

The City and the Formation of 'Mennonite Church Eastern Canada'

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In 1988 three Mennonite conferences with long histories in Ontario merged into the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada (recently renamed Mennonite Church Eastern Canada). MCEC, as it came to be known, was the first “integrated” Mennonite Conference in North America, that is, an amalgamation of the large Mennonite Church (MC) and General Conference (GC) in North America.² The MCEC’s cultural roots were diverse, consisting of three distinct church branches. The first branch, the MC, informally known as the “Old” Mennonites and more formally as the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Quebec, originated from Pennsylvania German immigrants who first arrived in Upper Canada in the late eighteenth century.³ The second branch, the Western Ontario Mennonite Conference, once known as the Ontario Amish Mennonite Conference, stemmed from European Amish immigrants that first arrived in Canada in the 1820s.⁴ The third branch, the Conference of United Mennonite Churches of Ontario, also often called the United Mennonites, emerged from the immigration of “Russian” Mennonites from the Soviet Union in the 1920s.⁵ If the three branches were distinct, they nevertheless shared a common characteristic, they were each affected by the urban environment

endemic in late twentieth century Ontario. Indeed, this urban culture was indispensable to the 1988 merger.

Our Neighbors Speak German Too

The boundaries between Mennonites and Amish and their neighbors in nineteenth century Ontario were surprisingly porous for an era associated with rural isolationist culture. In the nineteenth century, of course, few “urban” Mennonites existed in North America. Nonetheless, in Ontario the Mennonites did not live in isolation. Lorraine Roth, in her work on *The Amish and their Neighbours*, speaks about the “harmony amidst diversity” in the German Block in Wilmot Township west of Berlin (now Kitchener), Ontario in the mid-nineteenth century. Although worship practices differed dramatically (the Amish had no church buildings or trained clergy, while the German Lutherans and Catholics had distinctive buildings and trained clergy), most of the immigrants to Wilmot Township had a common German immigrant background. The German Lutherans and Catholics were not pacifists, but they were wearied by the European wars and came to Waterloo County with little passion for patriotism that might have set them against the pacifist Amish. Roth describes a religious tolerance between Amish and Catholics, indicated by the often-noted cordial relationship between Amish Bishop Peter Litwiller and Catholic Father Eugene Funcken who lived across the road from one another.⁶

Similarly, the nineteenth century Mennonites who lived in or near the town of Berlin crossed boundaries with relative ease. German speaking Protestants (including Mennonites) attended each another’s Sunday schools with regularity, and there are many formal pictures of Mennonite families that give no evidence of distinctiveness in dress from the culture around them. Mennonite businessmen like Jacob Y. Shantz participated actively in the local political life of their communities, and many readily identified with a political party of the day. Mennonite Peter Shirk served on the Berlin high school board for what became Kitchener Collegiate Institute, and had a telephone in his business, even though he came to associate with the theology of the Old Order Mennonites.

Mennonites and Amish in Waterloo Region also blended with their neighbors. Jacob Y. Shantz, for example, mingled easily with other German-speaking folk, like the well-to-do Hespeler brothers. Many other Mennonites cultivated close relations with their German-speaking United Brethren, River Brethren and Evangelical Association neighbors as their cousins in Pennsylvania also did. These links may seem surprising, since the Mennonite settlements in Waterloo County came as close to a “block” settlement as ever existed for Swiss-

background Mennonites in North America. Perhaps this "critical mass" of Mennonites in the Waterloo County community insured their survival a group, and allowed them the confidence to cultivate these relations. Certainly for all these German background groups, their language provided protection from English society.

The easy associations between Mennonites and non-Mennonites of Waterloo ended in the early decades of the twentieth century. For the Mennonites who came to Canada from the Soviet Union in the 1920s the story was, of course, different from that of the nineteenth century Waterloo Mennonites. Although the newcomers had lived in a multilingual context in Russia, in Canada their German language separated them from most of their neighbors in the cities, even in German-friendly Kitchener. For these Russian Mennonites the ethnoreligious boundaries remained distinct for many decades. In the decades following 1900 the ethnoreligious boundaries of the Amish and Pennsylvania-German Mennonites also became more sharply defined. Conservative Mennonite leaders in the United States began to teach the importance of distinctive, plain dress as a marker of Mennonite separation from the world. In many communities this separation was extended to the avoidance of alcohol consumption and tobacco use. Suddenly even Mennonites from less conservative churches, particularly the women, began to look quite different from their neighbors. As the protection of language disappeared for "Swiss" Mennonites, the distinctive outward appearance began to serve as a visible protection. Thus by the 1920s and 1930s both the Russian and the Swiss Mennonites had created significant boundaries with anyone outside their immediate worlds. These decades gave little indication that the Amish and the Pennsylvania-German Mennonites could successfully join their circles with the Russian Mennonites.

Maintaining Old Boundaries

Until World War I the Ontario Mennonite community was affected little by the urban world. Berlin (Kitchener) became a city only in 1912 after its population finally exceeded 15,000. Waterloo, Ontario did not achieve city status until 1948, when its population remained under 11,000.⁷ And most of the Mennonites who did interact with the cities and gained prominence in them ended up leaving the Mennonite Church. Peter Erb William Moyer, the founder of the *Waterloo Chronicle* and the long time editor of the *Berlin Daily News*, for example, became a Methodist at the age of 20, and moved almost completely into the English world. The St. Jacobs native, Isaac E. Bowman, who served as a Liberal Member of Parliament for the north riding of Waterloo from 1864-1878, and 1887-1896 also left the

Mennonite Church. So, too, did E.W.B. Snider, the owner of the mill in St. Jacobs, the Liberal member of the provincial parliament from 1881-1894, and a significant figure in the creation of Ontario Hydro. According to St. Jacobs historian Virgil Martin, local Mennonites who became involved in business or politics usually joined the Evangelical Association, sometimes called the German Methodist church, now part of the United Church of Canada.⁸

The immigration of Mennonites from the Soviet Union during the 1920s showed just how self-contained the Ontario Amish and Pennsylvania-Germans had become. It is true the "Russian" Mennonites moved into close geographical proximity to the "Swiss" Mennonites, especially in Waterloo County. In 1924 alone over a thousand immigrants spent weeks or months working on Mennonite farms in Southern Ontario, before moving on to more permanent jobs, mostly in the cities. Many of these Russian Mennonites have warmly remembered this experience, yet they recall that the language, cultural and religious differences were too great for genuine inter-Mennonite cooperation. Indeed, these religious cultural differences sometimes created misunderstanding. In 1924 when immigrants Jacob Fast and Anna Nickel were married at the "Old" Mennonite First Mennonite Church in Vineland by the venerable "Old" Mennonite Bishop S.F. Coffman he refused to allow Anna to wear a veil, an important symbol of chastity in her culture and forbade the couple to exchange wedding rings in the church.⁹ Warm memories of encounters between the immigrant and host Mennonites may have become "mythologized" but the 1920s cross-cultural experience did little to overcome differences between the Amish, Pennsylvania-German or Russian Mennonite communities.

Even World War II which contributed to greater cohesion among the diverse Mennonite communities in Ontario did not bridge the gap among these groups. Ted Regehr has ably summarized the struggles of Mennonite leaders to shape a common approach to Canada's government in seeking alternatives to military service for their young men.¹⁰ In Ontario all the Mennonite groups from conservative to progressive participated in the Conference of Historic Peace Churches, a collaboration of leadership persons across the Mennonite spectrum. Moreover, the young men who went to alternative service camps¹¹ were exposed to religious and cultural experiences beyond their sheltered lives at home. Still, for ten years after the conclusion of the war, the symbols of separation remained remarkably strong. For the Amish Mennonites and "Old" Mennonites this manifested itself in lingering dress codes and an educational philosophy that emphasized protection from the secular world. For both General Conference and Mennonite Brethren "Russian" Mennonites this meant retention of the

German language and the cultural symbols attached to it in their religious life.

Urbanization, Education and Missions

The factor of urbanization, and the related phenomenon of post-secondary education and mission work, began to break down the barriers to formal structural cooperation among Ontario Mennonites.

Urbanization itself was especially important as the number of Mennonites moving from the farms to the more lucrative jobs in Ontario urban centers almost quadrupled their numbers in the cities between 1951 to 1961.¹² Here they faced what Ted Regehr has identified as three consequences of Mennonite urbanization. First, specialization in vocation and technology fueled the need for post-secondary education. Second, rationalization, trying as it did to “control, plan, ‘strategize,’ predict and calculate the probable consequences of particular policies, priorities and activities,” marked a departure from agriculture’s traditional reliance on acts of God.¹³ Urbanization’s third consequence, the call to individual achievement, personal fulfillment and individual rights challenged Mennonite concepts of family, congregation and community life.¹⁴ The impact of urbanization on Canadian Mennonites has been studied more intensively for Winnipeg and Southern Manitoba, but the many of same dynamics functioned in Southern Ontario.

The second factor that advanced cooperation among the Mennonite groups was the emergence of the city-based Conrad Grebel College located at the University of Waterloo. In 1959 the Kitchener-Waterloo Mennonite Ministerial Fellowship discussed the possibility of cooperation in higher education. These initial conversations included the Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ, in addition to the three conferences that ultimately merged to form the MCEC.¹⁵ The vision for a shared college became a focal point of cooperation that moved beyond the peace and relief issues that centered on activities and needs outside the local Mennonite community. And jointly-owned buildings were the “concrete” symbols of unity that programs and staff alone could not match. It was significant for the unfolding conference integration process in Ontario that both the Mennonite Brethren and the Brethren in Christ conferences withdrew from the Conrad Grebel College project in July 1962 when financial commitments had to be made. Their withdrawal left the three participants of the eventual 1988 conference integration to operate Conrad Grebel College.

The third and ultimately the most important factor that advanced conference structural unity was the turn outward by Ontario

Mennonites towards urban missions. Prior to the 1950s, with rare exception, Ontario Mennonite mission outreach extended to rural areas. Mennonites ventured to the city only if a significant ethnic Mennonite population required spiritual support, as in St. Catharines or Kitchener-Waterloo.¹⁶

One congregation best illustrates how the urban mission served to converge the Amish Mennonite, United Mennonite, and “Old” Mennonite circles. Mennonite mission efforts in London, Ontario emerged in 1951 when the rural Nairn Mennonite Church founded a “rescue mission” for homeless men under the leadership of Alvin Roth. Roth served both as superintendent of the rescue mission and pastor of a small Mennonite church that emerged on London’s King Street in 1953. In June 1961 after his duties at the mission had increased, Roth stepped down from congregational leadership, and Ralph Lebold, also of Amish Mennonite background, accepted congregational leadership. The Ontario Amish Mennonite Mission Board also stepped in to sponsor the congregation and provide financial assistance towards his salary.¹⁷ Since persons from both conferences were part of the King Street congregation the Amish Mennonite Mission Board and the “Old” Mennonite Mission Board began to meet to discuss cooperation in London. After two meetings in 1961 they agreed to work together in London, and to alternate supervision of mission churches in the area; thus Lebold’s congregation would be “under Amish jurisdiction while the next effort will be planned as a Fellowship under the [Ontario Mennonite] Conference.”¹⁸ Moreover, associate membership was to be made available to members who wanted their primary membership in another Mennonite conference.¹⁹ When the congregation relocated to northeast London it became known as the Valleyview Mennonite Church.

In June and September 1963 the two mission boards expanded their cooperative culture by joining with a third group, the United Mennonites of “Russian” Mennonite descent, to draft a “policy on cooperative church extension.” Board members took a pragmatic approach to cooperation and doctrinal differences, and simply said, “it was the common consensus that the only workable attitude and practice would be that of mutual respect and acceptance.”²⁰ The policy suggested guidelines for new “blended” congregations. To provide a “unified Mennonite witness,” the policy suggested new congregations affiliate with the conference that initiated a given mission project. Persons from other conferences who attended the new congregations were directed to become associate members, with “full congregational rights, privileges, and responsibility without actually transferring membership from the home congregation or conference.” By February 1964 guidelines were approved in principle, and the three mission board

discussed the possibility of a rescue mission in Windsor based on the model of the London Rescue Mission. They also considered Hamilton, Ottawa, Sudbury, Montreal and Kingston as possible locations for future inter-Mennonite cooperation.²¹

This bubbling enthusiasm for mission focused the need for a more deliberate strategy, and the three conferences began to hold joint mission board meetings, and again invited Mennonite Brethren participation. Arnold Gingrich, the part-time staff person for the "Old" Mennonite Mission Board of Ontario believed the city of Sudbury was the ideal location for a cooperative venture by the Mennonite mission boards. In May 1965 Gingrich presented his case to representatives from the three conferences and the independent Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church of Kitchener. He had urged inclusion of the Mennonite Brethren in the project, arguing that "unless we can establish a pattern of cooperation [in mission] we are committing suicide."²² John Baerg and John M. Schmidt from the Mennonite Brethren Home Missions Committee responded to the invitation and met with representatives from the other groups. But ultimately the Mennonite Brethren declined to participate and rather pursued their own church planting efforts in areas like Ottawa, Brampton, and Thorold. A new "church growth" philosophy, stressing numerically-growing churches, made an especially strong impact on the Mennonite Brethren Church and set it apart from the other conferences' approach that emphasized outreach rooted in service programs.²³ Indeed for the cooperating conferences Alvin Roth's social service-based evangelism remained the primary model for several decades.²⁴

After several conference leaders visited Sudbury, the three cooperating conferences and Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church agreed in November 1965 to "create an inter-Mennonite Mission Board committee composed of one member of each mission board."²⁵ A year later the joint mission boards agreed to proceed with a service project in Sudbury. They cited four reasons for a cooperative approach: 1) to conserve leadership, 2) to make for efficient administration, 3) to rationalize economic resources, and 4) to ensure that they "might present a united and not a fragmented witness."²⁶ In 1967 the mission boards established a formal cooperative structure named the Mennonite Mission and Service Board.²⁷

Inevitably Urban

While this urban mission focus helped draw the three conferences together, other dramatic changes linked to a growing urban culture encouraged greater cooperation among the Ontario Mennonites. In

1960 the most conservative segment of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario (MC), led by conservative bishops like Curtis C. Cressman, left the conference after failing to maintain traditional discipline on matters such as the wedding ring and prayer veiling. By 1965, unencumbered by the conservatives, the Mennonite Conference of Ontario no longer required that baptized women wear the prayer veiling.²⁸ The United Mennonite Conference also changed during the 1960s, shifting so decisively from the German language, for example, that by 1967 the title of its yearbook changed to English. For the Amish Mennonites the 1960s saw a name change that distanced them from their Amish roots and the acceptance of a more formal manner of administering conference programs. The two great border markers, the prayer veil for the "Old" Mennonites and the German language for the United Mennonites, had ended.

This reduction in boundary markers came to be associated with other changes in the Ontario conferences. First there was a confident spirit of institution building in urban settings. In the mid-1960s the "Old" Mennonite Conference of Ontario built a new gymnasium at Rockway Mennonite School in Kitchener, a new multi-purpose building in Scarborough (part of Metro Toronto) at the Warden Woods Church and Community Centre, and the first building of the Conrad Grebel College campus in Waterloo. Second, there were new constitutions. In 1965 the Mennonite Conference of Ontario approved a new constitution and protocol of discipline, a change that appeared so radical that many fretted that the days of strong leadership were past. In 1973 the United Mennonites revised their constitution, explicitly endorsing dual-conference congregations and underscoring cooperation with other conferences.²⁹ The foundation for the integration of distinctive Mennonite churches had been set.

The independent Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Kitchener also propelled this culture of cooperation and integration. In 1968 it explored formal conference affiliation both with the "Old" Mennonite Conference of Ontario and the United Mennonite Conference. Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church had emerged from a division within the "Old" Mennonite First Mennonite Church in Kitchener in 1924 over the issue of dress regulations for women. For many years Stirling Avenue was an independent Mennonite church in search of a parent conference. It might have considered joining the more progressive United Mennonite Conference, but it would have been too German, and thus in 1946 Stirling Avenue joined the General Conference Mennonite Church's Eastern District located in Pennsylvania because its pastor had roots in that conference. By 1968 both the "Old" Mennonite and the United Mennonite conferences had changed enough to make them acceptable to Stirling Avenue and the following

year both responded to Stirling Avenue's request and accepted it as a member congregation, making it one of the earliest cases of dual-conference membership of an established Mennonite congregation in North America. Increasing the effect of Stirling Avenue's move was a petition at this very time by Grace Mennonite Church in St. Catharines that its parent conference, the United Mennonite Conference, begin to take specific steps toward a merger with the "Old" Mennonite Conference of Ontario. The United Mennonite delegates approved the Grace Mennonite Church petition, although they interpreted it merely as a call for greater cooperation between the two Mennonite Church conferences.³⁰ Still a momentum had been created and in 1971 the Mennonite Conference of Ontario responded to the United Mennonite action with its own resolution: "We believe that the time is here when serious attempts should be made in working toward the uniting of our three Conferences."³¹

Specific acts rose from these events. During the 1970s the three conferences continued to set up cooperative structures, even while forgetting the urban missional impulses that had pushed them together. In May 1973 the conference moderators urged the formation of an Inter-Mennonite Executive Council (IEC), composed of each conference's moderator and secretary, plus the chairpersons of the Mennonite Mission and Service Board, the conjoint education committees, and the Conrad Grebel College Board of Governors. This Inter-Mennonite Executive was mandated to provide coordination to and leadership of inter-Mennonite projects³² and by January 22, 1974 it had held its first meeting. The following year its position was strengthened when the three conferences adopted "operational guidelines" and gave the new body the name, Inter-Mennonite Conference (Ontario.).

These were only tentative first steps. The Inter-Mennonite Conference was never incorporated as a legal entity, limiting its authority in relation to the cooperating conferences.³³ Then, too, the conferences appeared to stumble along, often taking actions that unwittingly hindered cooperation; during this time, for example, two of the three conferences, the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and the Amish-descendent Western Ontario Mennonite Conference jointly hired a conference minister and later shared a Student Services worker and office secretarial help.³⁴ In the late 1970s these two conferences also began to hold joint meetings of their executive committees, thus isolating the United Mennonites.

When a first attempt to merge the three conferences took place in 1978 new hurdles appeared. The Inter-Mennonite Executive had recognized the frustrations that had arisen in the cooperative structure, and thus had proposed the conferences unite into one conference, a

process they identified as “amalgamation.”³⁵ With this in mind an Amalgamation Study Committee began work immediately. But now it was stymied by the death of one of its key leaders, Newton Gingrich, and by the lack of unity within the committee itself. When options for partial and full amalgamation were presented to the congregations, most congregations favored continued cooperation, but hesitated at steps beyond that. In light of the mixed response, the Amalgamation Study Committee recommended “organized and planned amalgamation” should not be pursued and that only “organic growth” continue until an acceptable option could be found.³⁶

“Blowing of the Wind”

In 1983, one year after the dust settled from these “amalgamation” initiatives, the Inter-Mennonite Mission and Service Board (IMSB) gave another “kick-start” to the issues of conference structures. When Brian Laverty, the chair of this board, asked delegates at the 1983 annual meeting if the committee should continue urban church planting the response signalled a new interest in integrating the three conferences. Hubert Schwartzentruber, recently hired as a part time Missions Consultant, said some new congregations were wondering about their conference affiliation options. The Mississauga Mennonite Fellowship, for example, wanted to affiliate directly with the skeletal Inter-Mennonite Conference. The delegates thus authorized the Inter-Mennonite Executive Council to explore this possibility³⁷

Ed Janzen, moderator of the United Mennonite Conference, and a member of the Inter-Mennonite Executive Council, drafted a provocative paper, entitled “Blowing of the Wind,” on behalf of the Council. This paper, presented to the delegates at the 1984 annual meeting, caused a stir and not a little consternation. Janzen’s paper moved the discussion on amalgamation from each individual conference’s power and identity to the question of common Mennonite identity for new, primarily urban, congregations that were emerging among all three conferences. Ironically Janzen used agricultural imagery in his paper to make a case for urban unity:

In spite of our reluctance to say that our three farms could be better tilled if we joined them into one, we were not hesitant to being planting further afield....

We told IMSB they were to initiate, promote, support and advise in programs of evangelism, church expansion, and congregation building. The individual conferences forged

ahead and hired missions consultants....The time was right and we sensed it.

Faithful preparation in plowing and planting bore fruit. New congregations began to emerge....

We said to the Inter-Mennonite Conference that it needs to be concerned that its program initiatives are truly inter-Mennonite. Most of the new groups which have emerged as just that....

How shall they be divided?...Shall we now draw boundaries through the fields and say this belongs to you and this belongs to me? We can do that, but it does not seem right.

There are a number of reasons why these emerging congregations now belong together instead of apart in different conferences. Jesus desired the unity of those who follow him; we know this but this is theology and did not stop us from rejecting amalgamation....

There are some very practical reasons why we should not now draw artificial boundaries through the fields. The emerging congregations are composed of members of the three conferences and to assign them to one or the other can cause difficulties....

We do not want to join our three farms into one, but we have already created a farm together in which we are tilling the soil and growing crops. Can we not let this field, which we have planted together remain together and say they belong to all of us?³⁸

Janzen intended to encourage the possibility of new congregations joining the Inter-Mennonite Conference in Ontario without having to choose from among the three conferences, in effect it was a plea for the partial amalgamation proposal of two years earlier.³⁹ Janzen's paper also came in the aftermath of the first joint Mennonite Church/General Conference Mennonite Church assemblies at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania the previous summer. The positive feelings after "Bethlehem '83" surely helped to nudge unity discussions along, although denominational leaders remained very cautious in their comments on cooperation.⁴⁰

The Inter-Mennonite Executive Council asked each conference's executive committee to respond to the "Blowing of the Wind"

document prior to the Inter-Mennonite Conference's annual meeting in February 1984. However, only the executive of the "Old" Mennonite descendent Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Quebec did so. After minimal discussion it said it could not support any of the recommendations in the proposal "as it would appear to lead to creation of a fourth conference."⁴¹

Following this rejection, Valleyview Mennonite Church in London, which this paper has identified as the starting point for inter-conference cooperation in Ontario acted unilaterally; it applied for affiliate status in both the United Mennonite Conference and the "Old" Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Quebec as a symbolic expression of unity. Both conferences accepted Valleyview on that basis.⁴² The next months were a time of ongoing discussion of next steps, but finally when no clear direction could be identified, the Inter-Mennonite Executive Council by a narrow 4-3 vote decided to "drop the implications of the Blowing of the Wind" document.⁴³

Unity within Diversity

This rejection of the "Blowing of the Wind" document upset, even outraged, mission leadership persons. While the Inter-Mennonite Executive Council dithered, Inter-Mennonite Mission and Service Board chair, Brian Laverty, began to hold "federated" mission board meetings. He threatened to resign, citing "the irritation and frustration" caused by the perpetuation of historical divisions among the three conferences. Hubert Schwartzentruber, a staff person for the Mission and Service Board, expressed strong dismay at the decision by the Inter-Mennonite Executive Council to table further action on amalgamation. "Does the Inter-Mennonite Conference really want a staff person to help start inter-Mennonite churches if they can't really happen? If we don't find a way through this, we're setting our mission effort back a few years."⁴⁴

Several initiatives allowed the exploration of merger to begin once again.⁴⁵ In late 1984 a joint meeting of all the relevant executive committees agreed on a statement that said:

We are agreed on the following:

- 1) In 1985/86 the three conference executives will meet monthly at the same place and time, and spend part of the time with IEC [Inter-Mennonite Executive Council] to do joint business. The joint portion will be chaired by the IEC chair. The standing committees of the conferences will be encouraged to meet jointly.

- 2) We are moving towards an integrated conference with geographically-based districts. These districts could have a fall delegate/inspirational meeting. District-based programming could be an option.
- 3) Congregations will send delegates to the annual meeting (as before) and these delegates will represent the congregation at the geographically-based district meetings.⁴⁶

The federated executives set a timetable and decided to discuss the issue at the 1985 conference annual meetings, appoint a committee to develop a formal proposal in 1986, and undertake final implementation in 1987.⁴⁷ The timetable was followed remarkably closely. At the 1985 annual meetings the conference delegates were strongly supportive of integration in all the votes. When the last round of formal votes were taken in October 1987 to adopt the legal amalgamation agreement and the new bylaws, only one vote was cast against the motion in any of the conference sessions. As a supreme irony, leaders learned it was a person in the wrong conference meeting who cast the negative vote, that is, a member of the Western Ontario Mennonite Conference cast a negative vote at the United Mennonite Conference session.⁴⁸

Fourteen Years Later

Mennonite Church Eastern Canada has continued to become more urban, and multi-cultural since the 1987 merger of three conferences. Five rural and two urban congregations have closed since 1987; twelve new congregations have begun, only three of them "rural" in a general sense and two of these having charismatic worship styles. Of the nine new urban congregations, five worship in non-English languages, and two or three have emerged directly from the same version of service ministry, the "rescue mission," that inspired Alvin Roth's venture into the city of London in the early 1950s and the eventual birth of the prophetic Valleyview Church.⁴⁹

There were two prongs to Mennonite urbanization in Ontario. At least in the Region of Waterloo the Mennonites happened to settle at the very place where a large city developed during the twentieth century. But the more important factor for bringing the Amish, Pennsylvania German and Russian Mennonites together, was a commonly-shared vision for urban mission, usually service based, and often among the new immigrant groups to Canada. Interestingly, the urban churches that have failed or have struggled to survive are the urban congregations whose mission outreach is directed at the English-speaking middle class, formed with a small leadership core from a

Mennonite-heritage background. The service-based vision for urban congregational life has sustained MCEC from Alvin Roth's 1950's "rescue mission" in London, Ontario through today's Toronto Mennonite New Life Faith Church founded with refugees from Latin America.

Notes

- ¹ This is an "insider" history with the benefits and liabilities that perspective brings to historical research. The approach is more narrative than analytical. The author was the secretary of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario (MCO), later Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Quebec (MCOQ), from 1980-1986; secretary of the Integration Study Committee and the Transition Committee, 1985-1988; and secretary of the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada from 1989-1994. An earlier version of this paper was presented that Conference of Mennonites in Canada History Conference held in July, 1997.
- ² "Integration" is a term used widely in the Mennonite merger movement of the 1980s and 1990s. It was seen as a friendlier term than "merger" or "amalgamation." See Ron Rempel, "Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada," *Mennonite Encyclopedia V*, 569.
- ³ The Mennonite Conference of Ontario began mission efforts in Quebec in the 1950s, and added "and Quebec" to its name in 1982. The term "Old" Mennonite had widespread usage in North America, and served to distinguish the Mennonite Church (MC) from "New" Mennonites. In the United States "New" Mennonites generally referred to the General Conference Mennonite Church. In Ontario "New" Mennonites referred to the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, presently known as Evangelical Missionary Church. "Mennonite" was dropped from that conference's name in 1947.
- ⁴ The Ontario Amish Mennonite Conference changed its name in June 1963. When the conference decided it was time to print letterhead for conference use in November 1962 delegates wondered if it was time to change the conference name. Dropping the word "Amish" would simplify interpreting the conference to others. "Conference body meeting at Mapleview," March 2, 1963, Western Ontario Mennonite Conference (hereafter WOMC) collection, IV-1.3, 1962/63 minutes and report, MAO.
- ⁵ Two other Ontario Mennonite groups, the Mennonite Brethren, stemming from the 1920s immigration from the Soviet Union, and the Brethren in Christ, a "progressive" group based in early nineteenth century immigration to Ontario, stood outside this 1988 merger.
- ⁶ Lorraine Roth, *The Amish and their Neighbours: The German Block, Wilmot Township, 1822-1860* (Waterloo, ON: Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1998), 75, 100-101.
- ⁷ "Table 9," John English and Kenneth McLaughlin, *Kitchener: An Illustrated History* (Waterloo: WLU Press, 1983); Marg Rowell, Ed Devcitt and Pat McKegney, *Welcome to Waterloo: an Illustrated History of Waterloo, Ontario* (Waterloo, ON. : s.n., 1982), 81. By the beginning of the twenty first century a marked difference had occurred. The Kitchener metropolitan area was the tenth largest in Canada, with a total of 431,700, behind Hamilton, Ontario, and Winnipeg, Manitoba, respectively. Statistics Canada, "Population of census metropolitan areas," <http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/People/Population/demo05.htm> (27 November 2001).
- ⁸ "Moyer, Peter Erb William," *A Biographical History of Early Settlers and their*

- Descendants in Waterloo Township*, ed. Ezra E. Eby (Kitchener, ON: E.D. Weber, 1971), 243; "Isaac Erb Bowman," *Twentieth Annual Report of the Waterloo Historical Society 1932* (Kitchener, ON. : The Society, 1933), 334-335; Virgil Emerson Martin, *The Early History of Jakobstettel* (St. Jacobs, ON. : V. Martin, 1979), 51, 80.
- ⁹ Interview of Jacob Fast by Henry Paetkau, June 17, 1976; Hst. Mss. 22.2.1, Interview 11, MAO. S.F. Coffman did help the couple purchase their wedding rings, and allowed the exchange of rings outside the church building.
- ¹⁰ T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970* (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1996), 35ff.
- ¹¹ See E. Morris Sider, "Life and Labor in the Alternative Service Work Camps in Canada during World War II," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (1992), 596-597.
- ¹² Regehr, 173. In Ontario metropolitan areas the number of Mennonites increased from 2631 to 9749 in this ten year period. Regehr subsumed urbanization under the larger category of modernization
- ¹³ Regehr, 171.
- ¹⁴ Regehr, 172.
- ¹⁵ Sam Steiner, "The Birth of Conrad Grebel College," *Mennogespräch* 6 (Sept. 1988), 16.
- ¹⁶ Exceptions were mission efforts in Toronto. The Toronto Mennonite Mission, later Danforth Mennonite Church began in 1907 during an early 20th century "Old" Mennonite burst of enthusiasm for urban mission. For this story in the larger North American context see Theron Schlabach, *Gospel Versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863-1944* (Scottsdale, PA. : Herald Press, 1980). Three other mission efforts in Toronto also deserve mention. The first mission effort in Warden Park began in 1937 under the leadership of Leonard Brown; it faltered in 1944 when the mission property was sold and Leonard Brown left the area. Leonard Brown also led a work in the Ellesmere area of Scarborough from 1946-1958 at which time that work also closed. See Craig W. Hincks, *Living Words: A History of Warden Woods Church and Community Centre* (Scarborough, ON. : The Church, 1995), [3]-6. The Toronto United Mennonite Mission began in 1942-1943 as an outreach effort of the General Conference Mennonite Church, though most participants were Mennonites living in the Toronto area. See John C. Sawatzky, "The history of the Toronto United Mennonite Church," *Jahrbuch der Vereinigten Mennoniten Gemeinden in Ontario, Canada, 1954*, 86-88. The Mennonite Brethren in Christ (now Evangelical Missionary Church) also began a work in Toronto as early as 1899. See Marlene Epp, "Grace Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church (Toronto, Ont.)," *Canadian Mennonite Encyclopedia*. <http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/MHSC/contents/gra.html> (4 June 1997).
- ¹⁷ John E. Adams, "Ministry to Community: the Mennonite Church in London, Ontario, 1953-1970," (Unpublished seminary paper, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, 1970), 5-8.
- ¹⁸ *Mennonite Mission Board of Ontario, the 33rd business session, 1962*, p 3-10, 16. Mennonite Mission Board of Ontario collection (hereafter MMBO), II-3.1, Mennonite Archives of Ontario (hereafter MAO).
- ¹⁹ Betty Lou Eby, "London Group Grows in Unified Witness," *Ontario Mennonite Evangel*, 7:1 (1962), 9. This was not a step taken lightly. Thirty five years later Ralph Lebold commented on the emotional impact of this decision for persons like Arnold and Gladys Gingrich who had strong connections to the "Old" Mennonite Conference of Ontario (indeed Arnold worked for the conference), and being a member of another conference's church was a powerful symbol. Conversation with Ralph Lebold, June 19, 1997.
- ²⁰ "The minutes of the meeting held at Parkhill, June 27, 1963," MMBO collection, II-3.2.3.2, Misc. Minutes, MAO; "Conjoint Missions Boards meeting," Sept. 17,

- 1963, MMBO collection, II-3.2.1, MAO; Arnold Gingrich, "A Report on inter-Mennonite missions in Ontario 1961-1969," Inter-Mennonite Mission and Service Board collection (hereafter IMSB), XXVIII-3.1.1, Misc. Folder, MAO. The Parkhill congregation survived until 1973. Leonard Epp was the last pastor. "Bethel Chapel (Parkhill, ON.), *Canadian Mennonite Encyclopedia*. <http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/MHSC/contents/bet.html>. (7 June 1997).
- 21 "Proposed policies on cooperative church extension," Sept. 21, 1963, MMBO collection, II-3.2.1, MAO; Arnold Gingrich, "Report on inter-Mennonite missions in Ontario 1961-1969," IMSB collection, XXVIII-3.1.1, Misc. Folder, MAO.
- 22 "Inter Mennonite meeting re: Sudbury and Northern Ontario missions," May 28, 1965. IMSB collection, XXVIII-3.1.1. MAO.
- 23 '*When your children shall ask*': A History of the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1957-1982 (The Conference, 1982), 15ff; Peter Penner, *No Longer at Arms Length: Mennonite Brethren church Planting in Canada* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1987), 98. The Mennonite Brethren never appeared to raise the matter of inter-Mennonite cooperation in missions at their annual delegate meetings.
- 24 "Informal meeting of representatives of Ontario Mennonite mission boards," June 3, 1965. Perhaps the Mennonite Brethren also declined participation because of their relatively recent decision to not be part of Conrad Grebel College.
- 25 "Joint meeting of mission boards...", November 5, 1965. IMSB collection, XXVIII-3.1.1. MAO. The persons who served as representatives on the Committee were Arnold Gingrich (OM), Ralph Lebold (WOM), Earle Snyder (Stirling Ave.) and Herman Enns (UM).
- 26 "Joint meeting of Mennonite mission boards," October 18, 1966. IMSB collection, XXVIII-3.1.1. MAO.
- 27 "Mennonite Mission and Service Board meeting no. 1," July 11, 1967. IMSB collection, XXVIII-3.1.1. MAO. The conference appointees to the first board were Rufus Jutzi and Arnold Gingrich (OM), Vernon Zehr and Alvin Roth (WOM), Herman Enns and J.K. Klassen (UM) and Elven Shantz and Irvine Manske (SA). Doug Snyder, who was Director of MCC (Ontario), also took an active part in the board.
- 28 Mennonite Conference of Ontario under the direction of its Executive Committee, *We consider I Corinthians 11:1-16* (Kitchener: The Conference, 1965).
- 29 This was the first constitution in the English language. "Constitution of the Conference of United Mennonite Churches of Ontario," 1974 yearbook, *United Mennonite Churches in Ontario*, 60-62; *Yearbook of the United Mennonite Churches in Ontario*, 1968, p. 30-31, 81.
- 30 The United Mennonites invited Stirling Avenue to become a member at its 1968 meeting; the actual acceptance occurred in 1969. *Yearbook of the United Mennonite Churches in Ontario*, 1969, 85, 87, 91; *The official record of the annual session of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario*, 1969, 21. See also the *Yearbook of the United Mennonite Churches in Ontario*, 1970, 70.
- 31 *The 1971 annual report, the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and the Mennonite Mission Board of Ontario*, 29.
- 32 "Inter Mennonite Moderators meeting," May 14, 1973. IMC collection, XXVIII-2.1.1. MAO. The education committees of the three conferences began to hold regular meetings in September 1972. As with the other cooperative structures, the focus for the group was coordination of inter-Mennonite activities. See minutes of the "Conjoint Education Committee", Inter-Mennonite Board of Congregational Resources (IBCR) collection, XXVIII-4.1.1. MAO.
- 33 The United Mennonites continued publication of their own separate *Yearbook*

until the formation of the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada. Their *Yearbook* has always contained numerous congregational reports, as well of photos of weddings, anniversaries and persons who had died in the previous year. See the operational guidelines in 1975 *yearbook*, *United Mennonite Churches in Ontario, Mennonite Conference of Ontario, Western Ontario Mennonite Conference*, 11-13.

- ³⁴ Lebold worked 1/5 time for WOMC and 4/5 for MCO. 1973 *annual report*, *Mennonite Conference of Ontario*, 45-46; *Western Ontario Mennonite Conference, 1974 annual meeting [report book]*, 3; Gloria Martin served both conferences as a Student Services worker beginning in 1976. *Western Ontario Mennonite Conference, 1976 annual meeting [report book]*, 7-8.
- ³⁵ "Progress report on future inter-Mennonite cooperation in Ontario"; "Inter-Mennonite Executive Council meeting # 7," January 13, 1978. IMC collection, XXVIII-2.1.1. MAO.
- ³⁶ "Report of Inter-Mennonite Amalgamation Study Committee," Jan. 5, 1981. Inter-Mennonite Conference Amalgamation Committee collection, XXVIII-8.1.1. MAO.
- ³⁷ 1983 *yearbook*, *Inter-Mennonite Conference (Ontario)*, 117, 119; Ron Rempel, "Church Membership in inter-Mennonite Body to be Studied," *Mennonite Reporter* 13 (21 Feb. 1983), 4.
- ³⁸ *Inter-Mennonite Conference (Ontario) annual meeting, February 18, 1984 [report book]*, 3-6.
- ³⁹ Newton Gingrich (1925-1979) had chaired the first amalgamation committee and served on many inter-Mennonite organizations. Emerson McDowell (1918-1976) had served as moderator of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and first chairperson of the Inter-Mennonite Executive Council. Herman Enns (1930-1977) had served as first chair of the Inter-Mennonite Board of Congregational Resources and had been active in mission exploration within the United Mennonite Conference. These three men who "died too soon" became symbols of the early integration movement. "Summary and implications of 'The blowing of the wind,'" IMC collection, XXVIII.1, 1984 annual meeting. MAO. The importance of the discussion on this paper was underscored by IEC's decision to create a verbatim printed record of the discussion at the annual meeting.
- ⁴⁰ Ron Rempel, "Sexuality, Justice and Unity Discussions at Historic Gathering," *Mennonite Reporter* 13 (8 August 1983), 1, 5.
- ⁴¹ "Executive Committee meeting, Nov. 15, 1983, Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Quebec (hereafter MCOQ) collection, II-2.1.2.1.4. MAO. See also the letter of Joe Nighswander, MCOQ moderator, providing more detail about the "fourth conference" concern. *Mennonite Reporter* 14 (20 Feb. 1984), 6-7.
- ⁴² *Inter-Mennonite yearbook 1984*, 116-117, 133-134.
- ⁴³ The first "federated" mission board meeting included 22 persons. *Inter-Mennonite yearbook 1984*, 123; "Western Ontario Mennonite Conference Executive response to the 'Blowing of the wind' document for Inter-Mennonite Conference," May 1984. WOMC collection. MAO; Executive Committee meetings no. 4, 5, 6 (June 13, July 19, Sept. 5, 1984). MCOQ collection, II-2.1.2.1.4. MAO; "Joint Executive meeting #4," Sept. 5, 1984. Joint Executive of MCOQ and WOMC (hereafter Joint Executive) collection, XV-52.1. MAO; Inter-Mennonite Executive Council meeting #3, Sept. 13, 1984. IMC collection, XXVIII-2.1.1. MAO.
- ⁴⁴ Paul Martin, "Focus on Joint Mission Work in Ontario," *Mennonite Reporter* 14 (11 June 1984), 11; Ron Rempel, "Leaders Say no to Membership in Inter-Mennonite Group," *Mennonite Reporter* 14 (1 October 1984), 1, 3. Laverty's threat to resign was noted in Margaret Loewen Reimer, "Three Ontario conferences will meet together in 1986," *Mennonite Reporter* 15 (4 March 1985),

4. In October 1984 Sam Steiner circulated a memo on "Unity" to the MCOQ executive. He argued changes since the first amalgamation attempt allowed for a fresh look at a cooperative structure: Region I was no longer part of the Mennonite Church structure, the polity differences between the conferences had lessened as their conference structures and staffing patterns become more similar, and the Inter-Mennonite Conference was no longer functioning effectively "five years of heeding the caution 'not to move too quickly' now threatens the structures we do have." He called for a modified amalgamation model that consisted of one conference with an important role for geographically based "regions." Sam Steiner to MCOQ Executive Committee, 25 Oct. 1984. Joint Executive collection, XV-52.1. MAO. On November 22 another meeting of the federated missions committees asked the Inter-Mennonite Executive Council to "reconsider its decision to negate the 'Implications Summary' attached to the document 'Blowing in [sic] in the wind,' namely, that emerging congregations be allowed to join Inter-Mennonite conference directly." After lengthy discussion the Inter-Mennonite Executive Council decided the issues of inter-Mennonite cooperation needed to be discussed at a meeting that included the executive committees of all three conferences. Federating Mission Boards of Mennonite Conferences to Inter-Mennonite Executive Council, Nov. 27, 1984. IMSB collection, XXVIII-3.1.3. MAO; "Minutes of Inter-Mennonite Executive Council meeting," Nov. 27, 1984. IMC collection. XXVIII-2.1.1. MAO. Doug Snyder, who as moderator of MCOQ was a member of the Inter-Mennonite Executive Council, proposed a "federated" approach for the executive committee for a two year period during which time the three conference executives would meet together monthly, and well as holding the conference annual meetings at the same time and place, not unlike the pattern already in place for WOMC and MCOQ. At its separate meeting on the afternoon of Dec. 19 the MCOQ executive discussed both the Snyder and Steiner documents and blended them into a recommendation that would utilize Snyder's federation model with the goal of moving to one conference by 1987. "Executive Committee meeting #9," Dec. 19, 1984. MCOQ collection, II-2.1.2.1.4. MAO.
- 46 "Joint Executive meeting #6," Dec. 19, 1984. Joint Executive collection, XV-52.1. MAO.
- 47 The rough notes of the secretary of the meeting indicate that Peter H. Janzen, Conference Minister for the United Mennonite Conference, was the first person to use the term "integration" as an alternate word for amalgamation in the discussion. A Joint Executive meeting #6," Dec. 19, 1984. Joint Executive collection, XV-52.1. MAO; Ferne Burkhardt, "Leaders draft new plan to unite three Ontario groups," *Mennonite Reporter* 15 (21 Jan. 1985), 1, 3.
- 48 Ron Rempel, "Three Conferences Set Firm Wedding Date and Decide to Get Serious with 'Inlaws,'" *Mennonite Reporter* 17 (30 March 1987), 1-2; Margaret Loewen Reimer, "Delegates Take Final Step in Uniting Three Ontario Conferences," *Mennonite Reporter* 17 (9 November 1987), 4. After the approval by the delegates in March 1987, a new "Transition Team" composed of the four conference moderators and four persons from the Integration Study Committee prepared all the legal and structural details for the final "no-turning-back" votes in October and gave general oversight to the procedure for hiring staff and office space for the conference. This committee was composed of Nelson Scheifele (chair), Sam Steiner (secretary), Doris Gascho, Cornie Driedger, Vernon Leis, Glenn Zehr, Gerald Good and Ed Janzen.
- 49 The rural congregations that closed were Dunnville, Glen Allen, Chesley, McArthurs Mills and Berea. The urban congregations that closed were Guelph and the Hispanic congregation in Montreal. Two other urban plants during

this period didn't "take", Brantford and Rouyn-Noranda in Quebec. The new urban church plants still functioning in 2001 were Agape Fellowship (London), Black Creek Faith Community (Toronto), Kingston Mennonite Fellowship, and River of Life (Waterloo). Non-English congregations are the Cambodian Church Centre (Metro Toronto), Grace Lao (Kitchener), Markham Chinese, Toronto New Life Centre and Toronto Taiwanese. The new "rural" congregations are in Stouffville, Baden and Monetville. All the later were divisions from established congregations, some as church plants and one as a split. See the *Inter-Mennonite Conference (Ontario) Yearbook*. 14th ed. and the *Mennonite Directory 2001*.