

Dialogue matters

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(The full text is available at Mennonite Life where it was originally published. The link to the last portion of the piece is provided in a link below).

In 1960, when Vincent Harding moved to Atlanta, he began trying to weld together the ongoing nonviolent activism being lived out by some in the Black Church with the peace witness of the Mennonite Church. This effort became less than a decade long experiment, because Harding would eventually break formal ties with the Mennonite Church. Though his time and effort keeping a foot simultaneously in both the Black community and Mennonite community was fixed should not suggest to us that he no longer had an important role to play in for Mennonite lived faith or that he did not continue to influence the Mennonite Church deeply. In fact, his ongoing legacy for the Mennonite Church lives on today.

When parting ways became more and more inevitable Vincent Harding also increasingly became more and more influential in the Mennonite Church. From my readings, conversations, and observations, it was precisely Harding's apparent distance and base in the black community while in the Mennonite Church that allowed him to speak more truthfully to Mennonite leaders as well as be heard more receptively from ethnic Mennonite insiders. This is the irony of Vincent Harding's presence for the Mennonites. It might just be the Mennonite Church's inability to manage Harding from within that made him a perfect candidate to speak prophetically to this historic peace community.

Some of my interpretation of this reality comes from reading in-between the lines of a phone conversation I had with Dr. Harding prior to his passing. To be fair, I was not a close or long term friend of Dr. Harding. I was introduced to Dr. Harding through a mutual friend, Joanna Shenk. Unfortunately I only had two conversations with him, not realizing how limited a window I had with this great man. The first conversation was very brief and introductory, though we shared contact information and planned to find a time to speak again at length and in-depth. The second time I spoke with him, he was beyond generous with his time, resulting in a very long and meaningful

phone conversation that covered a whole range of subjects and stories. Most importantly, he patiently told his story with me and then deeply desired for me to share my own as well. I have come to realize that is classic Vincent Harding, always seeking to be dialogical rather than monological with others. He wanted to receive rather than just give. During our conversation I quickly realized that he was assuming that I was Mennonite myself, given my Anabaptist orientation and my various Mennonite connections. Once he found out that I was not Mennonite, he strangely seemed very pleased to hear that. It wasn't because he did not want me to engage the Mennonite Church, but he seemed to suggest that I would be more helpful to the Mennonite Church if I was not a Mennonite myself. It was an interesting point he was making at the time, though I didn't ask him to say anymore. It is only after the fact that I have connected those brief remarks he made with me on the phone with his own experience with the Mennonites.

Read the end of the post [here](#).