

CHRISTIAN MUTUAL AID

A Handbook of Brotherhood Economics

SECTION FOR MENNONITE AID
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By

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Foreword

This booklet has been written to foster the development of a program of mutual aid among Mennonites. It assumes that the Mennonites in their various groups constitute Christian brotherhoods based upon a personal experience of faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and a loving fellowship in His body, the Church. On this foundation it advocates that the members of the Christian community, locally and as a whole, bear one another's economic burdens and so not only fulfill the law of Christ but strengthen the Brotherhood for its greater tasks of witnessing and building for Christ in the world of today. It is a conscious effort to challenge the secular trend of the times which threatens to denature the Christian community and make its members increasingly dependent upon the state and the commercial world with consequent transfer of loyalty from the church to other agencies.

In this undertaking, the author is squarely within the authentic historic tradition of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement with its spirit of Christian stewardship, mutual burden-bearing, and practical brotherly aid. Mennonites have always held that this spirit is the direct and necessary consequence of true Christian love, although they have not always practiced this ideal. The author is also entirely within the New Testament ideal, for what he advocates is a historic Christian principle anchored both in tradition and Scripture, and successfully applied at many times and places, both within and without the Mennonite brotherhood, though also often forgotten, neglected or deliberately by-passed for selfish profit.

There are increasing signs of a revival among the Mennonites in the practical application of brotherly mutual aid in various areas of common life and need. These applications range all the way from overseas colonization on a large scale to the granting of small loans to ex-CPS men, and the growth of local groups for mutual aid in such emergencies as illness, death and burial. In this revival, the author of this booklet has played no small part by his own contributions in vision, research and practical leadership, both in his own conference and in the larger circles of the total Mennonite constituency. He is now serving as chairman of the Mennonite Aid Section of the Mennonite Central Committee.

The demand for a convenient and practical summary of mutual aid principles, together with practical suggestions for

procedure, has led the Mennonite Central Committee to prepare this booklet for wide circulation among our people and among others who might be interested in the application of Christian love and brotherhood to the economic aspect of our common life. The author has successfully combined Scripture teaching with historical illustrations and practical operating suggestions to produce a clear, concise, and helpful manual. We commend it to our ministerial and lay leadership in the hope that it will meet a real need and will give effective impetus to the growing revival of the practice of Christian mutual aid.

THE MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE

Harold S. Bender

June, 1947.

Introductory Comments About Mutual Aid

"God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him." Genesis 1:27.

Mutual aid is a very old practice in human history. We may say that aid is mutual when two or more individuals work together to achieve a common good. Mutual Aid is a reciprocal process in that it benefits all parties concerned, in other words, the beneficial currents flow simultaneously in opposite directions. The idea of working together to accomplish desired goals is much older than the idea of working alone. In a very real sense mutual aid is a fundamental law of the universe. As such it is an inherent part of God's creation.

The earliest historical records reveal that ancient peoples lived in groups such as small communities, tribes, and families. They had a very simple way of life in comparison with the complex and highly intricate life of today. Yet an essential characteristic of their way of life was their sharing of the dangers, the sorrows, the joys and the bounties of life with one another. The extreme individualism so characteristic of modern life was utterly unknown to ancient peoples. It is not found today among the more simple cultures and civilizations.

Mutual Aid and Cooperation

In many ways the terms *mutual aid* and *cooperation* are synonymous. They may be used interchangeably. Some people would define mutual aid as "the idea of innate cooperation." While mutual aid is always cooperation, cooperation may sometimes not be mutual aid. The distinction, though subtle, must be made. It often happens that two or more individuals cooperate with one another to attain a common goal but they do so for basically selfish purposes. This is illustrated in our highly interdependent economic system of today where employer and employee, consumers and producers, professional men and their clients, may cooperate to attain a particular objective, but strictly speaking, one could not define

it as mutual aid because the motives may be basically selfish. The primary concern of each group is for the welfare of itself and not for the other. In genuine Christian mutual aid, there is as much concern for the other person or group as for one's own. Wherever mutual aid is practiced, it is concerned with the total good rather than with the partial good. In other words, the group welfare will take precedence over the individual welfare.

Mutual Aid and Cooperatives

In America as well as in other countries there are cooperative organizations as well as mutual aid societies. Mutual aid societies may be characterized by the intimate nature of the relationships of the members and generally have as their primary motivation a religious or fraternal basis. Cooperative organizations are all too generally economically motivated and entirely secular in character. Basically, of course, the name of an organization or an activity is not important. The name does not make it good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Both cooperatives and mutual aid organizations may be selfishly or unselfishly motivated. The important thing to discover in trying to understand any organization is its primary purpose and its basic motives. Why do people belong? What do members expect to get out of the organization? What do they expect to contribute to it?

Our concern in the discussion of the topic of mutual aid is that we as Christian people who talk about being good neighbors, and about brotherhood and stewardship, and about serving Christ, actually make a transfer from religious ideals and doctrinal professions to our everyday work and business practices. It is our concern that our businesses are operated and our jobs filled with the same pure spirit and the same high purposes with which we operate our churches. Our prayer is that all these things be done in the name of Christ for the glory of God. As church workers, we serve not for personal profit and prestige, but because there is need of our time and our energy and our service for God's work. As Christians we must strive for the things we pray for. "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We are co-workers together with God. A living faith is a working faith.

Mutual aid, like competition, is a form of striving but in the case of mutual aid it is striving with others to achieve a

common good rather than striving against others for the sake of gaining personal advantage. Of course, not all forms of competition are necessarily harmful. The motives behind the striving in every case determine whether they are good or bad, harmful or helpful.

Mutual Aid is Not Charity

It is important that a distinction be made between mutual aid and charity. We have said that mutual aid is a two-way relationship in which currents of service flow in two directions. Charity is often a one-way relationship where the currents of service flow only in one direction. The rich give to the poor; the well-fed give to the hungry; those clothed in silk give to those in rags. The two groups are likely to have little in common. They tend to live each in a world apart. Those who have are likely to look pityingly and all too often with condescension upon those who have not. Those who are in need are likely to look with mixed feelings of gratitude and covetousness upon those from whom they receive. There is little the two groups have in common.

The people who constantly receive have no way of repaying those who give. Therefore, they tend to lose self-respect and often, respect for those from whom they receive as well. Let us put ourselves in the shoes of those who receive charity and see whether we could retain our own self-respect if over a period of time we would be recipients only. Most worthy people do not like to be on the receiving end of charity very long. They generally accept charity in the hope that it will reestablish them and make them able to be self-sufficient.

As givers, we frequently never really see the people to whom we give. We are not in face to face relationship with them. The giving is, therefore, impersonal. We give to a cause rather than to an individual and we continue giving never knowing whether we pauperize the individual or whether we rehabilitate him.

The loss of self-respect through constant receiving of charity was illustrated in the depression years by people who preferred to starve slowly rather than accept relief. To accept relief would have meant a loss of self-respect and a loss of group-respect.

In this pamphlet we are concerned with mutual aid rather than charity. Each has its place in the program of the church,

but mutual aid, unlike charity, has been very much a stranger in the program of the current church. The purpose of mutual aid is to help needy church people to help themselves rather than to give them direct relief. Mutual Aid is a program designed to help set people on their own feet economically and spiritually so that they can in turn become stronger members of the Christian body and bear their share of the load in church and community. As Paul says: "But that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality." II Cor. 8:14.

Why the Church is Interested in Mutual Aid

The primary function of the church is to preach the gospel of salvation to all mankind. The church is the organized body of believers in Jesus Christ and as such it must preach repentance from sin, but it must also teach its own members right ways of living and earning a living. It must be concerned with showing the "better way" of which Paul speaks.

A basic assumption underlying this pamphlet and the accompanying emphasis on mutual aid among Mennonites is that the Mennonite Church desires to continue teaching and practicing the doctrines of separation of church and state; of non-resistance, of non-conformity to a secular world and of simplicity of living. This assumption must be accepted in order to appreciate the purpose of this pamphlet which is to encourage the development of a program of Christian mutual aid among Mennonites. This emphasis is a conscious effort to move in an opposite direction to the secular currents of our time. It assumes that the church as a brotherhood can and will meet as many of its problems independent of government assistance as possible; that the church will accept increasingly less rather than more by way of patronage, favors, and financial advantage from the state; and that it will seek to meet its economic and social needs through mutual assistance on the part of its people. In other words, it assumes that the Mennonite Church wants to urge its members not to look to the government to supply all human needs from the cradle to the grave. Nor does it desire to give its members occasion to transfer their loyalties from the Christian Church to the secular state because the state promises to assume responsibility for all their economic needs.