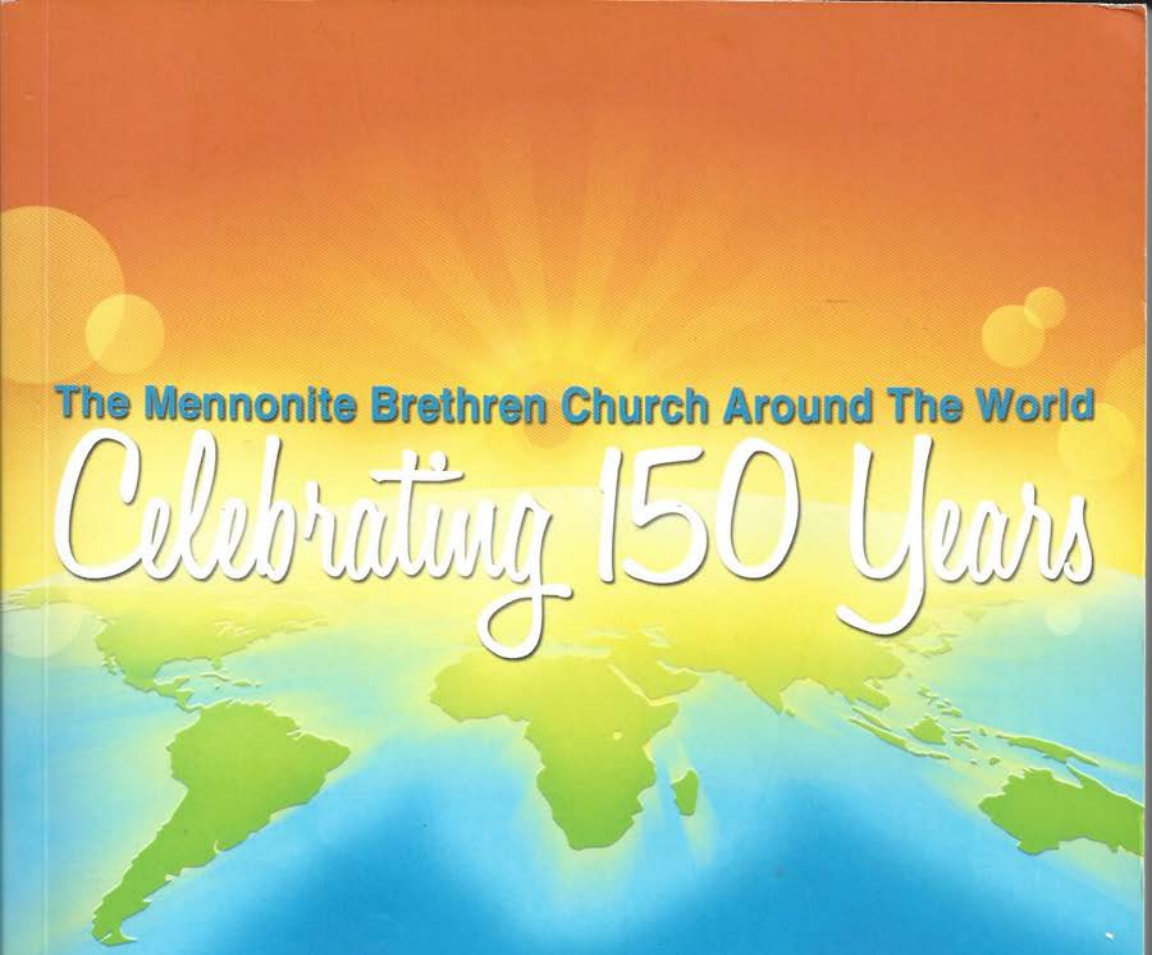
The Mennonite Brethren Church Around The World

Celebrating 150 Years



Abe J. Dueck, Editor

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The Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada

Abe Dueck and Bruce L. Guenther

Mennonite Brethren first arrived in North America as part of several successive waves of immigrants from Russia. During the 1870s, more than 18,000 Mennonites left the fertile steppes of the Ukraine. Of this group of migrants, only about 400 were Mennonite Brethren. Although they settled in scattered communities throughout the central United States, they maintained their sense of community along with many of the priorities established in Russia.

The origin of the Mennonite Brethren church in Canada is closely connected with the story of these early Mennonite Brethren settlers in the United States. The Mennonite Brethren church in Canada was born as a result of a very deliberate mission effort on the part of Mennonite Brethren evangelists in the United States. From 1888, when the first Mennonite Brethren congregation was organized in Burwalde (near Winkler), Manitoba, until 2002, when the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches in North America was dissolved, Canadian Mennonite Brethren were organizationally tied with the United States congregations and were viewed by Mennonite Brethren in other countries of the world as one unified "parent" body. However, as their membership grew, the Mennonite Brethren in Canada increasingly developed their own institutions, priorities and identity, even though many common bonds and cooperative tasks remained. The story of how

the separate identities of the Mennonite Brethren in the United States and Canada evolved helps reduce both the perception and the reality of North American Mennonite Brethren as a single power block in the world-wide Mennonite Brethren community. It also reinforces the significance of the recently formed International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB), an organizational structure that has created a greater degree of equality among Mennonite Brethren national conferences around the world.

During much of the twentieth century, North American Mennonite Brethren have been the primary sending church for missionary work around the globe. The roots of the missionary impulse were present in Russia and the Soviet Union where the Mennonite Brethren began with a strong emphasis on evangelism among other Mennonites, the native Russian population and cooperative missionary ventures with the Baptists. Their subsequent establishment and growth in Canada and the United States was often the result of natural increases in their own families and further immigration of large numbers from the USSR in the 1920s and after World War II. Over time, as the newly arrived Mennonite Brethren immigrants made their adjustments to a new country and culture, the Mennonite Brethren commitment to missionary work abroad also began to impact ministry priorities within Canada. The story of the expansion of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada is complex and exemplifies a deep commitment to evangelism and mission at home.

Born of Mission

The first Mennonite Brethren missionaries to Canada were Heinrich Voth and David Dyck who were commissioned by the US-based Conference in 1883 to visit Manitoba, Canada, with a view to beginning missionary work among German-speaking Mennonites who had migrated from Russia in during the 1870s and had settled on two land reserves in southern Manitoba. By May 1886, several couples were baptized at Burwalde. In 1888 the first congregation of sixteen members was organized. The presence of Mennonite Brethren evangelists was not always welcomed by the leaders in other Mennonite congregations and sometimes served

to reawaken old hostilities from Russia.

Even in this early period Mennonite Brethren in Canada had a vision for expansion beyond the rural Mennonite communities. They were the first Mennonites to become established in the major urban area of Winnipeg where evangelistic work among various ethnic groups was emphasized. In 1906 a group began meeting and conducting weekly Sunday schools, attracting up to forty children in the Elmwood area of Winnipeg. In 1909 this group became the first urban Mennonite Brethren congregation in Canada. William Bestvater was appointed in 1913 as a city missionary in Winnipeg. Several years later Anna Thiessen joined the mission, teaching Sunday school, conducting sewing classes, and making home visitations. Her work led to the development of the Mary-Martha Home, where she was the matron. This ministry focused on helping young women who came to the city to work, most of them as house-keepers in homes of the well-to-do, and served as a model for similar ministries in cities such as Saskatoon and Vancouver. Furthermore, Mennonite Brethren carried on a significant ministry among Russian and Ukrainian immigrants who had settled on the prairies and in urban centres such as Toronto. Herman Fast was an itinerant evangelist who began work among Russian-speaking people in Saskatchewan around 1906 and was also the editor of *Golos* (*Voice*), which was published in Kansas.

These early city-based ministries were followed by a move by many Mennonite Brethren into urban centres during the 1940s. This transition paralleled some of the important cultural transitions experienced by the Mennonite Brethren conference during the middle of the twentieth century. As noted above, many of the Russian Mennonite immigrants had experienced complete economic devastation during the Bolshevik revolution and its aftermath. The difficult pioneering conditions of western Canada were made worse by the economic depression of the 1930s. Many sought new economic opportunities in the cities and, as a result, the Mennonite Brethren became the most rapidly urbanized Mennonite group in Canada. The trend began as the proportion of Mennonite Brethren living in cities more than doubled between

1940 and 1960. By the early 1970s, more than half of Mennonite Brethren lived in urban centres. Urbanization brought more occupational diversity, but it also weakened the sense of community that had previously existed when Mennonites lived more agrarian, rural lifestyles. By the end of the twentieth century the majority of Mennonite Brethren had become comfortably middle-class, with some having become very wealthy. This new prosperity enabled the support of innumerable ministries in Canada and around the world, but affluence also brought the temptations of materialism and hedonism.

Growth Through Persecution and Suffering

Despite the strong sense of mission and evangelism that characterized Mennonite Brethren from the beginning, the most significant growth of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada between 1920 and 1950 came through immigration. Before the Bolshevik Revolution the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia had grown rapidly through evangelism. Not only did other Mennonites join them, but work among the Russian population also resulted in the establishment and growth of Baptist congregations.

The Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent civil war, famine and persecution, prompted Mennonites to seek refuge elsewhere. The result of intense efforts of individuals such as Benjamin B. Janz, in Russia, and David Toews in Canada led to a mass migration of refugees to Canada between 1923 and 1930. In total about 20,000 Mennonites came to Canada. Although the exact number will never be known, some estimate that between 20-25% of these immigrants were Mennonite Brethren. These immigrants generally became known as the *Russländer* (Russians), whereas the earlier 1870s immigrants were referred to as *Kanadier* (Canadians). The cultural differences between the two groups did at times create misunderstanding and conflict.

Most of the new *Russländer* immigrants initially settled in the agricultural communities on the prairies, often in communities where the earlier settlers had become established. Some settled in new communities or in urban centres such as Kitchener, Ontario, and Winnipeg, Manitoba. The economic difficulties of the 1930s

prompted some to settle in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, from where they expanded to Vancouver and other areas.

The suffering that these newly arrived immigrants had endured made a deep impact on them. Many of the *Russländer* immigrants were deeply traumatized; not only had most lost their livelihoods and possessions, but many had also been brutalized and humiliated. Virtually everyone had lost family members; some had watched family members or neighbors being killed or tortured. Their experiences led them to a profound realization of how fragile life could be and how important the preservation of faith was. They were generally a well-educated and skilled people who were able, through hard work and frugal lifestyles, to reestablish themselves economically, although the depression of the 1930s made the pioneer period one of intense hardship.

Despite the hardship and economic deprivation, these immigrants placed the highest value on creating a vibrant and healthy congregational life and on nurturing their young people in the faith. While their newly adopted homeland was one that cherished religious freedom and one that included many other Christians, they recognized that their young people would be faced with many temptations from which they had been protected in the relative isolation of their previous homeland. Some Mennonite Brethren leaders believed that preserving the use of the German language would be an important instrument for protecting their young people from some of the more insidious elements of the "worldly" climate around them.

The 1920s immigrants who escaped the Soviet Union were the fortunate ones. They left many of their faith community behind who suffered even more intensely during the persecution and hardship of the 1930s and beyond. World War II created immense trauma and displacement for those who were left. When the temporary reprieve under the protection of the invading German army ended, large numbers were deported to the labor camps of the east and north where they were scattered and often succumbed to starvation and illness or were executed. Those who were able joined the trek to the west with the retreating German armies in an attempt to escape the advancing Soviet forces, hoping

to find refuge in the west. At the end of the war, however, the majority were repatriated to the Soviet Union to face still more hardship. Those who escaped eventually became a third wave of migration from the former homeland. Almost 8,000 made Canada their home between 1947 and 1951. These were welcomed and supported by the Mennonites already here, including Mennonite Brethren. The immigrants expanded the membership numbers in congregations, the enrolments of the Bible schools and the Bible college in Winnipeg.

Other immigrants also enriched and expanded the membership of Canadian congregations. Some came from countries in South America such as Paraguay and Brazil. In the latter part of the twentieth century, some came from countries in Asia such as Vietnam, Laos and India. Often they had experienced hardship and suffering that was similar to the suffering of those who came from the communist Soviet Union and this enabled them to develop common bonds of understanding.

Education as Mission

Foremost in the strategy of preserving and extending the faith were the many Bible schools that Mennonite Brethren established in the years prior to World War II. The idea for starting a Bible school in Canada was present among Mennonite Brethren as early as 1910, when Mennonite Brethren settlers in Saskatchewan, many of whom had come from the United States, began holding annual conferences. The discussions at these gatherings led to the formation of the first Mennonite Brethren Bible school at Herbert Saskatchewan in 1913 by John F. Harms, a prominent Bible teacher who came from Kansas. After several years, William Bestvater, who exemplified several trends among the early Canadian Mennonite Brethren, became the leader of the school. Although the school used German-language textbooks, his openness to using theological resources from the larger world of English-language evangelical Protestantism not only helped distribute the influence of dispensational premillennialism, but also legitimized the use of English in outreach and ministry.

The impetus for Bible schools accelerated with the influx

of the 1920s immigrants. First was the Winkler Bible School (Peniel), which was founded by Abraham Unruh and two of his colleagues who had been teachers at the first Mennonite Brethren Bible school in Crimea of Russia, at Tschongrau. In 1925, shortly after his arrival in Canada, Unruh was asked to start the school which soon prospered and, for several decades, served as one of the foremost Canadian schools. The school emphasized the preparation of church workers for young people in Canada and also the preparation for missions abroad. Students at the school founded the Africa Mission Society under whose auspices the first missionaries to Africa, the Henry Bartsches, were commissioned in 1932 to go to the Belgian Congo. The society was organized partly because of dissatisfaction with the General Conference Mission Board and its treatment of Canadian missionary candidates who, it was felt, were discriminated against when they applied to go into the mission fields.

Other Bible schools followed in quick succession. Between 1925 and 1940 at least fifteen Bible schools were founded, with several more in the next decade. All began either as educational extensions of a congregation or a group of congregations, or as the efforts of a group of like-minded individuals who formed a society to organize and promote a Bible school in their region. At the outset, the schools served predominantly rural constituencies, creating a kind of invisible link binding congregations together in a common cause. Advances in communication and transportation during the 1940s, and the growing economic burden created by what were, in many cases, redundant institutions only a few miles apart, helped precipitate a trend towards consolidation and amalgamation. Many of the smaller, more congregationally-based schools, closed and the survivors, particularly those located in close proximity to larger Mennonite Brethren congregations in regions with a large critical mass of members, served ever-larger geographical areas. By 1960, only four Mennonite Brethren Bible schools (one in each province) remained in western Canada. These were Winkler Bible Institute; Bethany Bible Institute (now Bethany College), started in 1927 in Hepburn, Saskatchewan; Alberta Mennonite Brethren Bible Institute, started in 1929

in Coaldale, Alberta; and Mennonite Brethren Bible Institute, begun in 1936 in Abbotsford, British Columbia. While these Bible schools were primarily intended to nurture the youth in the Mennonite Brethren congregations in the faith and ensure that they would remain loyal to their church, they also had a very important role in preparing young people for outreach at home and abroad. An important aspect of outreach beyond their own people were the vacation Bible schools, Sunday schools, and other children's ministries sponsored by the Bible schools. A good example is Western Children's Mission, organized by staff at Bethany College. Led by Jake H. Epp, this organization recruited and sent dozens of young people into rural communities across northern Saskatchewan to conduct vacation Bible schools for children.

The Mennonite Brethren who came from Russia valued higher education, so it was not long before Canadian-born Mennonite Brethren began to recognize higher education as a significant means for gaining access to greater economic opportunities in Canada. The numerous Bible schools that were started by the Mennonite Brethren during the 1930s and 1940s to provide religious education for young people began to face stiff competition from six newly established Mennonite Brethren high schools, which many believed would enable access to university and professional education. These schools were less focused on training people for outreach and more concerned with the retention of young people who increasingly sought advanced levels of education in order to qualify for entrance to public universities. The Mennonite Brethren high schools strengthened the cultural and religious ties of young people to their faith community. By the early 1950s the total number of students enrolled in Mennonite Brethren high schools was more than double the total Bible school enrolment.

The preference for high school education on the part of young people coincided with a move towards more advanced theological education on the part of leaders in the denomination. In 1944 the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches established a degree-granting college, a "higher Bible school," called Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC). Prior to this

time most Canadians who wanted a more advanced level of education in the context of a church institution enrolled at Tabor College, a General Conference institution located in Hillsboro, Kansas. Frustrations about the number of Canadian students who remained in the United States, and a sense that their American counterparts exercised too much control over their cooperative programs and institutions, prompted Canadian Mennonite Brethren leaders to organize their own school.

The new school was strategically located in Winnipeg, a metropolitan area of considerable significance for Canadian Mennonites and for western Canada in general. Abraham H. Unruh, until then the principal of Winkler Bible Institute, was called on to spearhead the new institution in Winnipeg. The declared purpose of this new school was to train Bible school teachers, missionaries, and church workers to fill positions of leadership in Bible schools, congregations and mission agencies. In three years it became the largest Mennonite Brethren theological school in Canada, By 1960, the enrolment at Mennonite Brethren Bible College equaled almost 50% of the total enrolment in the four Mennonite Brethren Bible schools in existence at the time. MBBC became the main institution for the training of Mennonite Brethren pastors and church workers as well as for missionaries and evangelists at home and abroad until the 1970s. The location of this school helped Winnipeg become a major centre of influence among Mennonite Brethren in Canada.

Shortly after it began, the school began to offer a limited number of liberal arts courses. Some denominational leaders argued that the pastors of the future (particularly in urban congregations) would require a more general education than that offered by the Bible schools to keep pace with lay people in their congregations, and expressed frustration when they saw their best ministerial candidates attend American colleges and then not return to Canada. MBBC was positioned not only as a Canadian finishing school for individuals interested in professional ministry, but also as a Christian alternative for Mennonite Brethren young people who were interested in obtaining a university education. As an alternative to universities, the college was not so successful.

By 1965 the number of Mennonite Brethren young people attending universities was almost double that of the enrolment in Mennonite Brethren Bible schools and more than three times the enrolment of Mennonite Brethren Bible College. By 1972, more than 35% of Mennonite Brethren had acquired education beyond the high school level; a decade later this had increased to 48%. As Mennonite Brethren educational efforts became more regionalized, MBBC lost its status as a national school. It reopened as Concord College in 1992, and in 2000 joined with Menno Simons College and Canadian Mennonite Bible College to form Canadian Mennonite University.

Over time, the schools operated by the Mennonite Brethren helped instill a high level of biblical literacy, a common religious experience, and an enthusiastic predisposition for participation in the life of the church that was an ongoing source of vitality and energy for local congregations. Over time they shaped the ethos of the entire denomination. But the schools were also catalysts for change—changes such as the use of the English language generally took place first among the young people in Mennonite Brethren schools, and what was permissible in the Bible schools and high schools eventually became common practice within congregations.

The move towards a more professionalized ministry took another step forward in 1975 when the Canadian conference joined with their American counterparts in supporting the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS) located in Fresno, California. Geographical distance, and unfavorable currency exchange rates during the 1990s, made it difficult for many Canadians to attend the Fresno campus. In response, the seminary joined a seminary consortium called Associated Canadian Theological Schools (ACTS) on the campus of Trinity Western University in Langley, BC in 1999. ACTS is a partnership of five evangelical denominations working together to provide graduate theological education to their respective constituencies. In addition, MBBS helped organize the Winnipeg Centre for Ministry Studies together with four other Mennonite conferences. These two outlets raised the profile of MBBS in Canada and significantly increased the number

of Canadian Mennonite Brethren enrolled in MBBS seminary programs.

Service as Mission

Mennonite Brethren in Canada became engaged in many service ventures at the same time that they focused on nurturing their own faith community. The institutions and programs that developed were usually cooperative ventures with other Mennonite groups. Important among these were hospitals, which, although primarily intended to serve their own people, nevertheless intentionally and devotedly served wider communities. Eventually they became community hospitals funded by governments, although often governed and staffed in large part by Mennonites who gave these hospitals a distinctive ethos and reputation. Many Mennonite Brethren entered the service professions, particularly as doctors, nurses, and teachers.

The largest service agency of Mennonites in North America is the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), which the Mennonite Brethren have actively supported. MCC began in 1920 as a result of the efforts of Mennonites in North America to help their suffering brothers and sisters in the Soviet Union. Those who eventually escaped to make their home in Canada were very grateful and therefore anxious to help as other emergencies erupted, such as the refugee crisis after World War II. But before long MCC expanded its ministry dramatically both at home and abroad by becoming involved in humanitarian efforts in countries on behalf of people who did not necessarily have any prior connections with Mennonites. Natural disasters and wars in many regions became the focus of aid. "Service in the Name of Christ" was the motto for work among the hungry and the destitute worldwide. Mennonite Brethren not only contributed a great deal of material aid, but also sent many workers to areas in need.

At the same time MCC also dramatically expanded its programs at home and in 1963 the Canadians began their own organization named MCC (Canada). Mennonite Brethren were major participants and contributors to MCC initiatives at local, provincial, national and international levels. These included prison

ministries, native ministries, mediation services, and other social services. MCC became a significant vehicle by which Mennonites in Canada addressed government on various issues.

At the outset, Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) was closely related to MCC, although in time it became quite independent. It focused primarily on helping to provide relief to communities in North America that suffered from natural disasters such as tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods. Many Mennonite Brethren members volunteered for short terms of service in the United States and Canada.

War, Peace and the State

Mennonite Brethren in Canada, together with Mennonites and Anabaptists in previous centuries and around the world, have engaged in vigorous debates concerning issues of peace, war, and government. The various confessions of faith have all included statements pertaining to their distinctive theological understanding of these issues.

In the early period, much of the agenda was carried forward from Mennonite Brethren experiences in Russia and the Soviet Union. The Russian government had imposed an alternative service program on the Mennonites in Russia during the 1870s. During peacetime this service generally involved a period of compulsory forestry service, which was largely funded by the Mennonites themselves. During World War I this was expanded when some Mennonites served in the medical corps of the army. They wished to be regarded as loyal citizens of the country, helping to save lives rather than destroy lives. When the Communist era of the Soviet Union began, such special privileges were withdrawn.

Mennonites who arrived in Canada during the 1870s received a total exemption from military service. Those who arrived in the 1920s, however, were told that they would be covered by more general legislation exempting members of the historic peace churches (this included Quakers and Brethren in Christ), but that alternative service might be required of them.

With impending war in 1939, there was considerable confusion about whether or how Mennonites would be exempted from various

forms of service. Benjamin B. Janz, the Mennonite Brethren leader who was also the recognized leader of the 1920s immigrants, was in favor of alternative service that might include service in the medical corps. He worked hard to achieve such an agreement with the government. Other Mennonite groups were divided in their opinions: some were opposed to any form of service while others favored alternative service that did not involve any connections with the military. In the end, many Mennonite Brethren young men engaged in alternative service such as in forestry camps or in hospitals, while a smaller number served in the medical corps. Despite their church's opposition, some even served in combatant roles in the army, creating situations that were deeply divisive within families and congregations. Often such individuals were excommunicated after their return.

After the war the question of alternative service gradually faded into the background and other issues came to the fore. As the agenda of MCC shifted to broader peace and service issues, many Mennonite Brethren became more concerned about social issues. The term "nonresistance," which was often understood as a synonym for "pacifism," came to be replaced with other terms such as "peace," "justice," "nonviolent resistance," and "social concern." Some Mennonite Brethren came to regard the peace position as an optional "distinctive." A degree of polarization developed between those who regarded evangelism as the highest priority for Christians, and others who considered involvement in peace and social concerns as integral to Christian discipleship.

Congregational Life

Until the middle of the twentieth century, life in Mennonite Brethren congregations in Canada was relatively uniform and somewhat predictable. German-language worship services were regularly held on Sunday mornings and evenings, often supplemented by mid-week prayer meetings. Sunday school classes were generally only for children and young people while adults held prayer meetings or Bible studies. Frequently there were two sermons in the main worship service.

Because of the large number of *Russländer*, it was not until the

late 1950s and throughout the 1960s that Mennonite Brethren congregations made the transition from the use of German as the language of piety and religious practice to the use of English. By the 1940s, many Mennonite Brethren young people had received their primary school education in English-language public schools, and some of their Bible school training in the English language. Linguistic transitions within congregations followed soon after despite the resistance on the part of some who tried to make a link between the German language and the Christian faith, and who thought that retention of the German language could be a useful barrier against the intrusion of "worldly" influences. Such changes were often divisive, but by the late 1960s English had become the dominant language in most Mennonite Brethren congregations. The change symbolized the degree to which the Mennonite Brethren had adapted to the larger national culture.

The language issue changed the way Mennonite Brethren congregations organized their worship services. As the language transition was taking place during the 1960s one sermon might be preached in German and another in English. Eventually single English sermons became the norm, although some congregations started dual services. Most congregations had a multiple ministry, with one lead minister who was not salaried. As levels of education increased, salaried pastors gradually replaced the lead minister. Itinerant ministers were also appointed to visit various congregations. This helped to keep the bonds between congregations in different regions strong.

Women developed their own ministries usually in the form of sewing circles or women's missionary societies. They sponsored projects that helped support missionaries abroad, furnish local congregations, provide food for Bible school kitchens, and meet other local needs.

Young people were served by special programs developed for them. Church choirs were a significant way for them to contribute in public worship services in the church. Children's and youth summer camps were begun in most provinces as a way of ministering to Mennonite Brethren youth, but increasingly also as a way of reaching out beyond to other people.

Radio broadcasts were sponsored in many areas, sometimes by individual congregations, in an attempt to reach people outside their own ethnic boundaries. There were special efforts directed to German-speaking groups as well as to those who were too infirm to attend regular services. But many efforts were directed to the English-speaking population. Unfortunately, because most of the services in Mennonite congregations were in German until around 1960, many of the converts from the various Mennonite Brethren evangelistic efforts did not feel at home in Mennonite Brethren congregations and joined other denominations such as the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Evangelical Free, or one of several Baptist options.

Particularly helpful in bringing a sense of unity and identity to Mennonite Brethren congregations throughout Canada were several publications. The German-language *Mennonitische Rundschau* and the *Zionsbote* both had their origins in the United States, although the former moved to Winnipeg in 1923 and eventually became a Mennonite Brethren paper. In 1960 the Canadian Mennonite Brethren started their own English-language paper, *The Mennonite Brethren Herald*, which continues to be published. This magazine has been an important means of communication and a forum in which to discuss tough questions. Eventually periodicals in other languages such as French and Chinese were also begun.

Church, Society, and Culture

The decade of the 1960s was a time of enormous change in North America in general, and for western Canada in particular. Technological advances in transportation and communication, along with a post-World War II economic boom, made the vastness of the prairies less formidable for its inhabitants and helped create new metropolitan centres. As incoming immigrants who were trying to build a new life, the Mennonite Brethren experienced the changes taking place in the region as the infrastructure for a modern society was gradually being built. The movement of the Mennonite Brethren from being a largely rural, German-speaking ethnic sub-culture within the larger immigrant ethnic population

of western Canada, to becoming an English-speaking, increasingly urban, multicultural community mirrored many of the broader patterns of change taking place in the region.

In addition to urbanization, language transitions, education, and an increasingly professionalized ministry, another telling example of the acculturation experienced by the Mennonite Brethren from mid-century onwards was their growing interest in exerting influence within the political arena. Like other Mennonite groups, the Mennonite Brethren historically discouraged participation in politics. Over time the generally negative attitude towards involvement in government gradually changed. At first political activism on the part of the Mennonite Brethren was focused primarily on preserving the privilege of exemption from military conscription. By the 1960s, Mennonite Brethren began to consider the church's "prophetic role in relation to the state," and periodically even issued letters to government on topics such as Middle East conflicts, and various relief efforts.

Perhaps the most notable change has been the increase in partisan political involvement. A small number of Mennonite Brethren began running for public office during the 1920s, but a dramatic increase took place around mid-century as a growing number of candidates from Mennonite Brethren congregations began to run for public office at municipal, provincial and federal levels on behalf of a range of political parties. Many have been elected; at least two, the Hon. Jake Epp (Conservative Party) and the Hon. Raymond Chan (Liberal Party), have served as federal cabinet ministers, and one (Brad Wall) became the Premier of Saskatchewan in the 2007 provincial election.

Evangelical Protestantism

The early and ongoing influence of pietism among the Mennonite Brethren in Russia with its stress on a personal salvation experience, along with a thorough biblicism and strong emphasis on missions, created a natural compatibility with the priorities of evangelical Protestants in North America. Although somewhat separated from other evangelical Protestant denominations in Canada during the first half of the twentieth century by linguistic

and cultural differences, it did not take long before this affinity resulted in contact and an appreciative borrowing of resources during the 1940s and 1950s. In addition to the influence of radio broadcasts and the Christian literature distributed by evangelical organizations, the numerous Mennonite Brethren Bible schools in particular served as conduits through which evangelical Protestant theological ideas and practices were disseminated throughout the denomination. This compatibility, together with the significant degree of contact, borrowing of resources and involvement, gradually evolved into a remarkably close association with the larger evangelical Protestant community in Canada during the second half of the century.

The decade of the 1960s marked an important watershed not only for the Mennonite Brethren (as noted above), but also for evangelical Protestants in Canada in general. As evangelical Protestants became more affluent and better educated, they began to feel less like estranged outsiders in Canadian culture, and more like cultural insiders with a sense of responsibility for the character of Canadian society. As the different denominational groups that made up the evangelical mosaic emerged from their respective enclaves they began to discover one another, creating a network of interlocking institutions comprised of a mutually supportive fellowship of organizations and individuals. The gradual identification on the part of the Mennonite Brethren with the larger evangelical Protestant network coincided with a maturing sense of self-confidence. The desire to be an integral part of a larger multi-denominational evangelical network in Canada was marked more formally by their participation in the formation of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, an organization started in 1964 to further the collective social action interests of evangelical Protestants.

The response to the ongoing Mennonite Brethren openness to non-Mennonite theological influences and cooperation with those outside of the peace tradition has been mixed. It contributed substantially towards what J.B. Toews called, "an awakening effect" among young people, and a surge of missionary vision and commitment during the first half of the twentieth century. But it

also left the denomination with an ongoing legacy of ambivalence with regard to its identity as a faith community and its place within the larger Mennonite world. Conflict sometimes occurred as denominational leaders looked for an appropriate response to the question of how to relate to transdenominational evangelical organizations and institutions. Following a leadership change in 1964, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary responded by articulating a dual Anabaptist-evangelical theological identity. The maintenance of an Anabaptist identity has helped nourish a vision for the Church as a community, the necessity of serving those in need in the name of Christ, and an ethical seriousness.

In comparison to their Mennonite Brethren counterparts in the United States, the Mennonite Brethren in Canada have played a much more prominent role in the development and life of transdenominational evangelical institutions and organizations. Examples of Mennonite Brethren individuals who have assumed significant leadership positions include Henry Hildebrand as the first principal of Briercrest Schools, Victor Adrian as president of Tyndale College and Seminary (formerly Ontario Bible College and Theological Seminary), Harold Jantz as founding editor of *ChristianWeek*, a bi-weekly tabloid, and John Redekop, longtime participant with Evangelical Fellowship of Canada including a time as president during the 1990s. In addition, Mennonite Brethren have supported innumerable evangelical agencies in Canada such as Youth for Christ, World Vision, Power to Change, Athletes in Action, Crises Pregnancy Centres, Canadian Food Grains Bank, Samaritan's Purse, Canadian Institute of Linguistics, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Focus on the Family Canada, Trinity Western University, and many, many others. The more prominent presence of Mennonite Brethren in Canadian evangelicalism is due in part to the fact that Mennonites in Canada comprise a larger proportion of Protestant demographics than is the case in the United States (attendance in Mennonite congregations in Canada represents about 7.5% of the total attendance in all Protestant denominations). It may also be that Mennonites in Canada have found Canadian evangelicalism to be less nationalistic and militaristic, more theologically diverse, and therefore more compatible compatriots.

Broadening Horizons: Intentional and Aggressive Outreach

Due to intentional and aggressive outreach initiatives, and the inclusive environment created by Canada's official policy of multiculturalism, the demographics of the Mennonite Brethren church in Canada is much different today than one hundred years ago. After several decades of more arm's length evangelistic strategies such as radio broadcasts, camps, vacation Bible schools, etc., the transition of Mennonite Brethren members to cities prompted new urban church planting efforts. At first, these new church plants were focused inwardly as the denomination used them as a part of a strategy for retaining its own members who had moved to urban centres, but eventually the horizons broadened as congregations began thinking about new ways to do evangelism. When the interdenominational Canadian Congress on Evangelism was held in Ottawa in 1970, the Mennonite Brethren were one of the best-represented groups.

An outstanding example of broadening horizons developed because of unanticipated developments abroad, rather than because of a carefully planned strategy of outreach in Canada. In 1960 most of the missionaries in the Belgian Congo were forced to return to North America because of the revolution the country was experiencing. They had developed fluency in the French language and it seemed natural for them to look to Quebec as a potential field of missions. Ernest and Lydia Dyck were among those to be evacuated from the Belgian Congo and became pioneer missionaries in Quebec. At the time the province was experiencing its "Quiet Revolution," which significantly reduced the Roman Catholic Church's influence in Quebec culture and politics. The spiritual vacuum created by the wide-scale rejection of the Roman Catholic Church created new opportunities for other denominations. The first congregation was organized in 1964 and in the next twenty years a very fruitful ministry developed. Twelve Mennonite Brethren congregations were started by the end of the 1980s. The Québec Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches was founded in 1983 and in 1984 it joined the Canadian Conference. In 1976 a Bible school (*Institut Biblique Laval*, now *École de théologie évangélique de Montréal*) was founded. Later a

periodical, *Le Lien*, was begun and the Quebec Conference also began its own camp, called Camp Peniel.

The cultural transitions experienced by the Mennonite Brethren in Canada during the 1950s and 1960s signaled the gradual transition from a Russian-German ethnicity towards a more Canadian ethnicity. In 1971, multiculturalism was declared the official policy of Canada, and the federal government began to support the preservation of heritage languages and the activities of ethno-cultural communities. Mennonites suddenly had new reasons to remember and celebrate their Russian-German traditions. This precipitated new discussions about the nature of Mennonite identity: Is "Mennonite" an ethnic or a religious label or both? Some claimed that the term was a hindrance and an obstacle to church growth. Others felt that it was an important facet of the denomination's theological identity. One catalyst for such discussions was the book, *A People Apart: Ethnicity and the Mennonite Brethren*, written by John Redekop in 1987. In it, he advocated changing the name of the denomination, a suggestion that was never implemented.

While some debated the nature of "Mennonite" ethnicity during the 1980s, church evangelism leaders began searching for new outreach strategies. During the next two decades the Canadian Mennonite Brethren became increasingly multicultural. The increased ethnic and cultural diversity came about as leaders began strategically targeting specific areas of Canada, the growing number of visible minority communities and youth. In 1984 the Board of Evangelism began publishing *Evangelism Canada*. It was strongly influenced by the "scientific" methods of the church growth movement led by people such as Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner. The Mennonite Brethren in British Columbia in particular allocated significant resources towards an aggressive church planting campaign. During the last decade of the twentieth century, the British Columbia Conference doubled the number of congregations. A significant proportion of this growth came through establishing or adopting congregations made up of recent immigrants from a variety of ethnic groups including Chinese, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Laotian, Arabic, Persian, Indonesian, and

Korean. Guiding Mennonite Brethren church planting during this period was the controversial "homogeneous unit principle," which suggested that people become Christians most easily when they do not need to cross racial or linguistic barriers.

By far the largest non-white Mennonite Brethren group is the Chinese with the majority found in the greater Vancouver area. Since the formal organization of the first Chinese congregation in 1977, at least a dozen more have been started to reach out to the successive waves of Chinese immigrants who came to Canada in the latter part of the twentieth century. The task of leadership within these congregations was complicated as congregations tried to integrate more recently arrived, predominately Mandarin-speaking immigrants, older first-generation, mostly Cantonese-speaking immigrants, and second and third generation Canadian-born English-speaking Chinese. The difficulties surrounding the transition to English in this ethnic group are remarkably similar to those experienced by the German-speaking Mennonite Brethren immigrants from Russia. The Chinese congregations have demonstrated their commitment to missions by sending several pastors to do church planting among the Chinese diaspora living in Venezuela.

The realization that most of

Enoch and Grace Wong—Church Planters

On September 24, 2000, more than three hundred people of the Pacific Grace churches hosted a celebration to commemorate the twenty years of leadership of Enoch and Grace Wong and the six Pacific Grace churches that they have established in British Columbia. That's right-six churches all bearing the same name, but in different locations: Burnaby, Port Moody (2), Vancouver, North Vancouver and South Vancouver. The occasion coincided with the thirty-fifth wedding anniversary of Enoch and Grace and the seventy-fifth birthday of Rev. Wong.

After graduation from the Hong Kong Alliance Bible Seminary in 1962, Enoch Wong began his ministry at the Cheung Chau Peak Alliance Church and the Scripture Union of Hong Kong. In 1980 Enoch began as pastor of the Vancouver Pacific Grace Mennonite Brethren Church, which then was a small congregation of thirty members. Pastor Wong reorganized the ministries of the church, developed new fellowships, Sunday school, Gospel camps and challenged the congregation with the vision of

mission and church planting. After seven years the congregation had grown to a membership of 155.

However, that was just the beginning. Wong formally retired in 1987 and was succeeded by Rev. David Chan. In reality Enoch and Grace only nominally retired. They continued to assist in the establishing of the daughter churches. The prospect of Hong Kong being transferred from British control back to the People's Republic of China and the Tiananmen massacres of 1989 resulted in a large influx of Chinese immigrants into the Vancouver area. The opportunities were great and the Wongs were only too ready to assist in establishing the other five congregations.

One of the major strengths of Enoch and Grace has been their emphasis on Bible studies. In their twenty-plus years of ministry with Pacific Grace, they have led numerous Bible study groups. The Wongs also worked hard at mentoring semiinary smdents and new pastors. Many members of the six Pacific Grace churches were taught and cared for by the Wongs. Among them, are at least five pastoral couples now working

the population growth in Canada was taking place in urban centers prompted the Canadian Conference Board of Evangelism to launch an ambitious new outreach strategy in 1998 called the Key Cities Initiative. The plan called for one new city to be targeted for church planting every two years for a ten-year period. Each city would stay in the program for at least five years. Each new city initiative was launched at the invitation of a provincial conference. Mission Calgary was identified in 1998, Love Toronto in 2000, *Rendez-vous Montréal* in 2002, Ignite Vancouver in 2004, and Dream Manitoba and Harvest Saskatchewan in 2006. In its first decade, the program served as a catalyst for starting more than twenty new congregations.

The commitment to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ as good news for all people has resulted in considerable ethnic diversity within the denomination – Mennonite Brethren in Canada worship in more than twenty languages. Nevertheless, new debates are taking place about the nature of denominational multiculturalism: some leaders prefer congregations in which ethnic homogeneity is preserved, while others suggest that congregations are the appropriate place to promote a greater mixing and crossing of cultural boundaries. This has prompted some urban Mennonite Brethren congregations in centres

such as Vancouver to be intentionally "intercultural." Despite the ethnic diversity that now exists within Mennonite Brethren congregations; the same ethnic diversity cannot yet be seen within the denomination's leadership structures.

Mennonite Brethren in Canada are celebrating approximately 122 years of existence in Canada at the time of the 150th anniversary of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Membership numbers have grown to about 35,000 in more than 240 congregations, and the Mennonite Brethren Conference is the third largest MB conference in the world. Although some congregations are reticent about identifying themselves as Mennonite Brethren for fear of being associated with a particular German-Russian ethnicity and because of a general decline in denominational loyalty, there are also signs of a new appreciation for the rich legacy of the past and an emerging sense that Mennonite Brethren have something unique to contribute to Canadian society, to the Anabaptist/Mennonite community, and to the evangelical Protestant community in Canada. At its best, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren understanding of mission is imbued with a passion for spiritual wholeness and individual piety combined with a deep concern for the physical and social welfare of the nation and of the entire world.

in various churches and Christian organizations?

The celebration of Enoch and Grace Wong's twenty years in ministries ended with testimonies from both of them. Grace was a nurse in Hong Kong before coming to Canada and also taught in a nursing school for several years. She remarked: "I am proud of my contributions in the nursing career. However, the twenty years of pastoral ministries are much more memorable than the thirty-eight years of nursing work. Nursing for the soul is definitely a much more vital job than nursing for the physical body alone."

Joseph Kwan
Adapted from *For Everything a Season*, 172.