

# Theology of Migration: The *Ältesten* Reflect<sup>1</sup>

Titus F. Guenther, *Canadian Mennonite University*

## Introduction

This article will focus on the “theological reasons”<sup>2</sup> given by the leading *Ältesten*<sup>3</sup>, that is the church bishops or elders, for the Russian Mennonite emigration to Manitoba in the 1870s. More precisely, it will basically focus on the theological reflections of *Ältester* Gerhard Wiebe (1827-1900, *Bergthal* Colony), *Ältester* Johann Wiebe (1837-1906, *Fürstenland*-Old Colony), and *Ältester* Peter Toews (1841-1922, *Kleine Gemeinde*) as these have been passed on to us in their writings. I shall however also draw on some additional historical-theological sources.

You may ask whether we can properly call the reflections of these church leaders “theological reflections”?<sup>4</sup> I do not doubt they are “theological” in the broader sense, that is, if we do not try to force narrow, specialized theological categories on them. Perhaps it would be more fitting to describe their reflections as “pastoral-biblical position(s),” since their writings on our topic are deeply steeped in the biblical story, language, and imagery. But here, too, while the leaders obviously were avid readers of the Bible, their language was not that of today’s specialized “biblical theology” or that of “systematic theology.” Consider J. Denny Weaver’s comments regarding Gerhard Wiebe’s thought. He uses the category “theological” in a similarly qualified way. He notes that while Gerhard Wiebe’s congregational history, *Causes and History*, “is not a comprehensive statement of theology, it

does open a window into Wiebe's theological and religious outlook."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Weaver uses categories like "Wiebe's theology" and "religious outlook" interchangeably when discussing Elder Wiebe's thought.<sup>6</sup>

What is meant by "theological reflections or positions" of these church leaders may also be "an integrated worldview." To echo Weaver, such a worldview is composed "of humility and simplicity, discipleship, nonresistance, and opposition to education," even though "the integration was not so much that of a theological outlook as it was an understanding of the visible church."<sup>7</sup> Borrowing from current theological terminology, we might suggest that the theological emphases of the *Ältesten* fall more on orthopraxis (right acting) than on orthodoxy (right teaching). What this means, becomes apparent when Weaver asserts, rightly I think, that: "Wiebe did not defend nonresistance or humility or opposition to education by appeals to biblical authority. Much more, the church existed as a living extension of Christ and his disciples. It was a community defined and reinforced by a lifestyle rather than by an explicitly biblical and theological rationale."<sup>8</sup> I submit that this also is applicable to Elders Johann Wiebe and Peter Toews. Obviously one should not press this point too far, for even this preferential emphasis on lifestyle will show itself to be firmly rooted in the biblical imagination and teaching.

The questions I wish to explore include the following. In what way or to what extent did this biblical-theological understanding of the church as a living extension of Christ and his community of disciples inspire and guide the motivation of the church elders to emigrate? Did this theological understanding of themselves as part of Christ's visible church on earth provide the primary motive or was it only one among many motives for the migration? In order to determine this, we need to find out more about the people that emigrated and the situation that caused the migration.

### The Emigrants and Their Leaders

Johann Wiebe, the leading *Ältester* of *Fürstenland* Colony, led some 1,100 "Old Colony" Mennonites from Russia in the 1870s to settle in the West Reserve, in Manitoba."<sup>9</sup> Elder Gerhard Wiebe, a cousin to Johann, was the *Ältester* of the Bergthal Colony; Adolf Ens writes that this leader "persuaded the entire colony of Bergthal [about 3,000 persons, or 500 families] to immigrate to Canada during the years 1874-1876....settling in the East Reserve...east of the Red River in southern Manitoba."<sup>10</sup> But some Bergthalers would soon cross the Red, joining their Old Colony cousins on the West Reserve, without however forming one integrated church with the Johann Wiebe group. Elder Peter Toews was the leader of the migration of about two thirds of the *Kleine Gemeinde*, "the Enns group," to Manitoba, where they settled on both sides of the Red River, a minority at Scratching River Reserve west of the Red, and the majority in the East Reserve.<sup>11</sup> The other third of the *Kleine Gemeinde*, the "Friesen group," went to Nebraska.

According to the biographers of the two Wiebes the leaders were "basically...of the same spirit," in that they held "extremely conservative religious and cultural

views.”<sup>12</sup> By “conservatism” they meant that they preferred “the traditional cultural patterns, such as the closed village community, the independent parochial village school, and the autonomy of the Mennonite communities,” which were equally dear to the two *Ältesten*. In time the steadfast followers of Gerhard Wiebe would show themselves as more “progressive” and become more open to higher education than were the followers of Johann Wiebe. If this was not true for all former Bergthalers in Canada, it certainly was of the group that migrated to the Paraguayan Chaco in 1927.

The notions of “progressive” or “conservative” may need to be set aside so as to let the leaders speak for themselves. Historians offer us handy lists of causes and factors that led to the migration. James Urry, for instance, identifies and discusses many of the central reasons for the migration.<sup>13</sup> He submits that the Russian emigration happened because of a “complex” mixture of economic, social and religious motives. He concludes that in “a wider perspective, the Mennonite migration of the 1870s was in part a response to larger changes that had occurred both within and beyond the Mennonite communities established in Russia.” Certain “recent government reforms” had made Mennonites uncertain of their status in Russia. Urry adds:

long-term tensions within the Mennonite communities undoubtedly contributed to the decision to emigrate. This was particularly true among conservative...groups. There were serious, long-standing doubts among many concerning the direction of Mennonite life in Russia. These doubts included not just the unwillingness of many to accept official policies, but also the eagerness of some to seek economic reward at the expense of fellow brethren, as well as the enthusiasm for new kinds of knowledge and higher learning and the desire for new forms of religious practice. Recent events merely increased these doubts. Political corruption, religious dissent and schism, the ugly struggles over land — all were viewed as ill omens for the future.<sup>14</sup>

Against this situation “emigration promised a great deal,” writes Urry. He continues that “there were new lands to be settled and new economic opportunities to be secured” and adds that above all “there was a desire to make a new beginning, away from official interference, from other groups, and from other Mennonites whose way of life was being rejected.”

Peter D. Zacharias’ list of reasons for the 1870s migration to Manitoba is more pointed.<sup>15</sup> He notes that though they were a “diverse group,” a series of “unifying forces” bound them together. The immigrants were generally agreed on the following: 1) they were opposed to alternative service; 2) they were “generally opposed to ‘Russification’”; 3) they “generally wished to settle in villages” under the provisions of the “hamlet privilege”; 4) they “favoured *en bloc* settlements”; 5) they “desired freedom to have their own schools”; 6) they wanted total exemption from military service, a wish that relates to the first item.

The reasons for emigration identified by Urry and Zacharias, though supported

in the writings of the Elders, actually tell us little of the theological underpinnings of the migration. Clearly they were frightened by Russia's modernization efforts, spurred on by the country's disastrous loss in the Crimean War in the 1850s. Furthermore, the Bergthal, Fürstenland, and Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites could not fathom a community-life in which leadership was to be shared with Russian people as the newly proposed *Volosts*, or district communities, would require. Much less could they imagine assuming civil service positions, being judges or jurors, as they were urged by new government legislation. The *Ältesten* also showed deep commitment to separate Mennonite church schools and were suspicious that higher education would undermine simplicity, equality, humility, and unity in their Christian communities. They were suspicious even of Mennonite high schools or colleges. Gerhard Wiebe, later in Canada, expressed grave doubts about whether teachers in Bethel College were being led by the Spirit of Christ; they might have lost the simplicity symbolized by the Bethlehem of Jesus' birth.<sup>16</sup>

There is also no doubt that landlessness and the poverty of many was an ongoing concern for the colonies. The prospect of available new lands overseas will have been a considerable pull toward migrating. But surely the decisive catalyst for the three groups to move was Russia's decision to upgrade its military machine by universalizing conscription. This specter prompted many negotiations between inter-Mennonite leaders and high-level Russian authorities, all of which is described at length in Wiebe's *Causes & History*. In an effort to avert massive Mennonite emigration, the Russian government finally offered alternative service, namely service in the medical corps or the forestry, as an option to Mennonites. This only led to a split between the majority who were willing to accommodate themselves to alternative service and a sizeable minority of about one third of all Mennonites in Russia for whom any form of civil service, including combatant and non-combatant military service, was irreconcilable with their understanding of the church's calling to Christian discipleship within the wider society.

Were these the key reasons for emigrating or were these rather "symptoms" of deeper, underlying theological reasons? What were their salient theological reasons for emigrating from Russia to Canada? Gerhard Wiebe gives some practical reasons for his peoples' choice of Canada over the United States. After the delegates returned with "two letters of guarantee" of "exemption from military service" Wiebe noted the following:

Now the church could choose. It chose Canada because it was under the protection of the Queen of England; and we believed that our freedom from military service would survive longer there[than in the United States] and [it was also important] that church and school would remain under our own jurisdiction.<sup>17</sup>

But in terms of theology, were they simply trying to make time stand still and keep things as they were? To portray them simply as having "extremely conservative religious and cultural views" is not helpful.<sup>18</sup> Urry, though correctly naming many factors, seems to have some doubts about a "transcendent" motivation of the

emigrants. He writes that later the migration leaders “came to rationalize their move and [came] to see the migration increasingly as a divinely inspired exodus; guided by God..., sacrificing all for the sake of conscience.”<sup>19</sup> We may leave aside what Urry means by “transcendent motivation.” But was it “rationalization” or were the emigrant groups perhaps motivated by values that showed their “transcendence” precisely in their practical expression of faith in Christian communities? Christian living was very “down to earth” for these churches. Zacharias, for example, writes the following about Johann Wiebe:

*Ältester* Wiebe’s intentions were not to preserve the status quo, not to keep things the way they were. His intentions were to restore the New Testament Church as he understood that church. The receipt of assurances from the Russian government that arrangements for a forestry service could be made, albeit in uniform, in lieu of service in the military, placated many Russian Mennonite church leaders - they accepted it - but those assurances did not satisfy *Ältester* Johann Wiebe. He saw that acceptance as but another sign of how far the church had drifted from its moorings in the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup>

The same, it will be seen, could be said of the leaders of the Bergthaler and Kleine Gemeinde groups. Gerhard Wiebe reports that General von Todleben’s words that “you will not need to take the sword, only work in the forestry camps” actually caused the Bergthaler brethren, after deliberating as a church body, to “unanimously agree...to emigrate.” Peter Toews’ 1872 petition on behalf of the Kleine Gemeinde to the government is equally clear: “we cannot nor are we allowed to acquiesce in anything nor to accept any duties whereby war will be supported....nor can we take up any medical or supportive service as we did in 1854-1855 during the Crimean War.”<sup>21</sup>

All three *Ältesten* made great efforts to seek legal exemption from requirements that went against their Christian convictions before opting, after diligent church deliberations, to leave Russia. As well, they went out of their way to assure the government, in what seems excessive submissiveness, of their willingness to obey all laws as long as they did not conflict with the Mennonites’ primary Christian faith commitment. The Kleine Gemeinde petition, for example, states that “we wish to follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and be true to our faith.”<sup>22</sup> Here we are touching the central theological issue that informs the decision, ultimately, to leave their beloved homeland, Russia, in search of another where they would be at liberty again to live out their Christian convictions. The Kleine Gemeinde wished for the freedom to conduct life according to “the full gospel faith,” for as Toews noted, his people were in a “crisis of the full gospel faith in Russia.”<sup>23</sup> This was partly because of the modernization procedures in Russia. But it was also partly because of frictions with the main Mennonite Church at Molotschna Colony which was excluding the Kleine Gemeinde from military service negotiations with the Czar. Toews says it “seems somewhat ironic to the Kleine Gemeinde that the groups who did not hesitate to beat and to imprison each other had suddenly rediscovered the principle of

nonresistance when the issue of military service arose.” Those churches excluded the *Kleine Gemeinde* even though it had tenaciously rejected an association with any element of coercion, including the maintaining of prisons which was practiced on the Molotschna Colony. Toews and his *Kleine Gemeinde* thus found it necessary to approach the government independently with their own petition, as the *Bergthaler* would also do.<sup>24</sup> But the result of all the petitions was similar; the Czar’s agents expressed sympathy to their pleas, but added that Mennonites must accept some service in uniform to forestall the envy of the Russian people. Hearing this, the *Kleine Gemeinde* concluded that it “must once more be ready to surrender...all by leaving Russia.”<sup>25</sup> It could simply not compromise its stance on nonresistance for it had been one of its founding principles.

### Pacifism - Cause or Symptom?

At first glance, one might conclude from this that pacifism was the very center piece of the faith and life of the *Kleine Gemeinde* as it was for the two other groups. But I submit that this is not strictly so. The central tenet of the *Kleine Gemeinde* church, we could say, was rooted in a prior aspiration to respond to, and imitate, the love which Jesus Christ first showed to them. For “If we have love for Him then we shall also have love for one another,” Toews reminded his church, and added that Christ said “by this shall [everybody] know that ye are my disciples . . . .”<sup>26</sup>

We find a similar dynamic in the writings of *Ältester* Johann Wiebe. Wiebe’s “Farewell Sermon,” while clearly and decidedly advocating a consequent pacifist life for his church, embeds this theme also in a primordial commitment by his church to follow after Jesus Christ in all matters. The church he envisions is decidedly a peace church, but it is also part of the pilgrim people of God of all times, from the Old Testament times onward. This church counted on having to suffer for living a non-conformed life of discipleship. As for him personally, Johann Wiebe wrote, leaving his material possessions or home in Russia was as nothing compared to his concern about leaving behind the members of his congregation who were not willing or not yet ready to emigrate with him.

On the same subject, Gerhard Wiebe muses about the time his church sent off its delegates in 1873, saying: “Yes, dear reader, at that time we still were of ‘one heart and one soul’ because all, whether rich or poor, said, even if we don’t get the best land, as long as we can get a spot where we can feed ourselves and our children, and above all where we can follow our religion according to God’s Word; and above all that we could have our own schools in order to teach the children God’s Word and commandments.”<sup>27</sup> These words thus would relativize Urry’s point that prospective wealth in North America was a decisive driving factor for migration somewhat.

We may then make our point by overstating it: Johann and Gerhard Wiebe were emigrating not primarily because they wanted to keep the church pure in avoiding military service. Rather, they hoped that, by leaving behind the degenerate life into

which the church was clearly sliding, this church might be renewed in Canada. That this was indeed Johann Wiebe's reasoning is borne out in his *Reisebericht*, travel report, most of which is just that, a detailed reporting on the trip. In the opening paragraphs he says that the trip is in part a simple emigration and in part a flight from obligatory military service. As he puts it, he and his people are "fleeing" to a country that offers "us the freedom to live again according to the Lord's teaching and that of the Apostles."<sup>28</sup>

Then in his closing paragraphs, Johann Wiebe admonishes his congregation again to make God's Word the center and guide for life in their new home. This is something, he reminds them, they had lost in Russia. There Mennonite church members had turned to live in "the way of the flesh," suppressing the Spirit of Christ. And that was the reason they had lost their freedom in Russia. The *Ältester* then becomes explicit, saying that the Mennonites in Russia had chosen to subject themselves and each other to the worldly laws "and increasingly punished disobedient [members] through worldly force" instead of disciplining them "with brotherly punishment."<sup>29</sup> Because biblical discipline receded and the shepherds adopted worldly measures, incompatible with the teachings of Jesus, the Mennonites lost the freedom "with which Christ had freed us" and became slaves again, just like the Galatians whom Paul chided.

The following pointed questions by Johann Wiebe clearly indicate the theology underlying his ministry, and his motives for emigrating:

How can a follower of Jesus, or a congregation of the Lord, exercise such penalty? All of us, who have come to many years in Russia, have often seen it, that the superiors imprisoned the heavily indebted brothers, feeding them mainly bread and water. Moreover they were whipped, while [those treating them thus, are] continuing as brothers and members of the church. Others were punished with monetary fines or [statutory labour that included] chopping wood and digging ditches. Can God [be] pleas[ed with]...such a people? Can he impart his Spirit to them? Alas, no! For Jesus said to his disciples: You know that the princes of this world dominate, and the overlords have power [*Gewalt*]. But it shall not be so among you, [according to] Matthew 20:25. And if it ought not to be like that among his disciples, but only among worldly kings and princes, then all Mennonites who practice such force [*Gewalt*] and domination amongst themselves will not be able to be [Jesus'] disciples and followers, because Jesus says: Thus it shall not be among you. For he says: My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me (John 10:27). But you do not believe because you are not my sheep as I have said to you. Amen, Amen.<sup>30</sup>

Similar concerns about being in danger of losing the New Testament quality in the Mennonite churches in Russia, and also later in Canada, are also widespread in Gerhard Wiebe's reflections. Gerhard Wiebe celebrates church unity, stretched but still holding, during the negotiations for exemption from military service. He laments that church unity and the community's commitment to financial equality are marred

by a few selfish brethren who claim high assessments of their farms. The importance of this unity for Gerhard Wiebe and his church is visible in their willingness to satisfy these unjust demands rather than incur a division. Likewise, when “almost half of [the buildings of] Bergthal burned down [no mention of arson!], including one could say, the best properties,” and when “our mother colony [the Chortitza Colony] did not want to assist us and pay out insurance money”, Bergthal absorbed both the unjust demands of greedy farmers, and the share withheld by the Chortitza Colony.<sup>31</sup> And those who absorbed the costs were the district mayor (the *Oberschulze*), the *Ältester* and a few others, each paying with their personal money. Far from holding a grudge, writes Gerhard Wiebe, “this writer hopes that God has forgiven them as well.”<sup>32</sup> In the end, Gerhard Wiebe was much more concerned about these “false brethren” and their threat to the church’s biblical unity and biblical way of dealing with monetary matters, than he was with the “external enemy” that threatened to impose military service.<sup>33</sup>

What emerges from these theological reasons for leaving Russia for Manitoba is not so much an inflexible conservatism as a passionate New Testament vision for the Mennonite church. This is not to deny that the leaders may well have put too high a premium on the preservation of a “pure church,” while being insufficiently conscious of the fact that the church exists for God’s mission in the world. But their writings display a profound knowledge of the entire Scriptures, into whose story they see themselves to be solidly grafted. Thus Gerhard and Johann Wiebe see the church’s destiny subjected to the same divine rule as that of the Old Testament people of God: when they live in obedience to God’s Word, it will be well with them, even though there will be suffering.

Gerhard Wiebe is more disturbed when his church members put possessions above the well-being of the poor *Anwohner* among them, than he is about the threat of military service, to put it provocatively. And Johann Wiebe is more upset when fellow Mennonites abandon Christ’s servanthood model and adopt the use of force against their disadvantaged fellow church members, than he is at the danger of losing the Mennonite *Privilegium*, the privilege of military exemption. We should not misread this however: Johann Wiebe and a large portion of his church took the threat of universal conscription serious enough that they were willing to leave the familiar for the unknown, much as Abraham of the Old Testament followed the call of God into the unknown future. In his *Sermon*, Johann Wiebe actually interprets the government’s new military policy as God’s way of shaking up the lax churches, as a cleansing by God, and even as a type of “Abrahamic call” to leave behind the familiar community and follow God’s leading into an uncertain future.

These leaders were not naive dreamers when they tried to restore the New Testament church. Experience had made them realistic about their own churches and, for that matter, about the New Testament church itself. All three *Ältesten* note that there were “false brethren” already in the church of the apostles.<sup>34</sup> Peter Toews also warns “that the Kleine Gemeinde [is] not to be praised nor glorified either” because it had had many problems. But Toews knows this has happened before in history: “Like the Apostolic [churches] on which it is modeled [and even while it



emulated the Anabaptist model] the *Kleine Gemeinde* has also experienced internal strife and division, differences in doctrine, the defection of a beloved leader, etc.”<sup>35</sup> Johann Wiebe, showing similar “realism” about the imperfections of the early church, confesses that the “affliction” that caused the Mennonites to leave Russia, is mild in comparison to what Christians in other ages had to endure.<sup>36</sup>

Peter Zacharias seems right, then, in submitting that these Mennonite church leaders were not primarily “conservatives”, seeking to maintain the status quo. On the contrary, they sought to move their churches away from complacency, from conforming themselves to the attitudes and practices of unbelievers, including the use of force and coercion on their fellow Mennonites. The leaders called their churches to repentance and to a consequent, consistent life of discipleship. This would manifest itself not merely in refusal to use weapons (of course it had to do this!) but in a life as Christ’s body in faith, hope and love. It meant avoiding the use of force against any members. It also meant unity and mutual accountability that came with voluntary membership in a church. Finally, it entailed a belief that equality should determine the value and use of material possessions and that these possessions should secure only the well-being of members. Thus material goods and their stewardly usage formed an integral part of the “transcendent” Christian life of the church.

A similar evaluation can also be discerned in the seemingly suspicious attitude of the leaders toward higher education. Gerhard Wiebe often addressed this concern, both before leaving Russia and after settling in Manitoba. He was leery about higher education as it was sure to foster pride and arrogance, which in turn would undermine equality, simplicity and unity in the life of the church. It was this concern that undergirded his denunciation of Bethel College, the Kansas Mennonite institution of higher learning, as a place that turned people “away from the simple Bethlehem”; still, it was his hope “that the Lord will also have His own in Bethel College.”<sup>37</sup> This apparent attitude to education was not simply conservatism, but part of an ecclesiology that was committed to following the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and the apostles. Gerhard Wiebe was not a person who was “uneducated, paranoiac and rather ignorant in understanding the cruel world beyond the colony” as one historian cited by Adolf Ens suggests. Rather Wiebe’s goal is not unlike the aspirations of the Mennonite church schools of today. Adolf Ens offers this formulation: “Wiebe attempted with great conviction to maintain the school as handmaiden of the church; its main function was to prepare children for responsible church membership.”<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, the theology at work in the early Russian Mennonite migrations to Manitoba is a theology at the center of which stands the vision and practice of the New Testament church, a church committed to faithful discipleship. We may feel that, unfortunately, their theology was expressed in antiquated terms and practice; we may feel that a good dose of formal systematic or biblical theological training could have made them more articulate, and hence more convincing, before their worldly interlocutors than was the case with their too narrowly biblical language. These objections may have some validity. The Russian authorities, however,

seemed to understand well enough the position of the leader of the Bergthaler Church, and seemed to have more respect for Gerhard Wiebe's position than for some of the spokespersons of the "progressive" groups.<sup>39</sup> Clearly the writings of the three *Ältesten*, whether on issues of military service, educating the young, disciplining the church, or regulating the financial matters in the community, are always qualified by a particular ecclesiology. This idea of the ideal church is squarely rooted in the biblical story of salvation. At the center of this story stand the gospel and example of Jesus Christ.

In summary, then, the pastoral-biblical reflections of these church elders have shown conclusively that their "theology of migration" is not only, or even primarily, concerned with geographical movement. But this theology has as much, or more, to do with the "migration" or pilgrimage of God's people throughout history; a pilgrimage in the sense of Abraham following God's call towards an unknown, promised land; a pilgrimage of the church being on the move in its communal discipleship of following its Lord and exemplar, Jesus Christ; a pilgrimage which, they felt, was coming, or had come, to a standstill in Russia where church members seemed to have turned to the ways of the world. They hoped that this geographical migration to Canada would serve to reactivate their journey as God's people, as God's new humanity. Because of this underlying theology of migration, these elders and their churches knew that their migration or pilgrimage would not necessarily end in Canada or North America.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, subsequent geographical migrations did take place; the 1920s migration from Manitoba and Saskatchewan to Mexico and Paraguay was an effort to remain alert as God's people and to continue on the communitarian discipleship journey.

### Postscript

I conclude by pointing out to readers that I am a "grandchild" of the migration under discussion. That is, I am descended from a similar migration to Paraguay in 1927. My paternal great-grandparents, David and Sarah (Doerksen) Peters, took part in both the 1870s and the 1927 migrations, as children in the first migration, and as seniors in the move to Paraguay. I am descended from Bergthal Mennonites, and perhaps, too, from the Old Colony Mennonites. Martin C. Friesen, a leading *Ältester* in this move, citing from a petition of October 1920 to the Canadian government, gives the following motive for migration: "there is nothing in the world, for which we would hand over to others the important responsibility of the upbringing [*Erziehung*] of our children" and if the pressure toward a "religionless classroom" [*religionsloser Unterricht*] would continue, "we will be obliged to seek out a new homeland, where we and our children will be able to live by our faith."<sup>41</sup> Although the school issue, and that of freedom to live their Christian faith, was at the heart of this 1927 migration, there are other parallels (to the 1870s reasons for migration).<sup>42</sup> All of this is considerably more recent history than what this symposium is focusing on, but it evokes in me a sense of almost having gone through it myself. My

parents, David and Margaretha (Funk) Guenther, at ages eight and nine, actually experienced the trek to the Paraguayan Chaco.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is a moderately edited version of a lecture presented at the 125th Anniversary Celebration Conference held on October 1 and 2, 1999, in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

<sup>2</sup> As my training at St. Michael's College of Toronto School of Theology was in theology and not in history and as I teach theology at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, my focus will be more theological than historical, although I recognize that the historical factors certainly played a crucial part in the migration under discussion.

<sup>3</sup> The office of *Ältester* was the highest leadership position in the Mennonite churches in Russia at that time - other churches might use "bishop" for a comparable position. I shall use the designation interchangeably with "elder" in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Ken Reddig, inviting me to give a paper at this symposium, asked whether I would be interested in doing some theological reflecting upon the theological reasons given by church leaders for the Mennonite migration to Canada? How could I decline such an invitation? Ken helpfully suggested further that there would be three major leaders to explore: Gerhard Wiebe, whose booklet was available in German and English; Johann Wiebe, some of whose writings were also available, and Peter Toews, most of whose writings had been translated and published in Delbert Plett's books. These three sources might provide a nucleus, he suggested, that would include the major groups that came in 1870. For their writings, see the subsequent endnotes.

<sup>5</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the Late Nineteenth Century*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 245, n.8, and 72.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Johann Wiebe's writings to be considered here include his *Unsere Reise von Russland nach Amerika aufgezeichnet*, ca1875, Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives [MHCA], Vol.1072; and *"Abschieds Predigt von dem Ältesten der Gemeinde auf Fürstenland,"* ca1875 [MHCA]. See also: *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* [ME], IV, (Scottsdale Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House [MPH], 1959), 946.

<sup>10</sup> Adolf Ens, "Wiebe, Gerhard," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 12, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 1099. We shall rely mainly on Gerhard Wiebe's *Causes and History of the Emigration of the Mennonites from Russia to America*, tr. Helen Janzen, (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1981); it was originally published in the German as, *Ursachen und Geschichte der Auswanderung der Mennoniten aus Russland nach Amerika* (Winnipeg: Druckerei des Nordwesten, 1900). For two brief biographical sketches on Gerhard Wiebe, cf. Ted E. Friesen & Cornelius Krahn, "Wiebe, Gerhard (1827-1900)," *ME*, IV, 944 and A. Ens's entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (1990), p. 1098ff.

<sup>11</sup> For our purposes, the history of the Kleine Gemeinde, of which Peter Toews was the main leader at that time, is adequately covered in Delbert Plett's books, especially "Part Five. The Exodus 1871-1875," in *Storm and Triumph: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde 1850-1875*, (Steinbach, MB: D.F.P. Publications, 1986). We may draw on these, since Plett in his history presents extensive quotations from Toews' and others' writings.

<sup>12</sup> *ME*, IV, 944; Peter Toews, of the Kleine Gemeinde, could perhaps be similarly assessed.

However, we may have to ask ourselves how useful, even fitting, it really is to use a label like “extremely conservative” to describe what were in fact deeply biblically inspired positions of these leaders, as will become evident below.

<sup>13</sup> James Urry, *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1989* (Winnipeg, MB: Hyperion Press Ltd., 1989), 217f.

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

<sup>15</sup> Peter D. Zacharias, “Aeltester Johann Wiebe (1837-1906), Rosengart,” *Preservings* 14 (June, 1999):3-6; here 5.

<sup>16</sup> Wiebe, *Causes and History*, 67-68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> *ME*, IV, 944.

<sup>19</sup> Urry, *None But Saints*, 217.

<sup>20</sup> Zacharias, “Aeltester Johann Wiebe,” 4.

<sup>21</sup> Plett, *Storm and Triumph*, 275.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 283 and 284.

<sup>24</sup> Wiebe, *Causes and History*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Plett, *Storm and Triumph*, 284.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>27</sup> Wiebe, *Causes and History*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Wiebe, *Unsere Reise*, 1 and 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

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

<sup>31</sup> Wiebe, *Causes and History*, 50

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Plett, *Storm and Triumph*, 284.

<sup>36</sup> Wiebe, *Unsere Reise*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Wiebe, *Causes and History*, 67, 68.

<sup>38</sup> Ens, “Wiebe,” 1099.

<sup>39</sup> To affirm the vision and courage of the emigrating Mennonites is not to deny a possibly comparable conviction and courage on the part of the “progressive” Mennonites who stayed in Russia. The story of the “progressive” Mennonites is not our topic here. Quite likely the two groups should not have parted ways as they needed each other; if a church gives up either of the “progressive” or “conservative” dimensions (or “charismas” as Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, calls them), its life can become distorted. As a matter of historical fact, when the two streams meet up and begin cooperating later, as they do in Paraguay for instance, they create an impressive holistic Mennonite-Indian mission-settlement project together.

<sup>40</sup> Thus the idea of characterizing these migratory groups as “extremely conservative” is of dubious value. Frank H. Epp once told of a conversation he had had with a certain Mr. Fehr in Bolivia in the early 1970s. Epp had made use of the categories “conservative” and “progressive” at which Mr. Fehr had offered his view of these terms with an anecdote from history: “We [conservatives Mennonites] consistently led the way from Prussia to Russia; from Russia to North America; from Canada to Mexico, to Paraguay, and to Bolivia. Whose are the oldest

grave markers on Brazilian soil if not of the conservatives? And always the “progressives” followed. Who [then] were the progressive Mennonites?” After a short silence, Epp, assuming that the options of “world flight” had been exhausted, probed further: “Where will you go next?” To this Mr. Fehr: “I don’t know, maybe Russia, again.”

<sup>41</sup> Martin C. Friesen, “Die Auswanderung nach Paraguay - 1927” in, Martin W. Friesen, *Kanadische Mennoniten bezwingen eine Wildness: 50 Jahre Kolonie Menno - erste mennonitische Ansiedlung in Suedamerika*, (Kolonie Menno, Chaco-Paraguay, 1977), 15-17; here 16; my translation. In German, extended: “Diese Bittschrift brachte ganz klar zum Ausdruck, dass wir die wichtige Verantwortung der Erziehung unserer Kinder um keinen Preis an andere uebertragen koennten. Denn es sei unsere Ueberzeugung, dass ein religionsloser Unterricht in den Schulen, fuer die Moral unserer Kinder nachteilig sein wuerde, den Glauben schwaechen, wenn nicht ueberhaupt zum Glaubensverlust fuehren muesste. Und wenn diese Einschraenkung und der Druck, unter welchem die Mennoniten zur Zeit stuenden, so weitergehe, wir uns gezwungen sahen, eine neue Heimat zu suchen, wo wir und unsere Kinder unseres Glaubens leben koennten” (Grammar is unaltered).

<sup>42</sup> For example, infighting in the community severely threatened church unity; education, at home and in the community, was badly neglected (Friesen admits, *ibid.*); however, the fear of obligatory military service (due to new legislation in 1916) soon passed when it became clear that Mennonites would continue to be exempted from it. While *Ältester* Friesen mentions that the enforced government schools (prescribing the school subjects and prohibiting religion), had to be conducted in English, this factor was clearly a subordinate one as it does not appear in the final petition as cited above by Friesen. Rather freedom of education and religion are clearly at the forefront of their concerns.