

# Kanadier, Amerikaner and Russländer: Patterns of Fragmentation among North American Mennonite Brethren Churches

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In recent times there has been renewed debate about how Mennonites in the United States and Mennonites in Canada should relate to each other. The Mennonite Church (MC) and the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC) have been engaged in lengthy unity discussions which are now culminating in a merger of the two denominations. While the main focus has been on uniting the two denominations, the international boundary separating the United States and Canada has emerged as an issue that cuts across the larger concern for unity. The need for separate Canadian and US structures/conferences was eventually conceded.<sup>1</sup> A new denominational paper for the Canadian segment of the united body has already been created. Without attempting to analyse the details of the debate, it is clear that the forces of unity and fragmentation are simultaneously at work in these large Mennonite bodies.

Coincidentally, the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America (MBNA) also reopened the debate about the significance and function of the international boundary. In the period preceding the convention in Waterloo, Ontario in 1997, it

appeared for a time that the General Conference as an organizational structure might disappear virtually by fiat. A select group of individuals gathered at Camp ECCO in California in November 1996 and put in place a process that seemed certain to result in the dismantling of the General Conference. But slowly other voices emerged and by the time the convention was held there was much less clarity about the outcome.<sup>2</sup> Instead of action to dismantle the conference, a task force was created which was to undertake a comprehensive study of Mennonite Brethren structures at every level and come with recommendations to the next convention. The Task Force submitted its report at the end of 1998, and while it recommended the dissolution of the General Conference as a legal entity, it proposed a strengthening of cooperative programs between the two national conferences. When the Executive Board of the Canadian Conference met in late January, 1999, it declared its dissatisfaction with the proposals. Although it favoured the dissolution of the General Conference, it also expressed reluctance about the extent of involvement in cooperative programs. At the General Conference convention in Wichita in July, 1999, the delegates decided that the General conference should "divest itself of the ministries it currently holds" and seek to transfer them to the national conferences. This process is now well under way and is expected to be completed by July 2002.

The focus of this paper will be on the nature of relationships between Mennonite Brethren in the USA and Mennonite Brethren in Canada during the past century. It will demonstrate that the relationships between the two national MB groups have often been quite difficult and that although there are important parallels in some of the other Mennonite denominations, Mennonite Brethren developments have been quite unique in many respects.

Mennonites from Russia came to North America in three major "waves." The first group of about 18,000 came between 1873 and 1884. About 8,000 of these came to Manitoba and came to be referred to as "Kanadier." The others went to the Midwestern states such as Kansas, the Dakotas, Nebraska and Minnesota.

The second major group of about 21,000 came after the Revolution in Russia in the period from 1923 to 1930. These settled in Canada in various provinces from Ontario to British Columbia and came to be referred to as "Russländer."

The last of the major waves of immigration occurred after World War II when approximately 7,700 immigrants came to Canada in the years from 1947 to 1951.<sup>3</sup> These did not have any particular label that became attached to them although sometimes they have been referred to as "late Russländer".

In addition to the above major waves of immigration there were various other groups or individual families that migrated at other times. One group in particular needs to be noted here—those who came to Canada in the period between 1884 and 1923, some from Russia and elsewhere in Europe and others from the United States. These are sometimes referred to as "late Kanadier" (or early Russländer),<sup>4</sup> but they were usually quite distinct in their religious and cultural identity. Many migrated to Saskatchewan and could be referred to as "Amerikaner."

Much has often been made of the distinct characteristics of each of these groups in Canada, especially the differences and conflicts between the Kanadier and Russländer.<sup>5</sup> Frank H. Epp, while acknowledging the danger of generalizing, states that in the eyes of the Kanadier, the Russländer were "too proud, too aggressive, too enthusiastic about higher

education, too anxious to exercise leadership, too ready to compromise with the state, too ready to move to the cities, and too unappreciative of the pioneering done by the Kanadier." The Kanadier, in the eyes of the Russländer, were "too withdrawn, too simple-minded, too uncultured, too weak in their High German ..., too afraid of schools and education, and too satisfied to follow traditions...."<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, however, Epp also states that there was an important difference in the attitude of the two groups toward the Americans. Whereas the Kanadier felt little commonality with the Americans and feared Americanization (their choice of different destinations in the 1870s was evidence of different orientations toward their respective social and political environments), the Russländer openly fraternized with the Americans, attended their colleges and generally reflected kindred minds, Epp states. Rather boldly he asserts that "if the Russländer of the 1920s had migrated in the 1870s, most of them undoubtedly would have chosen America rather than Canada."

The waves of MB immigration to United States and Canada from Russia formed a very different pattern from the immigration of Mennonites as a whole to North America or the immigration of any of the other distinct bodies of Mennonites. Most MBs also came to North America from Russia and the Soviet Union in the three major waves identified above. But no MBs came to Canada in the 1870s; most went to the mid-western states. Most Canadian MBs came in the 1920s and in the period from 1947 to 1951. In the period between the two first waves, however, the MB church had begun to establish itself in southern Manitoba as a result of mission work among the Kanadier by Elder Heinrich Voth from the US. The first MB church was organized in Burwalde, Manitoba (near Winkler) in 1888 and consisted mostly of Kanadier converts. The Winkler church continued for many years to have close ties with the Americans and some of the leading ministers, such as Elder David Dyck and Heinrich S. Voth, came from the US. Ties with US institutions like Biola and Moody were also strong. These "Kadier converts," therefore, certainly were not hostile to the US.

In Saskatchewan, the first MB church was organized in Laird in 1898 and consisted mostly of individuals who moved there from Manitoba. But in the next two decades a number of congregations were established largely as a result of immigration from the US and can be referred to as "late Kanadier," or, as indicated, as "Amerikaner."<sup>7</sup> Although some also came directly from Russia, most of the early Saskatchewan congregations consisted predominantly of members who had immigrated from the USA.<sup>8</sup>

When the Russländer MBs came in the 1920s, the dynamics of the relationship with MBs already in Canada were quite distinct from the general dynamics between Kanadier and Russländer. On the one hand, in places like Winkler, the immigrants came into contact with many who were Kanadier converts as well as with some MBs from the US. This often resulted in serious tensions. Russländer soon became a strong force. A. H. Unruh, J. W. Wiens, and Gerhard Reimer began the Pniel Bible School which was essentially a transplant of the Tschongrav Bible School in the Crimea.<sup>9</sup> This school soon replaced the Herbert Bible School as the dominant Bible training school for MBs in Canada.

On the other hand, at least some Russländer had reservations about the spirituality, etc. of the Kanadier MBs. In a rather lengthy article entitled "Is a union between the Russian brotherhood and the Canadian communities possible and essential?" Gerhard Reimer complained that although outwardly the two communities had the same name, etc., their world view was very different.<sup>10</sup> The Kanadier are wealthy and worldly, he stated, and have not

learned the spiritual lessons that result from passing through the crisis of war.

In Saskatchewan serious tension often arose when Russländer immigrants settled in areas where late Kanadier/Amerikaner congregations already existed. The Main Centre MB Church, which was founded in 1904 by immigrants from Manitoba, Russia and the US, received 78 immigrants in the 1920s, but a large group of these left in 1927 to establish a new congregation.<sup>11</sup> In other areas the differences were also often very obvious. The Dalmeny congregation became home to the Henry Bartsches who went to the Congo in the early 1930s. However, the congregation refused to support them.

When the Mennonite Brethren Bible College was founded in 1944 it was basically a Russländer school and an extension of the Winkler Bible School. Several late Kanadier were appointed to the faculty, but they were left with the feeling that they did not belong. Jacob H. Quiring was one late Kanadier from Saskatchewan,<sup>12</sup> but because he had been “baptized” into the Russländer culture in Coaldale previously and knew the German language he was able to succeed. Reuben Baerg, however, encountered more difficulty because of his limited German language ability and soon left to join the Americans in California.<sup>13</sup>

### Conference Structures

The evolution of conference structures can be summarized as follows.<sup>14</sup> Officially the MB Conference of NA began in 1879 when the first convention met in Nebraska. In 1909 the conference was divided into districts, primarily because of the long distances separating the various congregations. Initially three districts were created. The Saskatchewan churches became the core of the Northern District, although the Rosehill, North Dakota church also had the option of becoming part of this district. Manitoba and Rosehill had the option of joining the Central District and they did so initially. The international boundary, therefore, was not recognized as a neat dividing line between district conferences at this time. By 1914, however, Manitoba also joined the Northern District and therefore the Canadian churches together formed the Northern District of the General Conference which consisted of four districts in all. Within a short span of time political boundaries took precedence over geographical proximity in the determination of conference structures. By 1946 the Northern District Conference became the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.<sup>15</sup>

A major change in conference structure took place in 1954. At that point two area conferences (US and Canada) were created.<sup>16</sup> The United States retained the division into three district conferences and, in the meantime, each of the provinces (Ontario to British Columbia) had become organized at the provincial levels.<sup>17</sup> The General Conference met triennially whereas the area conferences met annually (later biennially). This structure has continued to the present time with only minor changes. The formal structural changes reflect some of the underlying tensions, debates and institutional/program changes that have occurred over the past century or more.

## Foreign Missions

Foreign missions began as a separate thrust by Russian and American MBs in India prior to the twentieth century. Abraham Friesens were the first MB missionaries who went to India in 1890 under an arrangement with the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU). They began their work in the Nalgonda field.<sup>18</sup> Less than ten years later the Nicolai N. Hieberts were commissioned by the General Conference of MBs in North America to begin work in India and their work became centered in Hyderabad. These separate ventures by MBs in the same country foreshadowed some of the divisions that later characterized ventures by Canadian (Rusländer) and American MBs.

The reasons for the separate ventures were partly due to personalities involved, but also related to issues of principle. The Russian MBs had very cordial relationships with the German Baptists and quite a number, including Abraham Friesen, received their training at the German Baptist Seminary in Hamburg, Germany. Working under the Baptists was not a serious threat in the sense that Baptists were not yet a very strong force in Russia. In America, however, the Baptists were a very large group and could easily be seen as a threat. This difference looms large in many of the discussions between the two MB groups. In a lengthy letter P. M. Friesen wrote to J. F. Harms:

You are doing the right thing by carrying on missions in India as an independent fellowship. You are much more in danger of being swallowed up by Baptists than we are because the Baptists in America are a gigantic force, whereas the M.B.C. is a droplet. It is different for us in Russia because...we live as compact masses in the midst of Mennonites as Mennonite Church citizens with our own, exclusively Mennonite schools” and “because of the relatively small number of German-speaking Baptists in Russia....”<sup>19</sup>

When the Rusländer established themselves in Canada the only real option was to work with the Americans through the Foreign Mission Board of the General Conference. This proved to be very difficult, however, and relationships were sometimes seriously strained. The Canadian MBs were largely left out of these discussions and were not really a factor in the missionary effort of the GC before the 1920s even though approximately one in four members was a Canadian by 1920.<sup>20</sup> The first Canadian MB to be commissioned to foreign service was a Kanadier, Helen Warkentin, who was ordained at Winkler in 1919 and left for India in 1920. The next appointment was almost a decade later. In 1929 Margaret Suderman, also a Kanadier born in Altona, was ordained and went to India. Both received their American “credentials” by studying at Moody.<sup>21</sup>

The real impetus for direct Canadian involvement in foreign missions came after the influx of large numbers of Rusländer. The only Rusländer to be appointed under the MB mission Board prior to 1944, however, was Abraham A. Unruh who was commissioned in 1936 and served a long term in India.<sup>22</sup> Why was this the case? Peter Penner is quite pointed in stating the reasons:

Some members of the Board of Foreign Missions, notably Heinrich S. Voth...wanted to limit access to missionary service to those who stemmed from the Russian

immigrants of the 1870s [Kanadier]. In the case of H. S. Voth, for many years the leading minister at Winkler....this feeling probably began with the coming to Winkler of a famous trio of Bible school teachers from the Crimea, Johann G. Wiens (the former missionary to India), Gerhard Reimer, and Abram H. Unruh.... Evidently Voth felt overshadowed by these better educated Russländer. Whereas Voth served on the Board of Foreign Missions for many years, it was A. H. Unruh who was known as the educator and Bible expositor....

It appears that [his] son's acceptance as a missionary to India was delayed because of feelings over this and other differences between the two culturally diverse groups within the MB conference. In the end the younger Unruh was accepted for service in 1936 largely because he had married Anna Elias, the daughter of a Kanadier, J. M. Elias, who served as Canadian treasurer of the Board of Foreign Missions.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, Unruh was married to Annie Enns. Other factors must therefore have accounted for his acceptance.

The most visible manifestation of the tensions between the Russländer and the Americans was the emergence of a rival Russländer mission agency—the *Afrika Missionsverein*. The beginnings of the *Afrika Missionsverein* relate to the efforts of the Henry Bartsches, who were *Russländer* from Dalmeny, Saskatchewan, to become accepted as missionary candidates to Africa.<sup>24</sup> The Dalmeny church consisted mostly of late Kanadier. The Bartsches attended Winkler Bible School and under the tutelage of the three main *Russländer* founders of the school (Abraham H. Unruh, Johann G. Wiens and Gerhard J. Reimer), became convinced that God wanted them to enter missionary service. Bartsch did not receive support from his home church but, interestingly, received support from the Brudertaler church in Steinbach. But Bartsch also sought support from the MB board and contacted N. N. Hiebert who advised him to attend Tabor College first and that might lead to his acceptance.<sup>25</sup> His efforts to be admitted to Tabor apparently met without response. The Bartsches left Dalmeny without support from their relatives, home church or conference in 1931. But they had considerable support from fellow students at Winkler and in 1932 an independent effort to secure financial backing was under way. Gerhard Reimer and a few students organized the *Afrika Missionskomitee*. The Bartsches then proceeded to Africa for their first term, returning for a furlough in 1935. On his furlough Bartsch went to Hillsboro to seek the support of the Board of Missions but failed. As a consequence the committee became more formally organized and incorporated as the *Afrika Missionsverein* late in 1935.<sup>26</sup>

Repeated efforts to have the society's missionaries accepted by the mission board failed until 1943.<sup>27</sup> In the meantime a number of other *Russländer* missionaries were appointed by the society while the only Canadians appointed by the MB mission board during this time were the Unruhs and, as indicated above, the process of their acceptance seems to confirm that there was some discrimination against Canadians, especially against Russländer.

Although a unified mission effort under one board became a reality by the mid-forties, there were signs for many years of Canadian resentment that the Americans appeared to control the process. Representation on the mission board was not proportionate and the Hillsboro office was like a funnel through which Canadian candidates had to be channelled. In 1956, for example, the Board of Reference and Counsel (*Fürsorgekomitee*) of the Canadian Conference was asked to respond to the question: "Why do missionary candidates

still have to go to Hillsboro in spite of adequate training?" Although answers were provided it is clear that the issues continued to trouble the Canadians.

### Publications

The story concerning periodical publication is the most complex and shows the division between the US and Canadian constituencies most clearly. None of the other major Mennonite groups have drawn such a sharp line at the international boundary in regard to periodical publication.

The first official organ of the North American MBs was the German Language *Zionsbote*, which began publication in 1885. An official English language periodical, *The Christian Leader*, did not begin until 1937. Both were published in Hillsboro, Kansas, and were distributed broadly among MBs in the US and Canada.

Another German language periodical, the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, was widely read by Mennonites from Russia. It was established as the *Nebraska Ansiedler* in 1878 and two years later became the *Mennonitische Rundschau*. At first it was published in Elkhart, Indiana, then in Scottdale, Pennsylvania, but in 1924 it moved to Winnipeg, a central location for Mennonites from Russia. During the next several decades it was widely read by Mennonites of various groups, but it increasingly became the preferred paper for MBs, especially since *Der Bote*, published in Rosthern Saskatchewan (later in Saskatoon), increasingly became the paper for the CMC (GC) Mennonites in Canada. In 1945 a group of Canadian MBs purchased the Christian Press corporation which published the MR and in the following years the Canadian Conference of MB Churches purchased more and more shares until it owned all the shares by 1960. The MR became the official German language periodical of the Canadian MB Conference.

The period from 1945 to 1962 was the turning point for nationalization of both English and German language publications in Canada and both happened with considerable resistance from the US. The *Zionsbote* fell more and more into disfavor with Canadian MBs while the number of German readers in the US declined rapidly. With the complete adoption of the MR by Canadian MBs the paper soon ceased publication altogether (1964) and the remaining subscriptions were given to the MR.

English language publication was more complex. The Canadian MBs made several efforts to begin an English language paper. In 1955 the *Mennonite Observer* began publication as an English language companion to the MR. In the meantime, however, a more ecumenical effort had begun with the publication of the *Canadian Mennonite* in 1953. The publishers hoped that MBs would join in this cooperative venture. But there was little enthusiasm for this.<sup>28</sup> Renewed efforts focused on unifying publication efforts by MBs in US and Canada. The minutes of the *Fürsorgekomitee* in 1956 observed that publication efforts in Canada had grown substantially because the needs in Canada had not been adequately understood in the US. Now, it continued, the mistakes had been acknowledged and the Conference was committed to a united effort to produce better papers.<sup>29</sup>

By 1961, however, the Canadian Conference had officially rejected this proposal. Instead it created a new official English language MB periodical called the *Mennonite Breth-*

ren Herald, which began publication in 1962. For more than a year, therefore, Canadian MBs actually had two official English language periodicals and two official German language periodicals. Formally, separation did not come until 1963, but the signs had been clear for more than a decade and it was primarily the difficulties in dealing with their US counterparts that slowed the transition and often made it very painful.

### Advanced Theological Education

Probably the most difficult issues in US/Canadian MB relations have been those related to post-secondary education, specifically theological education at the college and seminary levels. Both constituencies also had Bible schools, some of which became transformed into Bible colleges or Christian liberal arts schools, but Bible school education was usually more regional, especially in Canada, and did not become a major issue at the international level.

Hillsboro, Kansas, was the centre of Mennonite Brethren educational efforts until the mid-forties, just as it was the centre for missions and publication. Tabor College was founded in 1908.<sup>30</sup> The Bible Department was the core of the program, even though Tabor had a broader liberal arts component from the beginning.

Tabor College was formally accepted as a General Conference school in 1933. A Bachelor of Religious Education degree program was begun in 1936 and in 1938 Tabor began offering a graduate theology degree called the ThG. This was changed to a BD program in 1944 and continued until it was transferred to Fresno in 1955.

The role of Tabor College as a North American MB General Conference institution gradually changed. Many Canadian MBs, including Russländer, attended Tabor College at least until the early 1950s. Among these were prominent leaders like A. H. Unruh, J. A. Toews, J. J. Toews, F. C. Peters, and many others. The latter even became president for a short period (1954-56). According to David Ewert, "the fact that a Canadian had been asked to head up an American school did not sit well with some of the staff members."<sup>31</sup> But at the same time there was a growing sense that Canadians needed their own school of higher theological learning both for the preparation of congregational leaders and for the preparation of missionaries. This school became a reality in 1944 when the Mennonite Brethren Bible College was founded. A review of the documents surrounding the founding of MBBC shows very little evidence that the school was deliberately begun as a rival school of Tabor College. But the realities were such that it could not be understood in any other way. The Russländer, many of whom had been prominent promoters of the *Afrika Missionsverein*, were the main promoters of the new school.<sup>32</sup> The purposes of the two schools overlapped. The potential for significant duplication of efforts and fragmentation of educational programs was already noted as a major concern at the 1948 convention.<sup>33</sup> Much energy during the next decade was devoted to the "unification" issue. One of the main differences with respect to theological training in the two countries was, of course, that German language instruction was still important during the early years at MBBC.

At the same time that MBBC was gaining support in Canada, Tabor College declined substantially in popularity among Canadians. Tabor experienced its own internal crisis during this period and Canadians were suspicious of issues of lifestyle and theology.<sup>34</sup> Appeals for

financial support from Canadians often fell on deaf ears.

The same year that MBBC was founded in Winnipeg another school was founded in Fresno - the Pacific Bible Institute. Although in some respects this school was perhaps initially more analogous to various Bible institutes in Canada, it also became another school which threatened the role of Tabor as the General Conference institution and served to fragment the vision for a unified effort in theological education.

### The Constitutional Crisis of 1954

The issue of education was the single most important factor underlying what J. A. Toews called the "constitutional crisis" of 1954.<sup>35</sup> But the crisis was really the culmination of various factors that brought into sharp focus the underlying differences between the US and Canadian Mennonite Brethren. The international boundary was not a line separating two identical religious communities. It was a line separating two distinct groups of MBs who owed allegiance to two different nation states each with its own history, political system and cultural and racial mix. The majority of MBs in each of the countries came to their respective environments at different times—almost fifty years apart. Even at the time of immigration in the 1870s there were probably some differences between those who left and those who chose to remain. But the fifty years of separation were years of massive change in the respective environments and years of transforming experiences. The Russländer experienced the severe trauma of the Bolshevik Revolution with its aftermath resulting in severe testing of their religious commitment in a hostile environment. Cultural change was also monumental on both continents. By the 1930s, when the two communities began interacting in NA more frequently, language and lifestyle issues formed a considerable barrier between the two communities.

The General Conference convention of 1954 was the watershed in terms of a new relationship between American and Canadian MBs. By that time the Canadian membership (12,202) had surpassed the American (10,740) and the Canadians were much more self-confident about determining their own destiny.

The first concrete steps appear to have been taken at a meeting of the Canadian *Fürsorgekomitee* in November, 1953. The agenda included an item under the heading, "The Relationship of the Canadian Conference to the Programs of the General Conference." Here the various areas of joint participation were listed and the committee acknowledged that the Canadian Conference was not contributing its share in terms of financial support. Furthermore, it stated that the needs, interests and points of view of the Canadians differed from the Americans except in terms of missions and welfare (*Hilfswerk*). In view of the forthcoming convention in Hillsboro the committee decided to prepare a recommendation based upon a new concept. With respect to finances, Canada should have more representation on the Board and the members should be elected in Canada so that the US brothers would not determine the nature of Canadian representation. The following statement was sent to the *Fürsorgekomitee* of the General Conference:

We have concluded that the circumstances and needs of the churches in the US are different from those of the Canadian churches. In addition almost all the northern

churches use the German language almost exclusively. Economically, our churches are not as strong as the churches in the USA and this often hinders us from contributing proportionately to the joint programs.

For these reasons the Canadian members of the various boards have often felt constricted and from time to time have wondered whether it would not be better for practical reasons for the North to withdraw from participation in certain areas and to launch out on their own.

The committee assured their brothers in the USA of their respect and common spiritual bonds.

The above statement set the stage for some very difficult deliberations at the General Conference convention in October, 1954. In the months prior to the convention work was begun on a new constitution, but time did not permit adequate negotiations to resolve problematic issues. On June 7, 1954 the Canadians were asked whether the English version of the new constitution would be adequate for review purposes since there was insufficient time to translate it into German. The Canadian Conference then considered the issue at its convention in Virgil, Ontario in July after the *Fürsorgekomitee* had met again. The consensus, which was forwarded to the GC convention in Hillsboro in October, was that many joint program areas of the GC had fallen away quite naturally (including Sunday School, Youth work, Tabor College, and Home Missions). Active cooperation was still evident in areas such as the work of the Board of Reference and Counsel (*Fürsorgekomitee*), Board of Foreign Missions, Board of Trustees and Board of Welfare and these should be strengthened.<sup>36</sup> Both large church bodies, which were now about equal in size, should be equally represented on the boards which were responsible for these areas of common endeavour.

When the Constitution Committee reported to the convention in Hillsboro it recommended that the new constitution be accepted on a trial basis for the next triennium. After considerable wrangling a "revised revision" was adopted as a basis of operation for the next three years.<sup>37</sup>

But the debate did not end with this. A more problematic debate arose in the discussions concerning Tabor College. Coincidentally, it was the same year that a Canadian, Frank C. Peters, became President of Tabor. A series of recommendations were presented to the delegates, many of which were hotly debated and often rejected or revised. Before any specific action regarding the fifteen recommendations could be considered, the Canadian delegation presented the following statement, which was read by J. A. Toews:

a) That the Canadian delegation abstain from the discussion of the unification issue and that the matter be regulated as an area issue: b) That Canada through its delegation has consented to voluntary participation in the spiritual, moral, and financial support of the General Conference Educational Program subject to a further review at the next Canadian Conference: c) That after the completion of the organizational pattern of the General Conference school program as affected by the USA area, provisional agreement be reached in areas which may affect the USA or Canadian areas.<sup>38</sup>

The first recommendation, that Pacific Bible Institute be accepted as a General Conference school, was then voted on and accepted with the abstention of some delegates. Other

recommendations were dealt with but without definitive statements about the future of the educational institutions. Canada was left with only one member on the Board of Education which consisted of thirteen members.

The next six years were years of considerable uncertainty. In 1955 the Canadian Conference debated whether or not to honour the so-called concessions that the Canadian delegation had made at the 1954 General Conference, i.e., that Canadians would not withdraw completely from support for Tabor College. In principle, they decided, that the Virgil decision would remain but Tabor College could request one collection annually from each of the Canadian congregations. In addition, Canada should continue to be represented on the board with one voting member. At the General Conference convention in Yarrow in 1957 the topic of "unification" and constitutional adoption was again on the agenda. There were expressions of confession and repentance that past actions had not always been taken with a view to the good of the conference as a whole and that even "personal factors [had] sometimes stood in the way of unity and brotherly love."<sup>39</sup> The adoption of a new constitution was again postponed. A recommendation that the US and Canada not continue programs of expansion in the area of higher theological education because they might hinder the process of unification was passed.

The next Canadian Conference convention once again raised doubts about how serious Canadians were about working out joint programs in theological education. The delegates went on record as wishing to honour the General Conference decision but nevertheless stated that they were intent on keeping their goals clear and would pursue planning for theological education at the BD level at the College in Winnipeg.<sup>40</sup>

The GC convention in Reedley, California finally accepted the revised constitution in 1960. The constitution stated that education at the undergraduate level was the responsibility of the newly created area (national) conferences. Graduate level education was left for further action by the General Conference.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Continuing Saga: Seminary Education**

The story of the vicissitudes of seminary education at the national or General Conference level until 1975 has been told in its essentials by Abe J. Klassen.<sup>42</sup> Although seminary education has remained a General Conference program since 1975, it is clear that the last two decades have not transpired without difficulties and there have been renewed calls by Canadians that seminary education should be available to Canadians in their own country. Some of the reasons for the concerns have changed. In recent years the decline in the value of the Canadian currency has been a serious problem. But there has also been concern because of the increasing number of Canadians attending various seminaries in Canada and the fact that too few pastors in both countries are receiving their training in an MB school. Some seminary level training has been offered at MBBC in Winnipeg for most of the last three decades and is under development as part of the new Canadian Mennonite University. In addition, a seminary program is now being offered in British Columbia. All of these factors point to the fact that the 49th parallel continues to be a major factor in determining the shape of seminary training.

### **Kanadier Converts, American Canadians, Americans, Russländer, late Russländer**

The dynamics of US/Canada relations among MBs have been both unique and complex. Although this paper has not described the developments among other Mennonite groups it seems clear that there was no close parallel in any of the other groups.

The Mennonite Church, while it had a significant membership in Ontario, was always much larger in the US. Independent institutional developments in Canada were slow in coming and small by comparison with US institutions. Periodical publication was always centered in the US and most theological training occurred in the US.

The GC Mennonite church was the only one of the larger Mennonite bodies that had some of the same dynamics. It had a large contingent of Mennonites who immigrated from Russia to the USA in the 1870s and had Kanadier, late Kanadier, Russländer and late Russländer in Canada. It also developed significant educational institutions and periodical publications in Canada. But in the US the membership included many of Swiss/South German background. Furthermore, the US membership was always considerably larger than the Canadian membership and English language publication remained centred in the US. A graduate theology degree program was never fully established in Canada (CMBC) as it was at MBBC.

Canadian Mennonite Brethren, after the influx of the Russländer in the 1920s, remained more separated from their American counterparts than other Mennonite groups were from their respective counterparts. They frequently complained about inadequate representation, lack of understanding and lack of coverage in the American-based periodicals. For a period of time the English language formed a major barrier for most of them. Americans had more financial resources which put Canadians at a disadvantage—the Americans were the “big shots.”<sup>43</sup> The needs of the two constituencies were different, according to the Canadians.

Canadian MBs probably associated more with other Mennonites, especially Russländer with Russländer, than American MBs did with their counterparts in the US.<sup>44</sup> American MBs were a relatively small group in relation to other Mennonite groups in their country. They often associated more with evangelicals in the US. The Conference of Mennonites in Canada was in some ways most analogous to the Canadian MB Conference and had a large group of Russländer who had had similar experiences and had a common culture. But the Russländer in the CMC were not as prominent in numbers and influence in the GC Church in North America as a whole as the Russländer MBs were in their conference.

The American MBs seldom seemed to understand why the Canadians wanted to develop their own institutions. They usually resisted efforts to form two distinct national bodies which had equal representation on boards at the GC level.

American MBs learned about Canadian MBs through contacts with Canadians at US schools such as Tabor, through pastors and teachers who frequently took positions in the USA, and through some coverage in the periodicals. Almost never did US MBs come to Canadian schools, take positions as pastors (until later) or teachers or otherwise mix with Canadians in a Canadian setting. Canadians, on the other hand, learned about Americans by attending American schools (Mennonite and other), by becoming pastors and teachers in the USA and then often returning to Canada. It was almost impossible to contemplate having a GC program or institution (e.g., periodical, mission office or seminary) based in Canada.

More recently the head office of the mission board was based in Canada for a time, but even then the US office remained strong. The proposal to locate the seminary in British Columbia in the 1970s failed.<sup>45</sup> It was easier to have a strong core of Canadian faculty in a seminary based in the US than to have a joint seminary based in BC. Canadian students might attend a US institution, but very few Americans could be expected to attend a Canadian institution.

For North American Mennonite Brethren the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel was simultaneously a political boundary between two countries and a boundary separating two groups with different histories, experiences and cultural characteristics. The coincidence of these factors accentuated the potential for conflict and tension between the two groups. The group of Kanadier converts and immigrants from the US to Canada was not large enough to bridge the gap.

Although some of the factors that determined the nature of the boundary have changed and some of the cultural, ecclesiological and theological differences have become less distinguishable, new factors have emerged to reinforce the old boundaries (e.g., finances, emergence of new institutions) which have continued to plague efforts toward unity. The strength of the global MB community and the ease of communication has tended to erode the concept of a North American General Conference, and the triumphalism or imperialism imbedded in it. Internationalization, with the emergence of organizations such as ICOMB (International Council of Mennonite Brethren), is at one level a process which minimizes the significance of international boundaries, but at another level erases the special relationships that have existed between the two large North American MB bodies.

Cultural, political, economic and religious factors make it very difficult to create a truly global Mennonite Brethren conference in which all countries participate equally or proportionately. A special relationship will undoubtedly continue to characterize Mennonite Brethren in the United States and Canada because of obvious factors such as geographical proximity and cultural and social affinities. Regionalism within each of these two nations is also a major factor. But the past century of Mennonite Brethren experience in North America has demonstrated the reality of two communities which have retained quite distinct identities despite a very permeable international boundary and despite many other forces which have united them in many causes..

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Rich Preheim, "Border to Define Church Organization," *The Mennonite*, 7 April 1998, 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Paul Toews, "Do we really want to dissolve the General Conference?" *Christian Leader*, June 1997, 16-19, and "Revisiting MB Conference Structures," in *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, June 13, 1997, 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 94.

<sup>4</sup> See Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto, ON: Macmillan of Canada, 1982): 242f.

<sup>5</sup> E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia* (Altona, MB: D. W. Friesen & Sons, 1955), 208ff.

<sup>6</sup> Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 243-44.

<sup>7</sup> Congregations that began in this era included Bruderfeld (1901), Ebenezer (Dalmeny-1901), Hoffnungsfeld (Borden-1904), Main Centre (1904), Herbert (1905), Aberdeen (1906), Gnadenau (1907), Elim (1907), Woodrow (1909), Hepburn (1910), Greenfarm (1912), Bethania (1913), Fox Valley (1914), and Waldheim (1918). Elder David Dyck, who had first come to Winkler from the USA, moved to Saskatchewan in 1906 to join the Borden church.

<sup>8</sup> Another peculiarity of the MB mix in Saskatchewan was that at least by 1905 two congregations (Arelee and Blaine Lake Bearlier known as Petrovka) joined a North Dakota church (Kief) to form a conference of Russian MB churches. They held an annual convention for many years. The MB conference began a Russian periodical called *Golos*, published in Hillsboro, KS, to serve this community. It was published from 1905 to 1913.

<sup>9</sup> See Abraham H. Unruh, *Kurze Notizen uber Grundung, Bestehen, Bedeutung und Schlieung der Schule* (Winkler, MB: Winkler Printery, 1926?), and Margaret Reimer, *The Story of the Crimea Bible School Theological Seminary: 1918-1924* (Kingsville, ON: by the author, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> "Ist ein Zusammenschluss der russlandischen Brader mit den canadischen Gemeinschaften moglich und notwendig?" Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg. Hereafter CMBS.

<sup>11</sup> Epp, *Mennonites in Canada*, 262.

<sup>12</sup> David Ewert, *Honour Such People* (Winnipeg, MB: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1997), 101.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob H. Quiring, "Post-midnight Reflections on MBBC," 4. CMBS, Winnipeg.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed analysis see John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), Ch. 13.

<sup>15</sup> The new constitution was accepted in 1945. See *1946 Year Book of the 36th Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America*.

<sup>16</sup> *Year Book of the 46th General Conference*, 16-18.

<sup>17</sup> Saskatchewan was divided into Northern and Southern District Conferences for a time.

<sup>18</sup> See Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telugus: The Mennonite Brethren Mission in India 1885-1975* (Winnipeg, Hillsboro: Kindred Productions, 1997): 116.

<sup>19</sup> *Zionsbote*, 14 May, 1902, 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> Exact comparisons could not be made because some of the districts did not report memberships.

<sup>21</sup> Suderman also studied at Tabor College.

<sup>22</sup> B. Epp went under the Fernheim Mission Society, Esau, p. 402; Peters, Growth, 107.

<sup>23</sup> Penner, *Russians, North Americans, and Telugus*, 116.

<sup>24</sup> A detailed account of the *Afrika Missionsverein* and the problems between Kanadier and Russlander can be found in Ben Doerksen, "Mennonite Brethren Missions: Historical Development, Philosophy, and Policies" Doctor in Missiology dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 1986, ch. IV. There is no entry on the *Afrika Missionsverein* in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* and J. A. Toews, in his *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, only makes a brief reference to it without reference to the "political" issues that resulted in tension between the US and Canadian MBs. For a time the *Afrika Missionsverein* published *Der Kleine Afrika Bote* (1936-43) which reported about the origins and work of the society.

<sup>25</sup> See Ben Doerksen, "Mennonite Brethren Missions," 94.

<sup>26</sup> See Cornelius J. Funk, "Die Entstehung des Afrika-Missionsvereins," in *Der Kleine Afrika Bote*, April, 1937:9-11; June, 1937:9-12; July, 1937:9-12; August, 1937:10-11.

<sup>27</sup> An independent effort had begun in 1912 under the Aaron Janzens from the US. They began work under the Congo Inland Mission, opening the Nyanga field, and much of their support came from

MBs. See J. B. Toews, *The Mennonite Brethren Church in Zaire* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978): 43ff.

<sup>28</sup> The *Fürsorgekomitee* minutes of December, 1956 state that the *Canadian Mennonite* had made repeated offers to combine the two papers, but for certain reasons the FSK didn't feel that the offer was acceptable. Minutes at CMBS, Winnipeg.

<sup>29</sup> C. A. DeFehr wrote to D. J. Pankratz indicating, among other things, that Canadians ought to have equal representation on the Board. Correspondence of *Fürsorgekomitee* at CMBS, Winnipeg.

<sup>30</sup> On the early development of Tabor College see A. E. Janzen, *A History of Tabor College* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1958).

<sup>31</sup> Ewert, *Honour Such People*, 131.

<sup>32</sup> These included C. A. DeFehr and A. H. Unruh.

<sup>33</sup> 1948 *Yearbook*, 77.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, some of the serious concerns expressed by B. B. Janz. Personal papers, folder #74, CMBS, Winnipeg.

<sup>35</sup> See J. A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 213.

<sup>36</sup> *Canadian Conference Yearbook*, 1954, 57-58.

<sup>37</sup> *General Conference Yearbook*, 1954, 18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>39</sup> 1957 *Yearbook*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> 1958 *Yearbook*, 90.

<sup>41</sup> 1960 *Yearbook*, 32.

<sup>42</sup> A. J. Klassen, ed. *The Seminary Story: Twenty Years of Education in Ministry, 1955-1975* (Fresno, CA: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1975).

<sup>43</sup> See Franz Thiessen letter to Heinrich Janzen, 26 March, 1943. CMBS, Heinrich H. Janzen, Personal papers, File #47.

<sup>44</sup> On their openness to the "Anabaptist Vision," see my article, "Canadian Mennonites and the Anabaptist Vision," in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995), pp. 71-88.

<sup>45</sup> In 1978 the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches voted that the seminary remain at its location in Fresno. See 1978 *Yearbook*, p. 167.