

# Patterns of Piety Among the Early Brethren (1860-1900)

**John B. Toews**, *Regent College, University of British Columbia*

Traditionally Mennonite Brethren folk memory has thought of its 1860 emergence in Ukraine as a radical evangelical renewal amid a stagnant and unyielding ecclesiastical orthodoxy. This self-image envisaged a people of God given to a decisive view of conversion, a spiritual fervour involving evangelism and missions, and a visibly consistent lifestyle, obvious and discernible to the surrounding community. Less articulated but usually assumed was a legacy of special practices related to the cultivation of congregational and private piety. These might range in scope from the conducting of small group Bible studies and the role of public prayer in worship, to specific, expressive modes associated with the pursuit of personal and group spirituality.

This self-portrait of Brethren piety was probably the result of two formative forces. The first involved the published and commonly known documents relating to Brethren beginnings. The second related to the later cultivation of specific forms of piety, somewhat modified over the decades but amazingly orthodox in their character, even in the first decades of the twentieth century. Here too there are sufficient documentary remnants for a reconstruction of both the style and content of that piety.

Most of the published documents connected with Brethren origins are administrative and bureaucratic in nature. In a world in which religion and politics were hopelessly intermingled, religious renewal automatically became a civil issue. A secession document (January 6, 1860)<sup>1</sup> addressed to church elders was dispatched to the district office in Halbstadt, where officials invoked

the provisions of tsarist law governing secret societies in an attempt to suppress the new movement. Both sides now poured all their energies into a largely political drama in which the very survival of the dissidents was at stake. The drawn-out struggle produced an impressive array of official documents, few of which really reflected the spiritual character of the renewal movement. Only the actual secession document tells something of Brethren aspirations: they wished to establish a pure church with communion celebration restricted to true believers.

When the Brethren historian P.M. Friesen published his monumental work in 1911,<sup>2</sup> he created a broad documentary base pertaining to Brethren beginnings, the personalities, sequences and events, but provided virtually no information about their salvation and discipleship theology. Ironically, this expansive collection does not enable us to make a significant reconstruction of their concept of conversion and baptism, the contents of their prayers and sermons or the nature of their Bible studies and private devotional lives. Such a onesided source base makes it difficult to adequately describe the heart-beat of a lay movement given to multi-leadership, spreading through the informal and adaptable structure of the house church, and leaving very few records of its journey.

The terminology associated with both the study and practice of "Christian spirituality," though incorporating some similar religious elements, is not really applicable to the overall dynamic of the early Brethren. Historically and currently Christian spirituality has focused on seeking and knowing God within two spectrums. The one involves techniques of meditation stressing both an apophatic (emptying/divesting) and kataphatic (imaging) approach. The second deals with the vertical God-human relationship and seeks to explain the role of the heart (affective) and mind (speculative). While spiritual masters or entire schools operated on various levels of these two scales, the pursuit of such spirituality was predominantly a personal and individualistic endeavour. Aspects of early Brethren experience at times intersected with these spheres, but generally their quest was less meditative and inward-looking. Documents associated with their beginning reveal little preoccupation with the mystical or a striving for self-enhancing religious states. The essence of their pilgrimage had more to do with a style of piety than a state of spirituality. It was not concerned with a life-long striving for divine-human union nor the cultivation of private states of religious ecstasy.

The varied elements of early Brethren piety co-existed in a state of tension. On the one hand the emphasis on conversion exalted the personal and experiential; on the other their concern with life in the community stressed the collective and practical. Any analysis of Brethren piety must involve an understanding of their concept of conversion as well as a knowledge of the religious practices which constituted both its context and content. In practice the two components were inseparably meshed, since neither functioned in isolation.

While P.M. Friesen's materials document the celebration of salvation in early Brethren history, they supply almost no information about its actual salvation theology and understanding of conversion. Fortunately, John F. Harms, the editor of the Mennonite Brethren periodical *Zions-Bote* in the late nineteenth century, requested his readers to publish their conversion accounts. Though the first five years of the periodical (1885-1889), as well as the years 1892-93, appear to be lost, over 150 conversion accounts were published between 1890-1900.<sup>3</sup> Among them are the reflections of three of the signatories of the secession document of 1860. These three documents, which reflect the revivalist mindset of the 1850s, suggest that these early conversions were typified by a gradual coming to faith.<sup>4</sup> The second generation accounts of the 1870s and 1880s reflect a sharper definition of the process itself. Both pre- and post-1860 accounts allow a fairly exact reconstruction of the Brethren view of conversion and its impact on the practice of everyday piety.

What were the key elements in their concept of conversion? Almost without exception the initial stage of conversion was typified by a profound awareness of personal sinfulness as well as an acknowledgement of specific sins. These often focused upon violations of known community norms and might include dancing, carousing, cursing, card playing or nicotine and alcohol addiction.<sup>5</sup> A lengthy period of great fear and anguish of soul usually ensued, during which the individual engaged in an intense penitential struggle. It involved repentance, confession to others, reading of Scriptures and hymns, and ongoing prayer and counsel from those who had experienced conversion.<sup>6</sup> The notion of wrestling or contending for faith, of being "in conversion," frequently coincided with this struggle. All the accounts cite a moment of spiritual climax when the difficult search was over and anxiety was replaced by assurance and inner peace. The documents speak of joy, happiness and even ecstasy.<sup>7</sup> There was the sense of being spiritually overwhelmed, the sense of an encounter with the divine. The informant views the experience as the most important event in his or her life.

Did this moment of conversion become an end in itself and foster an experiential piety which repeatedly sought to recapture the emotional well-being associated with conversion? Some of the surviving conversion accounts suggest that the sharing of "my experience" was common in public gatherings or small group fellowships where it was regarded as a source of spiritual encouragement and nurture. Such subjectivity was not without its dangers. The constant reaffirmation of this "theology of beginnings" possibly generated a selfish spirituality seeking only to recreate the joy of conversion at the peril of neglecting the demands of discipleship. It may also have encouraged a harsh judgement of other Christians unable to articulate the exact sequence of Brethren conversion experience.

In some ways the *Froehliche Richtung* (exuberance movement), which so marred the inner soul of the Brethren and soiled their public reputation, symbolized an attempt to re-create the ecstasy of conversion. These dramatic

and sensational accounts testify to a celebrative piety which insisted that the new life in Christ express itself in lively rhythms and songs or in shouts of joy.<sup>8</sup> Though this preoccupation with the experiential was condemned as unbiblical by the so-called "June Reforms" of 1865, there remained a lingering temptation to continue the search for ecstasy. It particularly expressed itself in the songs, prayers and personal testimonies often associated with the house church liturgies of the early Brethren. Happily the pursuit of joy occurred in the midst of the people of God. It was not an isolated or lonely quest but took place in the community, amidst the ebb and flow of life experience. Here was a stabilizing if complex dynamic.

Nineteenth-century Brethren conversions occurred in the context of a conventionalized Mennonitism where, in theory, all belonged to the church. In such a setting baptism and church affiliation often implied a coming of age whereby the individual joined the adult world, at least that was the perception of many Brethren converts.<sup>9</sup> Conversion for them invariably meant alienation from the older spiritual community and affiliation with a small group of dissidents. It was an attempt to rectify the failings of the old by constructing an alternative religious model. The new community was obligated to address two issues. It had to develop a spiritual vocabulary capable of describing the character of the inner journey initiated by conversion. There was a need for concrete and intelligible words to portray the new religious experience, whether expressed in sermon, song or testimony. A rejection of the old ways of articulation meant designing new ones capable of describing dissident spirituality in both its private and public dimensions. There was a second obligation. The inadequacy of prevailing Christianity necessitated revisionist definitions of lifestyle and ethical norms. Formulated in a reactionary setting and fuelled by legal and bureaucratic confrontation, the Brethren demands of conformity to the ethical ideals of the Gospel were uncompromising and severe. Early Brethren were not only celebrants but reformists who demanded a consistent Christianity within a corporate Mennonitism. Such a concern with holiness and being a moral witness in the "world," endowed Brethren celebration with a sobering realism.

Both issues were fortunately addressed. The Brethren proved capable of developing a vocabulary of renewal and were also able to define the terms of circumspect discipleship. Intermingled with the recounting of "my experience" was a functional, pragmatic and ultimately corrective element. It occurred in the context of community. Celebrating Jesus was not a private journey but a visible walk among the people of God. It meant living the Gospel together. Nineteenth-century Brethren conversions usually took place within an existing village house church. Individuals frequently identify *the Geschwister* (the brothers and sisters) who assisted them in their penitential struggle.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently they related their experience to the group, became members and with others lived the Gospel relationally. It was not a casual but a very deliberate linkage. Already in 1860 the secession document demanded consist-

ent living and the embodiment of the Gospel in the everyday world. A person lived openly in community and worked actively for the enlargement of that community. Here was a style of piety that was not only concerned with what you believed and had experienced, but also with what you did.

The small Brethren fellowship groups, whether meeting in homes or the local school, not only provided the context for early Brethren piety but generated a liturgy of religious practices which eventually constituted its content. In his massive compilation P.M. Friesen preserved a group of documents, some from as early as 1861, which provide some clues as to the character and content of the early patterns of Brethren piety. A few consist of the reports of Old Church observers who attended Brethren services, while other documents are "in-group" materials which provide a portrait of customs, processes and liturgies by which the Brethren sought to define their inner journey. The documents possibly reflect the initial, sombre piety which gave rise to the Brethren, a piety tied to the daily rhythms of life, typified by constancy and continuity, and ultimately able to survive the onslaught of the exuberant radicals.

What perspectives do these source materials provide? Somewhat ironically the earliest profiles of Brethren services are sketched by outside observers during the summer of 1861. A substantial list of signatories attested to both the authenticity and objectivity of the reports.<sup>11</sup> During one of the meetings the visitors noted that the hymns were sung "using happy melodies" and that some "waved their hands, made happy faces and uttered sounds which they called praise." There was "a most unusual joy" radiating "from almost every face." Furthermore, the exposition of a selected text "was interrupted or expanded a number of times by the observations of others." The visiting delegation concluded that "aside from the unusual expressions of joy there was nothing we found offensive." Other reports confirmed the practice of lively singing accompanied by the flute, harmonica and violin. They also made reference to the expressions of joy "with their hands and happy gestures," and Scripture interpretation which took "the form of dialogue led by their minister." There was also "much prayer by many different persons." Apparently the Brethren worship style of 1861 contained no "transgressions against public order" for "everything transpired in a quiet, orderly manner."<sup>12</sup>

The description of these services provide the first glimpses of the patterns associated with early Brethren piety. During a house service in Liebenau the Low German sermon "was interrupted or elaborated a number of times by the observations of others. Songs and prayer alternated, once spoken by this person then by another." A house service in Waldheim featured spontaneous prayers, songs from *Glaubensstimme* and once again "a number spoke up from time to time"<sup>13</sup> during the sermon. Such activity did not disturb public order during worship, but "served much more to provide a well-rounded exposition of the biblical text."<sup>14</sup> A third gathering in Ladekopp was characterized by many songs and much prayer as well as the simple observance of the Lord's Supper.

From these documents it is apparent that early Brethren piety consisted of several components. Novel musical instruments like flutes and drums not only augmented the singing of conventional hymns, but also set the rhythms of new songs whose content focused on the personal and experiential. Joy and happiness was spontaneously and naively expressed. Perhaps the most extraordinary phenomenon, calmly cited and somewhat positively endorsed by the Old Church visitors, related to the practice of community exegesis of the biblical text. Worship participants apparently felt free to add their insights during the middle of the sermon. This type of informal dialogue seems to have characterized Brethren house gatherings during the first five years. Rather surprisingly the services were held in Low German, the functional language of the everyday. All visitors who attended Brethren services in 1861 cited another characteristic of dissident worship, the widespread participation in audible prayer. Even in the more formal setting of later years a time of prayer during worship remained a hallmark of Brethren services.

These accounts portray a moderate exuberance early in the Brethren story and provide a balance against other accounts depicting services clearly out of control. All of the Brethren meetings visited by the Old Church observers testified to peaceable gatherings which, though exalting the emotional and experiential, exuded spiritual beauty and innocence. Much of this innocence may have been lost when, goaded by self-appointed, radical leaders, the spiritual revolution moved towards the radical left. Yet amid all of this there remained a kind of distant memory of an earlier happiness, an intuitive compulsion which continued to celebrate the experience of grace according to the rituals associated with the initial renewal. Exuberance may have momentarily distorted but could not destroy the early patterns of piety both as to style and content.

There is evidence to suggest that some aspects of Brethren piety predated the founding of the movement in 1860. Jakob Bekker, Abraham Peters and Jakob Wall, all signatories to the secession document, relate some significant information about their early Christian pilgrimage.<sup>15</sup> They mention the existence of small fellowship groups in several of the Molotschna villages during the 1850s. These groups were either instrumental in the actual conversion process or provided the setting for maturation and growth immediately afterwards. All also cite Eduard Wuest as a significant catalyst in these Bible studies, but do not make it clear whether they predated him or whether he was directly responsible for establishing them. While Wuest influenced the spiritual formation of some early Molotschna leaders, it cannot be determined whether he initiated the small group revivals which eventually led to the founding of the Brethren. Jakob Bekker's account suggests that Mennonite believers were meeting in such house churches as early as 1852. He also provides some information about the practices of such gatherings. Songs were sung, prayers were spoken, and as he reported of a meeting in 1854: "Some brothers were there who led a devotional study." The accounts make one thing

clear: the style of piety practised by the Brethren in the early 1860s had existed for almost a decade.

Brethren piety derived enormous long-term benefit from these early house church structures. Throughout the nineteenth century they provided the setting from which most adherents derived their primary spiritual nurture. The gatherings were variously described in print as *Erbauungstunden*, *Abendversammlungen*, *Bibelstunden*, and *Abendstunden*.<sup>16</sup> The terms might describe an evening service in the local school with preaching by an itinerant minister and group singing, or they might imply a Bible study held in a village home and attended by a few families. Such a group responded easily and naturally to a variety of local circumstances. It functioned in the presence or absence of a formal church building. It was not dependent on a fixed population base and easily "travelled" with the Brethren as they were scattered by the Mennonite migrations within the Russian Empire. Even more importantly it provided an immediate spiritual family for both convert and long-term adherent. Above all, it encouraged personal participation in Bible study, singing and worship.

With the establishment of the itinerant ministry as early as 1861, the Brethren inadvertently developed a strategy which ensured the preservation of their early forms of piety. They may well have adopted an already existing practice, at least as it was known and applied in Prussia. Only a few reports survive from the first decades of this ministry, but they do reflect the religious style of the founding era. Excerpts from the 1865 diary of the itinerant ministers Jakob Jantz and Christian Schmidt portray a strategy involving small group meetings and home visitations. Such visitations were personal and intimate in character. The ministers reported that "our discussion centred on the fellowship of the blood of Jesus our Lord," that "we rejoiced that our salvation depends entirely on the fact that Jesus loves us," and that "we have been united in a salvation which exceeds all else."<sup>17</sup> At the Steinbach estate they held an "edifying discussion about God's mercy to us poor sinners." During tea time they "sang and thanked the Lord."<sup>18</sup>

A decade later (1876-77) Jakob Dirksen of Muensterberg reflected upon his itinerant activities.<sup>19</sup> At one evening Bible study "we recalled many a precious promise from the Word of God and prayed together." During another meeting "we experienced with joy how the Spirit of the Lord convicted several youths ... who pleaded for the forgiveness of God and man." According to Dirksen's report, home visitations followed a time-honoured pattern where a "passage was read from the Word of God and all of us prayed." He also spoke of a setting in which "we could discuss the Word of God in close fellowship."

Reports carried by the *Zions-Bote* during the 1890s substantially expand the materials available for a better understanding of the itinerant ministry. If the reports from Russia are any indication, at least 22 itinerant ministers were active at one time or another between 1890-1900. Though relatively few reported their activities to the North American based *Zions-Bote*, their contributions suffice to

illustrate the importance of this activity to Brethren piety. Two itinerant accounts from 1889, one from North America and the other from Russia, appear in the earliest surviving copy of *Zions-Bote*. The first came from the Minnesota church worker and evangelist Heinrich Voth. He had begun to visit Mennonite villages in Manitoba, Canada, under the auspices of the Mennonite Brethren Conference of North America as early as 1883-84.<sup>20</sup> In January, 1890, he reported on his visit to Manitoba during the previous month. He described how several families in the village of Hoffnungsfeld

gathered for a Bible study every Wednesday evening. The men bring a Testament (and sometimes two) with them as well as song books like *Frohe Botschaft* (Glad Tidings). And what do the women bring? They bring work for missions! They have decided to do something for the Lord and while their men read and discuss God's Word, they listen quietly and keep [the Word] in their heart, yet all the while they are active in mission work for the Lord Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

Its gender bias notwithstanding, the report reflects the dynamic associated with the itinerant ministry. Voth reported that additional services were held in schools, churches and other homes. On occasion, the Lord's Supper was celebrated and in conjunction with it, footwashing. Home visitation as always remained an essential component of such an itinerant ministry.

On the following pages of *Zions-Bote* the itinerant minister Jacob Jantz, writing from Friedensfeld, Russia, on December 1, 1889, listed his activities. He had visited the Mennonite settlers who served as model farmers in the Jewish colonies as well as the Mennonites in the Baratov and Zagradovka settlements. His activities in Zagradovka readily matched Voth's in Manitoba. "We visited all the villages in ten days, held services in the schools and in the homes of our members, and made house visitations."<sup>22</sup> Jantz also participated in an ordination service following which the congregation "celebrated the Lord's Supper and observed footwashing."<sup>23</sup>

Congregational and ministerial reports in the *Zions-Bote* suggest little modification in the structure and style of the itinerant ministry until well into the early twentieth century. It constituted an essential ingredient in the day to day practice of Brethren piety both in Russia and North America. The practical expression of this dynamic component is well illustrated in the case of David Duerksen. Duerksen, a long-time teacher and minister in the Molotschna village of Margenau moved to the Crimean village of Schoental in 1897 and was subsequently ordained (1899) as the first elder of the Brethren in the Crimea.<sup>24</sup> The *Zions-Bote* reports fortunately provide a few glimpses of his earlier career as an itinerant minister and the style of piety which accompanied it. In 1890 Duerksen undertook a journey to the Mennonite settlement of Samara.<sup>25</sup> After departing on May 18 he spent several days enroute at the Memrik colony where he held three days of services during the Pentecost celebration. Five days of intermittent train and wagon travel finally brought him to his destination on May 28. A flurry of activity ensued. During the next five days one or two house services per day were held in the various villages.



Duerksen reported that "a goodly number" were present, in one instance specifying 35 people. At least three of the services were held in the Lutheran settlements of the region. On June 3, all day services in the Mariental home of Peter Epp culminated in a baptismal service. Adding to the stress of preaching and travel were the many home visitations expected of any itinerant minister.

In September of the same year Duerksen again visited Memrik to participate in home visitation, a special consultation and a two-day missions celebration. Then afternoon and evening housemeetings were held in various villages with mornings usually devoted to home visitations. A similar pattern of activity ensued when Duerksen travelled to the Ignatyev colony, where he arrived on September 13. Not long after he journeyed to the Kuban, stopping at several small settlements enroute.<sup>26</sup> Once in the Kuban he spent some twelve days "sometimes preaching in the school, sometimes in the church, and in between times making house visitations."<sup>27</sup> Between September 7 and October 1 he had preached 16 times, made 54 house visitations and held "five edificatory meetings." Duerksen's account provides some interesting incidental information. On his journey he met several of his fellow itinerant ministers who were likewise crisscrossing the Brethren constituency, and together with them participated in several harvest and thanksgiving festivals.<sup>28</sup>

During September of 1893 David Duerksen made a somewhat different journey. Together with his fellow minister Jacob Janz he travelled to East Prussia to visit his former homeland and to spend time with the Mennonite leaders of the East Prussian community. Their assignment, according to the 1893 General Conference meetings in Memrik, was "to preach the Gospel." They were given a gracious reception by Prussian elders and accorded the freedom of Mennonite pulpits, an unusual move since there were no Brethren congregations in Prussia. Furthermore, until quite recently it had been felt that the Brethren split from the Old Church reflected elements of the schismatic and heretical. Judging from the reports, the visitors encountered some mild cross-cultural shocks. Janz, preaching in the church at Thiensdorf, found it difficult to speak from the high pulpit and complained that he felt like David in Saul's armour.<sup>29</sup> His cultural horizon was further expanded when, in the same building, he witnessed "an organ being played in the large church while the congregation sang."<sup>30</sup>

Several days in Berlin brought another surprise. Accustomed to easy and open interaction with Baptists in Russia, the visitors were taken aback by their contact with the German Baptists. "In Russia we know immediately that a smoker is no brother. Here in Prussia that is not possible for many of the Baptists smoke, which is very offensive to us."<sup>31</sup> On their return journey to Russia they briefly stopped in Poland in order to minister to small Brethren congregations. Here again they engaged in activities characteristic of the itinerant ministry: home visitations, the small, intimate services, the celebration of communion.<sup>32</sup> Finally in late October the two left for home.<sup>33</sup> Early in September of 1894 Duerksen again left on a *Missionsreise* (missions journey),

this time to the Ufa, Samara and Pleshanovo (Neu-Samara) settlements. In Ufa he and his colleague Isaak Friesen encountered "48 families of our dear Mennonite Brethren." Again the familiar pattern of home visitations and home services ensued in all three settlements. As usual long and arduous travel by train and wagon characterized the journey.<sup>34</sup>

David Duerksen was one of many. Names like Kornelius Fehr, Herman Neufeld, Wilhelm Loewen, Herman Konrad, Jakob Wiens and Jakob Jantz appear frequently in the accounts. The many journeys of these and others ensured ongoing and vital contact in a widely dispersed constituency. The effect of such intersecting "networking" was often quite astounding. A correspondent from the village of Andreasfeld, some 17 miles east of Chortitza, reported that "we have recently had many ministerial visits,"<sup>35</sup> then goes on to list the names of six ministers. In 1896 a Kuban correspondent mentions a three-week visit by two ministers in January, another three-day visitor in March and the presence of four itinerants during September.<sup>36</sup> Among the varied itinerant accounts is a surprising disclosure that Baptist contacts, so characteristic of early Brethren history, continued in the 1890s.<sup>37</sup>

Such Brethren networking was deliberate and carefully planned. Suitable itinerant candidates were listed at the annual Brethren Conference, then democratically elected and corporately financed. Some, depending on their farming obligations, might spend one to five months in this type of activity. In 1894 David Duerksen reported covering 4,908 versts by train and 500 versts by horse-drawn wagon during some 41 days of travel. He had visited 80 homes and conducted 57 house or school services.<sup>38</sup> Several years earlier Wilhelm Loewen observed that during 49 days in the Molotschna Settlement he had preached 30 sermons and made 202 visitations.<sup>39</sup> The journals of Herman A. Neufeld provide us with an even more composite picture of the Brethren itinerant minister. His meticulous records reveal that during 1895-96 he travelled some 145 days, made 200 visitations and preached 126 times.<sup>40</sup> Over an intensive ten-year period he estimated that he made contact with every village in the Russian Empire where there were Brethren. In doing so he journeyed more than 100,000 versts by train, 3000 versts by wagon, contacted 3000 homes and preached an equal number of sermons.<sup>41</sup>

The early Brethren, more by circumstance than deliberate choice, adopted a framework of piety which probably predated 1860. The home Bible study group not only provided the context for the initial gradualistic revival, but the organizational structure for the young dissident church. The available evidence suggests that a house church with a very small membership was completely capable of a long-term, independent existence in a remote village. It was equally capable of expanding into a sizeable congregation while retaining the format and style of the house church. The structural piety which gave spiritual birth supplied long-term nurture. The religious practices of the movement underwent little transformation during the first four decades of its existence. A movement which should have been decentralized and fragmented

by the vast geographic distances which separated it remained cohesive and unified. Two dynamic forces, one obvious the other subtle, were at work. The first involved institutionalized itinerant ministry, usually operating casually and informally. The second related to a personalized style of piety initiated within the house church but expanding to envelop larger congregations.

The role of the itinerant ministry as a unifying and bonding agent is readily identifiable. Mennonite colonization within the Russian Empire during the later nineteenth century brought with it an unprecedented scattering which threatened the cohesiveness of the fledgling movement. The itinerant ministry provided an ideal response to the ensuing diaspora. A fairly large number of occasional and regular ministers, usually working at low salaries and in the spirit of self-sacrifice, regularly crisscrossed the land. Their carefully planned schedules ensured yearly contact with virtually all Brethren members. Traveling by whatever means were necessary, they systematically visited all Brethren adherents, and so ensured a continuous affirmation of what was regarded as common faith and practice. Appointed and sent by the central conference they constituted an authoritative voice in matters relating to theology, polity and worship practices. Thanks to their presence even remote communities felt a sense of belonging and knew what was essential to the practice of private and public piety. Furthermore, they effectively reinforced and perpetuated a uniform and unique style of spirituality.<sup>42</sup>

Virtually no historical sources illuminate the inner spiritual dynamic of the hundreds and eventually thousands of nineteenth-century Brethren home and school services held in widely separated regions of the Russian Empire. In his extensive journals elder Herman Neufeld briefly describes the prayer week services held in the Ignatyev settlement at the dawn of the twentieth century.

We held the prayer week in the following manner. We brothers and sisters and many others gathered every evening. After one or two songs were sung we opened with Scripture reading and prayer. Then a number who desired to do so prayed alternately. Several brothers and sisters related their conversion. More prayers and testimonies followed. Songs or [single] verses of songs were sung in between. The Lord manifested himself and blessed the prayers and testimonies so that tears were shed and many were [inwardly] moved. It seemed that souls wished to repent and be converted and we had a blessed time.<sup>43</sup>

Here was a simple liturgy given to the singing of hymns, Bible reading, testimonies and prayers. Neufeld's account reflects a broadly participatory lay piety given to an intimate recounting of the personal and a celebration of the experiential. It was a setting of vulnerability in which spiritual counsel was apparently easy to find. Conversion was expected to occur in the context of such a community and the presence of caring sisters and brothers guaranteed subsequent nurture.

In 1897 the small Sparrau church accepted Benjamin B. Janz, a young, newly converted teacher into membership in the face of strong parental disapproval. Reflecting upon the community he had joined he wrote.<sup>44</sup>

I was accepted into the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1897. In those years I visited many a church. I received a distinct impression of its character: of brotherly fellowship; fear of God; a healthy appetite for the Word; of a sincere, quickening preaching; of work with the faltering one and of the treatment of the unrepentant sinner in the church. Growth in the church came much more from the outside than via the children of the church members. Whether old or young, the church member generally had a burden for the unconverted of the area and for his relatives. They usually believed a man lost without conversion.

The young man was attracted by an inner dynamic which expressed itself in a sense of unity and belonging. In his estimation those who joined

could find what their heart had always desired... There was life and activity without a Bible school (often with a very weak Sunday school) and with rarely a high school, not even to speak of a college. There was no proselytizing by pressuring for children's conversion. The young people accepted the direction, order, customs and practices of the church without criticism. This was the way it should be, and they followed obediently without much fuss at weddings, without retreats and camp meetings. With no special youth conferences they were nevertheless modest, devout and loyal...

For Janz conversion meant joining the community and together living the life of discipleship.

In a sense the religious experience of young B.B. Janz aptly illustrates the dynamic of nineteenth-century Brethren piety. His dramatic if lengthy conversion brought salvation assurance and momentary ecstasy. The real meaning of the experience, however, related to the life of discipleship. Discipleship meant life in the community and an interest in bringing others into community through conversion. Conversely, conversion meant joining community and together living the life of discipleship. The young teacher described the two polarities of Brethren piety but did not find them to be in conflict.

From the very beginning the Brethren began to sing new religious songs. As late as 1855 dissidents and Old Church members in Chortitza were still singing from the same hymnal.<sup>45</sup> Soon radical revivalists like Gerhard Wieler condemned traditional Mennonitism as stagnant and corrupt. Certain that the few had found salvation while the many stood condemned, he and like-minded persons agitated for separation from the Old Church.<sup>46</sup> Their rejection of the existing order involved leaders, worship styles, old sermons and old hymns. Before long the dissidents were singing new songs. In the Molotschna, Old Church observers documented the transition in 1861. Their reports from July 23, July 30 and August 20, noted that most of the songs came from *Glaubensstimme* and that the services were characterized by "joyful melodies." The July 30 observations were more specific: "They sang two songs using our traditional church melodies, the rest of the melodies were arrangements from the *Glaubensstimme*."<sup>47</sup> This German-Baptist hymnal, while loyal to the chorale tradition, had incorporated some of the music of nineteenth-century continental revivalism.<sup>48</sup>

In all probability the early Brethren were not only attracted by the more rhythmic melodies in *Glaubensstimme*, but by the hymn texts which reflected subjective religious experience and celebrated salvation assurance. They soon discovered that another hymnal, *Frohe Botschaft*, was even more suited to their temperament. Reflecting the interests of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Methodist Ernst Gebhardt, it featured simple melodies and celebrated the inner life with Christ.<sup>49</sup> In the decades to come the Brethren preferred songs affirming faith and acclaiming the joy of salvation to songs of penitential striving and holy living.

Were the early Brethren musically guilty of pietistic celebration at the expense of the whole gospel? If *Frohe Botschaft* is any indication many of the early Brethren songs focused on joy and certainty of salvation. Furthermore, the intimacy of the house church setting with its broadly participatory agenda favoured the reiteration of the personal and experiential. The exuberance movement clearly demonstrated how far afield heartfelt emotion could lead and illustrated the significant role music played in the process. Fortunately, there were corrective forces at work. *Glaubennstimme*, which had provided an early alternative hymnody, later created a counter-balance to subjective emotion and rudimentary harmonies by the topical breadth of its hymns and chorales. Then too, an older musical tradition helped shape the new radicalism. In 1837 the Prussian school teacher Heinrich Franz Sr. compiled the hymns of the Mennonite *Gesangbuch* using numbers (Ziffern) to represent the musical scale. Though only published in 1860, it had been circulating in hand-written copies for many years. By the 1860s, the school children who learned four-part singing using Franz's *Choralbuch* were young adults in Mennonite congregations teaching their parents their new-found skills.<sup>50</sup> Even as practising Mennonite Brethren, these former school children could hardly forget the dignity of the chorale melodies they had learned to sight read. The school system continued to impart these musical skills until well into the twentieth century.

Musically speaking, this ongoing legacy limited pietistic excess by generating another type of restraint. The accentuated tempo of Brethren hymns attracted the young. Rejecting the *Gesangbuch-Vorsaenger* style of Old Church singing, the new Brethren musicology was largely shaped by the church choir, already widespread by 1875. The elementary musical skills learned in the village school were soon supplemented by the activities of ecclesiastical singing associations in Germany, which expanded into Poland, Russia and the Ukraine. Eventually not only printed materials but personnel arrived on the Ukrainian steppes. By the mid-1890s the first songfests (*Saengerfest*) and choral workshops (*Dirigentenversammlungen*) were convened.<sup>51</sup> At the dawn of the twentieth century Brethren celebration, at least in song, was steadily circumscribed by a more elitist and objective musical heritage from abroad. Its influence would be felt for almost half a century. The choir may not have eliminated the temptation to sing the songs of salvation, but its broad repertoire included the whole

spectrum of Christian life and teaching and elevated Brethren voices and minds beyond pietistic celebration.

Early Brethren piety not only consisted of singing but of the spoken word. It seems that the early Low German "dialogue sermons" were supplanted by the formal German sermon as early as 1864. Unfortunately, there is little information on the actual content of either sermon style. The outside observers of 1861 suggest an understandable pre-occupation with the salvation experience in the celebrative services they witnessed. Beyond that there is no documentation on the evolution of the Brethren sermon until the 1890s. Here two significant sermon collections, those of elder David Duerksen and elder Herman Neufeld reflect the priorities of the mature movement. The most extensive of these, that of David Duerksen, contains some 355 sermons, 330 of which are thematically classifiable.<sup>52</sup> Only 51 of these deal with evangelism while 79 are of a devotional nature and 140 instructional in character. Others focus on weddings (16), funerals (17) and the Christian festivals (25). A cursory survey of Neufeld's sermons would suggest a similar pattern.<sup>53</sup> In these sermons, living the Christian life seemed more important than celebrating salvation.

Brethren sermons published in *Zions-Bote* during the 1890s confirm such patterns. The 16 homilies published in 1890, for example, reflect a broad subject range.<sup>54</sup> None of them deal with conversion. There is little variation in the pattern during subsequent years. Unfortunately, editor Harms was given to excerpting devotionals from other evangelical publications or printing the sermons of Moody and Spurgeon. While helpful to his readers, this practice reduced the sermon material emanating from his constituency. The reports from itinerant ministers amplify our knowledge of sermon content by citing texts and occasionally providing brief summaries.<sup>55</sup> Here a stronger but far from exclusive emphasis on evangelism is in evidence, but then one of the tasks of visiting preachers was precisely that. Judging by the broad range of their sermon themes, Brethren ministers were not preoccupied with pietistic celebration.<sup>56</sup>

### Some Concluding Comments

Conversion, for the majority of early Brethren adherents, constituted a dramatic, unforgettable experience bringing ultimate meaning to their lives. Personal testimony, song and sermon naturally celebrated that event. Here was an intentional, subjective enjoyment of religion, an appeal to emotion and feeling. The temptation to celebrate salvation as an end in itself was severe, at least judging by the lengthy Brethren struggle with the exuberance movement. Furthermore, an ongoing emphasis on the importance of conversion unwittingly fostered a "back to beginnings" theology. Even when the movement achieved maturity and stability, personal testimony and song, though not sermon, continued to accentuate the salvation experience.

Fortunately, there were several priorities in Brethren piety which contributed to spiritual equilibrium and balance. Except for the excesses of the exuberance movement, where celebration often triumphed over Scripture, the early Brethren were concerned with the Word and with what the Word said. The reading and studying of the Bible was not only an individual but also a group process. Community exegesis in the house church setting predated 1860 and after the secession continued as a hallmark of Brethren piety. The community discovered divine truth together. Though periodically nurtured by the preaching of itinerants and supplemented by the talents of local lay ministers, it was really a collective, internally generated biblical literacy which gave solidity to the community. Community exegesis remained inseparably linked to simple service and worship liturgies, informal organizational structures and multiple lay leadership. It awakened, identified and incorporated all the gifts of the community. Here was a laity empowered by its biblical knowledge and largely immune to theological extremes advocated by self-styled radicals.

Early Brethren piety was also characterized by a strong sense of covenant community. A high level of personal involvement by each member demanded an open, transparent lifestyle. The norms and standards of the community were readily understood and individual accountability assumed. The setting allowed for a deliberate engagement with everyday problems and difficulties. The believing community sought to embody its faith and act it out in the world. Authentic faith demanded justice and integrity in the life process. There were obvious shortcomings. Embodied faith was at times limited to the confines of the local congregation or the borders of the village in which one lived, but at least their paradigm of piety went well beyond the mere declaration and celebration of faith.

The Brethren demand for circumspect discipleship in the secession document remained an implicit rather than articulated concern throughout the later nineteenth-century. None of the documents suggest that their concern with an acceptable Christian lifestyle demanded definition through rules and regulations. That temptation became acute amid the acculturation pressures generated in twentieth-century North America. Meanwhile the Old Church still sought to embrace and serve the larger Mennonite community and necessarily broadened the perimeters of discipleship. Simultaneously, Brethren definitions of lifestyle and community remained narrow and at times degenerated into legalism or even a felt and articulated "better than thou" attitude, but on the whole these were twentieth, not nineteenth-century, issues.

There is a sense of the idyllic and idealistic in the surviving portraits of nineteenth-century Brethren piety. Conversion accounts repeatedly cite the sense of intimacy associated with house gatherings. Seekers were not only attracted by the relational qualities demonstrated by individuals but by the counsel offered by an informal, non-threatening community. After conversion people joined the circle of the *Geschwister* and the deliberate community and

intensely personal fellowship which the German term implied. Here was authenticity coupled with concern and caring. Converts affiliated with a small lay community given to searching the Scriptures and so expanding their understanding of faith. It was a formula for stability and church growth. The early Brethren pattern of piety steadily reaffirmed the reality of a one-time conversion while the study of the Scriptures defined the content of an evolving discipleship. It was a piety operating in tension, vulnerable to extremes, but usually maintaining a healthy balance.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> P.M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland 1789-1910* (Halbstadt, Taurien, 1911), pp. 189-192.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of these accounts see John B. Toews, "The Early Mennonite Brethren and Conversion," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 11 (1993), pp. 76-97.

<sup>4</sup> Jakob Bekker, "Meine Erfahrung," *Zions-Bote*, no. 17 (1900), pp. 1-2; Abraham Peters, "Bericht," *Zions-Bote*, no. 11 (1899), p. 3; Jakob Wall, "Rueckblicke und Abschied," *Zions-Bote*, no. 50 (1900), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> For example see *Zions-bote*, no. 25 (1890); no. 18 (1891); no. 23 (1891); no. 27 (1891); no. 38 (1894); no. 10 (1895); nos. 1-2 (1896); no. 9 (1897); no. 24 (1898); no. 8 (1899).

<sup>6</sup> Frequently the term *Angst* (fear/anxiety) was used in connection with the penitential process. *Zions-Bote*, no. 46 (1894); no. 10 (1895); no. 8 (1897); no. 4 (1898); nos. 7, 30, 33 (1899).

<sup>7</sup> *Zions-Bote*, nos. 6, 14, 22, 24, 28 (1891); nos. 38, 41, 46 (1894); nos. 18, 19, 22, 47 (1895); nos. 11, 14 (1896); nos. 13, 35 (1898); no. 34 (1899).

<sup>8</sup> See Harry Loewen, "Echoes of Drumbeats: The Movement of Exuberance Among the Mennonite Brethren," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 3 (1985), pp. 118-127; John B. Toews, "The Early Mennonite Brethren: Some Outside Views," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. LVIII (1984), pp. 83-124. Both later nineteenth and twentieth century Brethren have looked askance at the excessive emotional and spiritual celebrations associated with their beginnings. Some viewed it as a mistaken emphasis on grace while others blamed it on the excesses of a few enthusiasts. Several factors may have molded this negative assessment. The first involved the overreaction of a later, rather conservative orthodoxy deeply shocked by the actions of its forbearers. The early dissidents clearly exceeded later Brethren definitions of Christian joy and therefore stood condemned by their spiritual offspring. The Brethren view of the exuberance movement may also have been somewhat skewed by the dramatic character of the surviving documents, which depicted a piety obviously out of control. They possibly overlooked the fact that the Christian story of renewal and revival often exhibited equal levels of normalcy and abnormalcy. The recorded portraits of reckless celebrants easily distorted the activities and actions of the many whose joyful celebrations outside observers deemed acceptable by the norms of contemporary public order. Dramatic and unprecedented religious activity quickly generated ample documentation while inward devotion and ongoing goodness left meagre records. There was a third factor which contributed to the Brethren condemnation of their early story: the movement solidified prematurely. Internally, radical leaders insisted on the absolute correctness of the new faith and the complete failure of the old. New wine did not belong in old wineskins. Such arrogance disallowed further dialogue and forced the group to come to terms with the celebrative fringe. In a sense the "June Reforms" replaced the variable borders of early religious experience with a conservative structure. Carefully regulated business



meetings, a conference organization (1872), formalized worship services and the use of the German sermon — all contributed to greater predictability. Externally, legal-bureaucratic wrangling about what it meant to remain Mennonite demanded immediate self-definition. A spiritual identity still in its infancy was forced to formally articulate its liberation experience. Though the impact of earlier revival was not lost, it was now contained in a safer, more controlled environment.

<sup>9</sup> "Gross werden" was a frequently used term designating baptism and church membership in the Old Church. For example see the conversion accounts in *Zions-Bote*, no. 8 (1895), pp. 2-3; no. 26 (1895), p. 2; no. 19 (1895), p. 2; no. 31 (1897), pp. 2-3; no. 19 (1899), p. 2; no. 33 (1899), p. 4; no. 42 (1899), p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Some of the converts used this term to identify the house church which they joined. *Zions-Bote*, no. 23 (1891); no. 32 (1894); no. 16 (1895), no. 27 (1895), no. 6 (1899); no. 17 (1899). Others simply spoke of *die Brueder* (the Brethren). *Zions-Bote*, nos. 7, 14, 30 (1890); nos. 6, 20, 27, 31 (1891); nos. 18, 19, 22, 43, 44 (1895); no. 50 (1898).

<sup>11</sup> Published in *Mennonitische Blaetter*, Vol. X, no. 1 (February, 1863), pp. 15-16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Jakob Bekker, *op. cit.*; Abraham Peters, *op. cit.*; Jakob Wall, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> *Zions-Bote*, nos. 6, 10, 16, 21 (1895); nos. 18, 43, 44 (1896); nos. 8, 10, 30 (1897); nos. 14, 30, 33, 44 (1899).

<sup>17</sup> Friesen, p. 373.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 431-436.

<sup>20</sup> "Bericht ueber die fuenfte Konferenz der Mennoniten-Bruedergemeinde abgehalten in Hamilton Co. Nebraska am 12. November, 1883," p. 13; "Bericht ueber die sechste Bundeskonferenz der Bruedergemeinde abgehalten bei Gnadenau, Hillsboro, Kansas," am 27. Oktober, 1884, p. 25. Both minutes are published in *Konferenz-berichte der Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde von Nord Amerika 1883-1919* (Hillsboro, Kansas: MB Publishing House, 1920).

<sup>21</sup> Heinrich Voth, "Minnesota," *Zions-Bote*, no. 5 (1890), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Jacob Jantz, "Reisebericht," *Zions-Bote*, no. 5 (1890), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Martin Durksen, *Die Krim war unsere Heimat* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Christian Press, 1977), p. 181.

<sup>25</sup> David Duerksen, "Reisebericht ueber eine Reise nach Samara," *Zions-Bote*, no. 33 (1890), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> David Duerksen, "Russland," *Zions-Bote*, no. 1 (1891), p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Jacob Janz, "Reisebericht," *Zions-Bote*, no. 3 (1894), pp. 2-3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> David Duerksen, "Reisebericht," *Zions-Bote*, no. 49 (1894), p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> D. Isaac, "Russland," *Zions-Bote*, no. 4 (1897), p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> D. Fast, "Aus Russland," *Zions-Bote*, no. 4 (1897), p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Baptist ministers like Kargel [*Zions-Bote*, nos. 11, 16, 18 (1890); nos. 14, 17 (1895)] and Hammer [*Zions-Bote*, nos. 30, 33 (1899); nos. 9, 14 (1894); no. 5 (1897); no. 4 (1898)] regularly visited Brethren congregations. As one report expressed it: "...brother Kargel has been a great blessing to us." *Zions-Bote*, no. 11 (1890), pp. 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> David Duerksen, "Reisebericht," *Zions-Bote*, no. 49 (1894), p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Wilhelm Loewen, "Reisebericht," *Zions-Bote*, no. 16 (1890), p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Hermann Neufeld Journals (Centre for MB Studies, Winnipeg, Manitoba), "Rechnung von den Missionreisen 1888-1919."

<sup>41</sup> Hermann Neufeld Journals, "Unsere Lebensgeschichte," I, pp. 348-350. During his 38 years as an itinerant minister Neufeld estimated that he had made 6,000 home visitations, held 2,000 Bible studies, preached 5,000 sermons, conducted at least 500 marriages and a similar number of funerals. In all he had travelled nearly 300,000 versts by wagon, rail and steamship. *Ibid.*, II, 488-490.

<sup>42</sup> Many *Zions-Bote* reports suggest that the mid-1880s and the 1890s marked a period of revival and expansion for the Brethren in Russia.

<sup>43</sup> Hermann Neufeld Journals, II (1904). This later Brethren elder relates how he obtained a certificate of baptism in 1883 so that he could get married. Spiritually he was deeply affected a year later while attending a Brethren baptism. Subsequently both he and his wife attended Brethren prayer meetings and Bible studies. His conversion followed after a lengthy penitential agony. Both he and Katarina immediately joined the Brethren. As he expressed it: "We were very happy in the fellowship of the *Geschwister* and took great pleasure in the prayer meetings, Bible studies and services." It was also in the context of this community that Neufeld was affirmed in the ministry. See the H. Neufeld Journals, "Lebensgeschichte oder Tagebuch von Hermann und Katarina Neufeld, Nikolajewka, Russland, I Buch."

<sup>44</sup> B.B. Janz Collection (Centre for MB Studies in Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba), Memoirs, "Grundzuege im Charakter der Glaubensstellung unserer Vaeter," pp. 8-10.

<sup>45</sup> The non-conformist minister Peter Unrau invited the Chortitza elder Jakob Hildebrand into his home for dialogue. Apparently the discourse was characterized by good will on both sides and "much singing" from the Old Church hymnal. See Cornelius Hildebrand, "Aus der Kronsweider Erweckungszeit," *Der Botschafter*, VIII (1913), nos. 6, 8-19.

<sup>46</sup> Gerhard Wieler was a young teacher in the village of Alt-Kronsweide whom elder Hildebrand encouraged and championed. Caught up in the new movement the zealous Wieler, in a conversation, apparently shouted: "You *Ohm* Jakob have preached many a soul into hell." Hildebrand's appeal for toleration fell on deaf ears. By 1866 Wieler had returned to the Old Church. John B. Toews, "The Early Mennonite Brethren: Some Outside Views," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. LVIII, no. 2 (April, 1984), pp. 110-111.

<sup>47</sup> *Mennonitische Blaetter*, Vol. X, no. 1 (February, 1863), pp. 15-16.

<sup>48</sup> *Glaubensstimme* was a rather traditional hymnal with songs appropriate to the corporate life of the church as well as the private life of faith. Some of the songs allowed for a rapid tempo which as some *Old Church* observers noted, was suitable for hand clapping.

<sup>49</sup> Wesley Berg, *From Russia with Music. A Study of the Mennonite Choral Singing Tradition in Canada*. (Winnipeg, Canada: Hyperion Press Ltd., 1985), p. 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20. The diaries of Jacob D. Epp (Mennonite Heritage Centre: Winnipeg, Manitoba) document this musical transition in a sequential and sometimes unintentionally comical fashion. For a translation see "Harmony Amid Disharmony: A Diary Portrait of Mennonite Singing in Russia During the 1860s," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 40, no. 4 (December, 1985), pp. 4-7.

<sup>51</sup> See *Zions-Bote*, no. 39 (1894), pp. 3-4; no. 30 (1894), pp. 2-3; nos. 9, 10 (1895).

<sup>52</sup> David Duerksen Sermon Collection (Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, California).

<sup>53</sup> Herman A. Neufeld Journals, "Predigtentwuerfe."

<sup>54</sup> See for example *Zions-Bote* no. 9 (1890), p. 3; no. 15 (1890), p. 1; no. 17 (1890), pp. 2-3; no. 18 (1890), p. 1; no. 19 (1890), p. 1; no. 21 (1890), p. 2; no. 24 (1890), p. 1; no. 28 (1890), p. 1; no. 34 (1890), p. 2; no. 42 (1890), p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> David Duerksen, "Reisebericht über eine Reise nach Samara," *Zions-Bote*, no. 33 (1890), p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> "Samara," *Zions-Bote*, no. 21 (1890), p. 1. If a *Zions-Bote* account of 1890 is representative, Brethren openness to the issues and concerns of the larger Christian world was remarkable. A Samara settlement reporter related how, during the 1890s, the small Brethren group in the settlement had always welcomed outside ministers. "...And so it happened that at various times Mennonites with black collars, Lutherans in robes, Herrnhuter in starched white and even Baptists with full beards occupied the pulpit, though the latter had to shave off their mustaches."