

‘My Story’ as a Canadian Baptist

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Introduction

So, who is Abe Funk anyway? I am a seventy-eight year old ex-Mennonite, retired after forty-eight years of ministry in the Baptist General Conference. I live in Abbotsford, British Columbia with my wife, Ann. We have two children and four grandchildren. We moved to Abbotsford from Edmonton, Alberta five years ago. My parents had moved from Saskatchewan to the Abbotsford area in 1957. My father, a bit of a humourist, used to say, “When Christians die they go to heaven, when Mennonites die they go straight to Clearbrook.” He did, and now we live there – “Mennonite Heaven.” It doesn't get much better on this side of heaven.

To prepare for retirement I took up writing. I have published three books; a history of my denomination, a family history, and a book on leadership for small churches. A fourth book on leadership training is at the publishers. I consult with churches and lead seminars and retreats for church leaders with the belief that developing healthy leaders will revitalize and result in healthy mission-focused churches.

I try not to take myself too seriously and enjoy wholesome humour. I like the story of a bishop (since I was one like that once) who had the reputation of being a very boring, dry speaker. When he visited one of his smaller rural congregations the attendance was unusually small. He scolded the pastor with, "Wasn't my coming announced?" "No sir" was the pastor's worried reply, "But word must have gotten out anyway."

I think I would call myself an "ex" and a "near" Mennonite. My denomination is very similar to the Mennonite Brethren (MB), with only some minor differences. We work together in Associated Christian Theological Schools (ACTS), the seminary of Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, a consortium of five schools I was privileged to help found. The rumour around ACTS is that MB really stands for "Mostly Baptist."

As a speaker at the Native Evangelical Fellowship Pastor's Conference some years ago, and to seek some common ground, I introduced myself as having been born on a reserve – the Swift Current, Saskatchewan Mennonite Reserve.

My Community

I was born and raised, thirty kilometres southeast of Swift Current, Saskatchewan. It was settled by Old Colony Mennonites from Manitoba in the early 1900s, then still open, undeveloped prairie land. My grandfather and three of his brothers took homesteads on the same four corners of a section of land and formed a small village they called Hamburg. The village was never registered as a Mennonite village, and not owned by the church as other villages were; they were four independent homesteads that shared resources in the early years. Their father, Johann (my great grandfather), had immigrated to Canada in 1876 from Russia. He later joined his four sons in Saskatchewan, who built a small house for him in the village. The village also had a German school where the many Funk children of my father's generation attended.

The majority of my extended family and neighbours attended the same church. Even our one-roomed country school was made up of Mennonite children who held the same beliefs and values. The common street language was Low German, with High German used in church. I learned to speak English in grade one.

My Family

When my parents married my grandfather gave them land half a mile west of the village, where my father moved a small two-room house he had purchased for \$90.00 (The owner wanted \$110 but my father said he could not afford that much for a house). At that time the family consisted of my parents and one child, my oldest sister. Soon after, in 1936, I came along, and was born in this tiny two-room house. When six children and two adults squeezed into this "sardine can" of a home, father built a larger house. The family grew to eight children.

We were surrounded by a large extended family. Both my grandparents lived just half a mile from our home. My mother's family had moved into one of the vacant Funk farms in the village after that family moved to Mexico in 1922 with hundreds of other families. Christmas and Easter holidays were big times for family gatherings. My mother came from a family of twelve children, my father had ten siblings, and I ended up with 160 first cousins – in all, pretty much a typical Mennonite tribe of that era.

My father was a farmer, like the rest of his family, but not entirely a happy or very good farmer. In hindsight, he should have been a pastor. I enjoyed the farm and as the oldest son often missed school to help with seeding and harvest. I have many happy memories of my childhood and growing-up years.

The Church

Both of my ancestral families were devout members of the Old Colony Mennonite church when they settled in Manitoba and after the move to Saskatchewan in 1906. One exception was when Great Grandfather Johann Funk created some unrest in the church in Reinland, Manitoba.¹

When the Old Colony ministers all chose to move to Mexico in 1922 in order to find greater isolation from what they called the bad influences of the world, both my grandparents went to look at this opportunity and both chose not to put their families through what they saw as great hardship. Since my maternal grandparents originally lived in a village owned by the church, they lost everything, even the grain in their bins, when they chose not to go along with the move to Mexico. With all the Old Colony ministers in Mexico, the Sommerfelder Mennonite church sent ministers from Manitoba to fill the void. The families that remained in Canada then became part of the Sommerfelder church, similar to the Old Colony

church, but a little more open to change. Two of my uncles later became ministers serving the five congregations in our larger community. My father was considered to be a candidate at one point, but during the process he left the church.

A Turning Point

When my maternal grandfather lost what everyone in the village knew to be the most progressive farm, it unsettled his faith in the church, and he went looking for other possible options. While nothing major changed for the family immediately, some family members drifted off to other churches or were inactive.

My parents were regular attenders at the Sommerfelder church, and while children were not expected to attend, I remember attending some of the services as a child. My father had a deep spiritual hunger to know the Lord better. He often visited the ministers in their Thursday evening planning meetings to seek help for his intense feelings of guilt and longing for forgiveness. They could not offer him any relief. One of the ministers told my mother that her husband would end up in Weyburn (the dreaded mental hospital), if he did not get over his problems. When my father asked the ministers about the new birth Jesus had promised, they made fun of it as something silly. The ministers were untrained farmers and only followed the traditions handed down to them. They only taught rules stipulating church attendance and things like “don't smoke” or “boys don't play ball,” and in the early years farmers were expected to use tractors on steel wheels, and were inspected to make sure they lived up to the church rules. In order to be married in the church, individuals had to be baptized at age twenty-one and officially join the church. Regarding the future, the church's response was, we “hope” to make it to heaven, but that was not clearly defined. I don't mean to judge what these churches are today, I am only telling you what they were back then.

Overcome with his spiritual need, my father stopped his tractor in the field one day, knelt in the prairie soil beside the big wheel of his Farmall tractor, and cried out to God in desperation. He experienced God's forgiveness and peace in a way he had never known before. This conversion set him on a new journey to seek more. That meant looking outside of the church they knew.

MB pastors and evangelists held tent meetings in our community around that time and my parents took us to these meetings. One such pastor, Otto Derksen from another village, had spent a night in his car with his wife and two small children one

cold April, stuck in the mud after trying to take a short-cut home. In the morning he showed up at our farm to get help and was invited for a warm breakfast. That friendship brought him to our home for Bible studies where two other families also gathered. Here is where my parents grew in their new faith.

About that same time a General Conference Mennonite pastor, Bill Zacharias from McMahan, our home town, came to our farm and asked my father if he could pick up his children for a youth meeting. Our parents followed and we attended this church for a number of years. Those were very formative years in my life. I look back at this time as a pivotal influence to me going into ministry. Through this pastor's encouragement my older sister and I attended Swift Current Bible Institute. This was a big step for us as education beyond elementary grades was not encouraged – it was even frowned upon. If you could read, add, and subtract that was good enough to farm, they thought.

My father's continuing search, however, led him to seek more and more, which finally landed him in what I thought was an extreme Pentecostal movement that was sweeping the area. While I attended some meetings with my family, I was not attracted to what looked to me like excesses. I was then a student at the Bible school and was getting more grounded in the Scriptures.

My Own Journey

It was at Gospel meetings in our town's dance hall, led by a Baptist cowboy from Montana, that I understood that Jesus was standing at the door of my heart and that I needed to personally invite Jesus into my life. I recall walking around the farm the next morning and was amazed at how much greener the grass was, how much more brilliant the trees were, and I had never seen the sky such a radiant blue. I saw the world through new eyes.

During Bible school I spent a summer leading several Vacation Bible Schools. I spent another summer with Canadian Sunday School Mission working at camps, and joined what was called The Unit in North Battleford, a Mennonite-sponsored program to work as an aid in the Saskatchewan Mental Hospital. A dozen young adults from different Bible schools lived in a church basement and worked at the hospital as summer relief staff.

One of the students, a graduate of Bethany Bible Institute in Hepburn, Saskatchewan, and I struck up a friendship. Ann Lenko was Ukrainian from Loon Lake, Saskatchewan, and a Baptist. As she describes it, she was the only “Gentile” at Bethany, and while

she felt welcome, she concluded that you had to be born a Mennonite to be one. Even before we met, we were both interested in becoming missionaries in Africa. While Ann was in nurse's training in Winnipeg I went there to work one winter and visited the Grant Memorial Baptist Church where she was attending. The pastor, Gerald Splinter, was a gifted leader and effective evangelist, a ministry to which I was very much attracted. We both became members of the church and joined a very active young adult program. As a Mennonite General Conference member I had a few issues to work through, but also felt that it was important for us to belong to the same church. In hindsight, it was part of the journey God had mapped out for me.

We applied and were accepted as candidates to serve in South Africa. "You are both young," the mission wrote "[therefore] some experience would be valuable." We were called to serve a small Baptist church in Alvarado, Minnesota. After two years we were asked by our denomination to take on the leadership of a Gospel team consisting of thirty-five young adults, traveling all over North America doing door-to-door evangelism. Those were very formative years for both of us and prepared us for our future ministries. After seven years with that ministry we came back to Canada. We now had two children and needed to settle down. We were asked to plant a new church in White Rock, British Columbia. From there I was called to serve as District Minister in Alberta, and then as the national leader of Baptist General Conference of Canada until my retirement. Occasionally Ann and I wonder if we should not be writing our mission board to ask if we finally have enough experience to serve in South Africa.

In Summary

What then are the factors that contributed to me now being an ex-Mennonite? I am not an angry ex-Mennonite. I have great appreciation for many aspects of my Mennonite heritage. While my ancestors had a limited understanding of the Bible and some senseless legalism, they were a God-fearing people. Growing up in a strong family environment deeply shaped my life. My parents were great role models and provided foundational values and stability. Compared to many people who grow up without roots and basic good values, I am blessed indeed. I had a good role model in a pastor early in my Christian faith, and a Bible school that grounded me in Scripture. I admire ministries like Mennonite Central Committee and the current dynamic church planting movement.

About the spiritual dearth in my parent's church I mentioned earlier? All that changed in 1958 when 350 people in this rural community experienced a genuine spiritual awakening. It was like a spiritual prairie fire had swept through the area. These new believers formed a new church and joined the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference. It changed the entire community. My two uncles, ministers in the Sommerfelder church were both converted and removed by the bishop. That movement has left an indelible impact on my life. I had seen the power of God to change lives and transform a community. I was related to many of those people and have followed their lives with great interest.

I see my journey out of the Mennonite tradition as part of God's leading in my life. Of course, my Baptist girlfriend had something to do with that too. My family's scattering to other churches, resulting from the spiritual dearth of their own church, also caused me to question my own long-term commitment. I look back at my life with great appreciation for how God has led me. I have been extremely happy serving in Baptist General Conference of Canada. It was a good match for me. I am a very blessed person. That I am still able to write and serve after fifty-seven years of ministry is a great blessing.

For the eighteen years while I was the national leader, I also served on the board of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. In that setting we worked with more than forty evangelical denominations and organizations. I learned to appreciate the great variety of God's amazing family. Each group brought strengths that made us all stronger. While I hold my beliefs as an evangelical and a Baptist dearly, I have learned to value God's beautiful family tree with its many colourful branches. While I believe that Jesus is the only way to God and actively seek opportunities to share my faith, I hold that with an attitude of tolerance to others. My value is summed up with, "If I let other people be who they are, then I can be who I am without apology."

I love the Lord, and I love His Church, even with all her imperfections. By the way, I have consulted in a troubled Mennonite church and found them almost as good fighters as Baptists. I agree with Malcolm Muggeridge, an atheist who embraced Jesus Christ and wrote in his book, *Jesus Rediscovered*: "At its most obscurantist and debased, the Christian position still seems to me preferable to any scientific-materialist one, however cogent and enlightened."²

A favourite Bible verse is Acts 20:28, which expresses my commitment and which I use in my leadership books and teaching: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy

Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” I have not missed out on the important things in life by devoting myself to the Lord and serving Him over a lifetime. I am a very blessed ex/near Mennonite.

Notes

- ¹ Delbert F. Plett, *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada 1875 to 2000* (Winnipeg: D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, 2011), 60-63.
- ² Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (London: Fontana, 1969), 105.