love, forbearance, and kindness, endeavoring to remedy the situation by prayerful instruction, guidance, counsel, or discipline as deemed necessary."

<sup>110</sup> Minutes of the Seventy-Eighth Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church, Article XXIII. June 9-14, 1948, 41.

a way that resulted in their reinstatement.<sup>111</sup> In other words, most local Brethren in Christ congregations had decided to ignore the denomination's instructions on the matter, and the congregations that followed the denomination's guidelines had proven relatively unsuccessful in bringing their prodigals home. Recognizing that the disciplinary jig was up, the 1958 General Conference repealed its past actions and adopted a less punitive approach. From this point forward, the Brethren in Christ Church would seek to nurture the doctrine of nonresistance through preaching, teaching, and counsel, but not enforce compliance to it through formal disciplinary procedures.<sup>112</sup>

There are no comparable studies from the 1940s that could help us determine the typicality of my father's disciplinary experience, but it appears to have been unique. Convinced during the World War II that he was doing the right thing, he remained unrepentant for nearly three years after he returned home. As we have seen, however, he eventually came around, ultimately trading his identity as a World War II veteran for that of a nonresistant Christian. What shall we say about his experience? Is it a "church discipline success story"? It may well be, but it is also an exceptional story. My father was not the only military man to reestablish his Brethren in Christ bona fides in the years after World War II, but he may have been alone in becoming an outspoken proponent of the denomination's peace position for the long haul.<sup>113</sup>

Whatever adjectives we assign to my father's story, this much needs to be said: the key to my father's restoration, which required him to change his mind, lay not in C. N. Hostetter's lenience, as if other Brethren in Christ leaders were not also wise and patient counselors. The key to his restoration resided in his desire to hold a set of beliefs that would satisfy his social goals, a desire that, according to Jonathan Haidt, is the hallmark of motivated reasoning. My father was a thinker, to be sure, but in Haidt's terminology he was also an "emotional dog." Sometime in the first half of

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<sup>111</sup> Minutes of the Eighty-Eighth Annual General Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church, Article XVI, June 11-16, 1958, 41-42.

<sup>112</sup> Minutes of the Eighty-Eighth Annual General Conference, 42-43.

<sup>113</sup> For other discipline stories from this time period, including ones that did not result in repentance, see Heisey, *Peace and Persistence*, 118-121.

1948, gaining my mother's affection became my father's primary social goal, and it remained so until his mind was slowly and sincerely changed. My father's thinking was also motivated by the social ties he enjoyed with so many other Brethren in Christ people, ties that he had established long before the war, sustained during the war, and renewed after the war. By many measures he should have left the Brethren in Christ Church for more progressive pastures. In reality he couldn't seem to stay away.

The all-encompassing social networks that connected so many Brethren in Christ lives in the 1940s—a connectedness that continues to exist among the Old Order Amish and some conservative Mennonite groups—doesn't exist in the Brethren in Christ world today, at least in North America. Indeed, these bonds were coming loose even in the 1940s and 1950s, which is one reason why church discipline as traditionally practiced by the denomination was fast becoming history. Simply put, the power dynamic between the church and the individual had shifted too far toward the individual to produce the desired result: there was no longer much to lose by being disciplined, and there was no longer much to gain by begging for reinstatement. In my father's case, however, these connections were still strong enough in the late-1940s to motivate his reasoning and help him change his mind, at least on the issue of nonresistance. And once his mind was changed, it was changed for good.