

Redefining 'Demonstration': A Review of Tobin Miller Shearer's *Daily Demonstrators*

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Tobin Miller Shearer. *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 392 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8018-9700-9.

Daily Demonstrators opens with an anecdote about Martin Luther King Jr. asking “a white Mennonite leader” in 1959, “Where have you Mennonites been?” Shearer argues that “a small but identifiable group of Mennonites” were actively participating in civil rights demonstrations – albeit “in a manner King did not then recognize. They demonstrated at home and inside the church” (vii).

Shearer is assistant professor of history and African American studies coordinator at the University of Montana. For most of the 1990s, he was director of the Racism Awareness Program of Mennonite Central Committee USA.¹ This experience, and his authorship of two earlier books on racism,² make him well qualified to write the history of Mennonite involvement (or lack thereof) in the American civil rights movement.

Part of the primary source base for this study is a collection of forty interviews conducted by Shearer between 2002 and 2008. Oral historians will be disappointed that the voices of those interviewed are often muted and that discussion of oral history methodology is absent. Shearer uses these interviews solely to provide “detail, internal perspective, and illustrative anecdotes...” (xx) and does not engage with the extensive literature in oral history methods or memory studies.

Shearer argues that, with respect to the civil rights movement, American Mennonites reflected broader American society: only some “took to the streets”; some opposed civil rights demonstrations; most “neither actively opposed nor engaged street-based activism”; even more “participated in demonstrations” at home and at church; and some “took more oppositional stances” (23). Such a diversity of responses was a result of the fact that Mennonite history and religious values could be used to support opposing positions on civil rights. Their religious commitment to social justice had led American Mennonites to protest slavery in

¹ MCC is a relief, service, community development, and peace agency that was founded by various Mennonite church conferences in 1920.

² *Enter the River: Healing Steps from White Privilege to Racial Reconciliation* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1994) and *Set Free: A Journey Toward Solidarity Against Racism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), the latter co-authored with Iris de León-Hartshorn and Regina Shands Stoltzfus. Herald Press is owned by Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.

1688 and to be the first to admit an African American student into a Christian college in the south (in 1948). But they also had a strong commitment to their doctrines of nonresistance and nonconformity, which discouraged them from participating in public protests.

Shearer goes against the grain of traditional civil rights histories which focus on male leadership to examine the role played by women. He shares the stories of two women in Harrisonburg, Virginia – one African-American and one white – who used religious dress (prayer coverings) to challenge segregation in their community. Partly in response to these women's growing leadership profiles, the Virginia Mennonite Conference passed resolutions in 1940 to racially segregate religious rituals such as baptism and communion (36). The white woman unsuccessfully challenged the Conference decision and was fired from her church-related employment after angrily leaving a segregated communion service. Her African-American friend's wearing of the head covering (even as many other Mennonite women were abandoning its use) was a daily visible reminder to the broader community of her equality with white Mennonite women. These women's stories, Shearer explains, reveal "a form of segregation left unchallenged by the demonstrations then being mounted against civic Jim Crow practices" (58).

Even more unconventional than his discussion of women and civil rights is the author's exploration of the role of children. Mennonite 'Fresh Air' programs, which lasted from 1950 to 1971, brought inner city African American children into white Mennonites' rural homes. Shearer characterizes the "disruption of daily life and prior expectations" of the white Mennonite hosts as a form of civil rights demonstration in the home by these children (63). Such disruption was not restricted to the private home, either: the challenge presented by African American children to white Mennonites was addressed in congregations and by church leadership. These children refused to indulge their hosts' intrusive interest in their home life, challenged their hosts' perception of their intelligence, and forced their hosts to "come to terms with their racial naïveté" (86). Shearer notes, however, that most white Mennonite hosts "often resisted further learning" (92). His declaration that the popularity of the Fresh Air program was in part because "few hosts could interrupt their exhausting summer farm tasks to attend a civil rights march" (93), however, is curious. Did not civil rights marchers interrupt their own work schedules, risking not only their livelihoods but their own lives?

Other chapters in this wide-ranging volume address civil rights demonstrator and church leader Vincent Harding's involvement in (and departure from) the Mennonite Church, inter-racial marriage, racially integrated church congregations, and the Mennonite Church's Minority Ministries Council's

engagement with James Forman's 1969 Black Manifesto demand for reparations from the Christian church.

While some may consider Shearer's extension of 'demonstration' to be innovative, his approach results in the equation of actions against racism by a minority of individuals in homes and churches with the life-endangering activities of street demonstrators who challenged and (in some ways) transformed a discriminatory political and legal system. This argument threatens to overshadow the important nuances of the evidence the author presents that most Mennonites, like most Americans, responded inadequately to the civil rights movement. And the rhetoric used in making this argument is, at times, overwrought: "Alongside those who pounded the pavement, another set of marchers strode through sanctuaries and loped through living rooms" (28). Whatever concerns one may have of this redefinition of 'demonstration,' Shearer has produced an interesting complement to the vast literature on the American civil rights movement. His detailed examination of how men, women, and children lived and, in some ways, challenged racism in the church and in the home make this book a necessary one for students and scholars of the civil rights movement and of lived religion. *Daily Demonstrators* offers a unique examination of under-explored aspects of the American civil rights movement, the "intimate spaces" that were part of the "mechanisms of social change" (224).