

# Old Colony Theology, Ecclesiology, and Experience of Church in Manitoba

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## Introduction

The Old Colony Mennonites of Manitoba are a deeply religious people shaped by their history, their faith in God, and their commitment to and experience of church. In their book, *The Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon say that Christians can be seen as alien people who see things differently than do those who are fully part of the national society.<sup>1</sup> They argue that too often the main agenda of the church has been to try to make the gospel credible to the society.<sup>2</sup> And this Constantinian assumption, they posit, fails to recognize that the gospel of Jesus Christ makes a difference and has created a new story. The nature of that story is subsumed in a sub-title of Hauerwas and Willimon's book, "Life in the Christian colony." Although they likely did not have Old Colony people in mind when they wrote the book, many aspects of what they advocate fit the Old Colony situation. The Old Colonists too believe that faith makes a difference in all areas of one's life, including not only faith and morality, but also vocation, economics, social organization and

education. Like Hauerwas and Willimon, the Old Colonists believe that faith is best lived out in a community where faithfulness is understood not only in terms of the way in which people relate to God, but also in the manner in which they relate to each other. The Old Colonists also believe that faith is fundamentally concerned about creating communities of faith, not only saving individual souls.

The Old Colonists base their view on separation from the world on biblical texts like Romans 12:2, where the Apostle Paul admonishes believers, "do not be conformed to the world." They see the larger society as living by standards and beliefs that they feel threaten true faith. Instead of building community, the world seeks the good of the individual. Instead of peace and reconciliation, the world lives by violence and war. Instead of modesty, the world is often shamelessly immoral and seeks only pleasure. Instead of sharing with those in need, the world is fiercely competitive, often to the detriment of the individual. Instead of a life of simplicity, the world strives for luxury and wealth in an unending consumerism.

The Old Colonists view of faith can be seen as one of the historical expressions of the sixteenth century Anabaptist vision. Anabaptists claimed that the Christian faith should apply to all of life, including the religious, economic, social, and educational. To be Christian is to be willing to be different, and to accept the persecution and misunderstandings, which comes with that stance. Old Colonists often see themselves as martyrs for the faith.

### **The Old Colony Vision and Experience of Church**

One looks in vain for a well-articulated Old Colony theology. Their leaders did not have the interest, or the ability, to express their theology in written form. Their theology remains more implicit than explicit. Consequently outsiders who have tried to understand them, but who nevertheless are not fully one of them usually articulate it. This paper is such an attempt by an outsider to try to understand the Old Colonists by making their implicit theology somewhat more explicit.

Even though Old Colonists have not written theological treatises, a few of their leaders have at crucial points in their history articulated a vision for their church.<sup>3</sup> Two writings are particularly helpful in this regard, namely, the one by Johann Wiebe, the first bishop of the Old Colonists (then called the Reinlaender Mennonite Church), who wrote about the move to Manitoba in the 1870s, and the other by Isaac Dyck, the bishop in Mexico who wrote about the reasons for the move to Mexico. In sermonic form, Johann Wiebe articulated his ideas

regarding the formation of the Old Colony Church by beginning with the experience in Russia.<sup>4</sup> As he saw it, in Russia Mennonite church leaders had had to struggle against Mennonite civil leaders.<sup>5</sup> The civil leadership had the support of the government, and thus church leaders were often restricted in what they could do and say. In at least one case, church leaders were banished from the community. It was Wiebe's vision that in Manitoba the church should have the final say in all matters related to the Mennonite community life, including the economic (village organizations), civil (municipal services), social (*Waisenamt*, care for orphans), and educational (the schools). Organizationally this primacy of the church in the community was expressed in that the civic leader, *Obervorsteher*, was confirmed in his office by the bishop.

The key to maintaining the system was confessional control of the schools where the beliefs under-girding the church would be taught. In the schools their children learned the German language which was used in church, memorized the catechism which was a synopsis of their faith, learned the content of the Bible since it was used as the basic text for reading in the schools, and acquired the rudimentary arithmetic and writing skills needed for village and church. They believed that to lose control of the schools was to lose control of the church's future.<sup>6</sup> This view of the Christian faith was remarkably integrated and comprehensive. Wiebe believed that the Old Colony Church was applying the teachings of the Bible to all areas of life.

### Changes in Mexico

In the 1920s the Old Colony Church moved to Mexico because the Manitoba and Saskatchewan governments took away control of their schools.<sup>7</sup> In Mexico they continued to hold the view that the authority of the church was central in the community.<sup>8</sup>

However, an issue that became increasingly significant for the Old Colonists was modernity.<sup>9</sup> The modern world and its technological advances were viewed with suspicion. The Old Colonists believed that they should not be unequally yoked with the world. Since modernism, and its accompanying militarism, had taken away their schools in Canada, they felt modernization would undermine their basic beliefs in God. Modernism was seen as not only threatening their schools, but also their belief in non-resistance, their view and experience of community, their economic organizations and life style, and most importantly, faith in God.

The Old Colony church saw itself as engaged in a struggle for survival with the world in which every new issue, for example, the

introduction of the automobile, rubber tired tractors, modern clothes, new housing styles, new curriculum for the schools became a struggle over the survival of the church and the Christian faith. Thus, until a few decades ago, the majority of Old Colony Churches in Mexico rejected these modernizing trends because to accept them was to give in to the corruption of the world.<sup>10</sup>

An unfortunate by-product of the Old Colony Church's struggle with modernity was that it closed its members to renewal from within. Their school system which had well trained leaders when they first immigrated to Manitoba, lost its vitality. But developing a teacher training school like their people had had in the Chortitza colony in Russia was too threatening, and so they could not develop a process for renewal and reform. A conservative attitude developed, leading the Old Colony Church to try to keep its schools unchanged. It believed that since the schools had served it well in the past, they would continue to serve the church community well in the future. However, what the Old Colonists did not realize was that schools steadily declined in ability, and thus could not meet the demands of changing times within their communities nor in the society outside their villages.

In Mexico, the Old Colony church experienced the challenges of a changing cultural environment. Cuauhtemoc, which was a small town when the Old Colonists arrived in 1920s, grew to become a large city, in part due to the economic contribution of the Old Colonists. As the city grew, it became ever more a challenge to their isolation and way of life. A severe drought in the 1950s resulted in assistance from the Mennonite Central Committee. The MCC workers who provided assistance introduced new schools into the Old Colony and Sommerfelder communities. This small beginning developed into a new school system outside of Cuauhtemoc. Old Colony people who supported the school were excommunicated. They began a new church. The new General Conference Church which resulted was seen as a threat by the leadership of the Old Colony Church, and it redoubled its efforts to keep a sharp line between itself and the "world" as it characterized the General Conference church and schools.

During the years after the 1950s, the Old Colony Church continued to minister to its members and to grow. Its population increase was at first accommodated by the establishment of new settlements nearby, like Santa Rita and Oho de la Yeva. However, before long, the overpopulation became acute, many became financially destitute, and the problems multiplied. Beginning in the 1950s, Old Colonists moved back to Manitoba or to Ontario where they could have seasonal employment. What was a trickle eventually became a stream.

To address the increasing encroachment of the “world” upon them, the leaders in one Old Colony settlement after the other decided they would have to move to a more isolated location. The result was out-migration of those who were willing to follow the leaders and their vision for communities separate from the “world.” The Old Colony settlements near Neuvo Casas Grandes and Campeche in Mexico, and in Bolivia resulted. Those Old Colonists who remained in the settlements near Cuauhtemoc eventually all adopted some forms of modernization like pickup trucks and electricity, but most rejected newer forms of schools. In their church life, they either reorganized as Old Colony Churches, or joined new churches, like the Reinlaender, Kleine Gemeinde, Gemeinde Gottes, or General Conference.

In each of the new areas to which the conservatives migrated, the struggle over modernity in schools, church life, economics, transportation, clothing etc. continued. For example, in the Old Colony settlements near Nuevo Casas Grandes, the recent steep rise in the price of gasoline and diesel fuel made the acceptance of electricity necessary for economic survival. Without electricity, the cost of irrigating their semi-desert fields was unaffordable.

In each colony, as the pressure to accommodate became too great, the bishops decided to move to either Campeche in southern Mexico or to Bolivia. They called upon the members to follow them. Obeying the bishop became a test of faith, and those who did not were banned. Those who did not move, and accepted electricity, also accepted trucks and cars. However, schools were not changed and church services continued in the traditional pattern. Even with the accommodations, separation from the world still remained a governing principle. The line of separation between themselves and the world had moved, but the principle remained.

Old Colonists came to Manitoba from both the conservative and the accommodating camps. If they came from groups that did not allow automobiles or electricity, they may well have been banned when they left for Canada. If they came from one of the accommodating groups, they may not be banned for moving to Canada, but may have had a sense of failure that made the move necessary. In both cases, they oftentimes experienced some inner turmoil about their relationship to their home community.

### **Old Colony Experience of Church Life – Positives and Negatives**

The vision that Johan Wiebe articulated was continued in a variety of church groups in Manitoba. Both the most conservative Old Colonists and the more accommodating ones saw themselves as

continuing the original vision. When the Old Colonists came back to Manitoba in the late twentieth century, they usually had been shaped within one branch of the Old Colony experience or the other. Regardless of the group they had grown up in, they had some common characteristics. They had been shaped by the church's teaching and nurture. The quality of the teaching and nurture varied, because the quality of the lay leaders varied. In most cases they experienced regular preaching of the gospel. They heard and often responded to a call to confess their sins to God and to each other. Many committed their lives to God in faith. Their usual pattern of arriving at a faith commitment was a lengthy process that began with instruction in the schools.

A major step in this process of coming to faith was the memorization of the catechism and being baptized into membership in the church. Their hope in eternal salvation was seen as a lifelong process that continued after baptism. They lived in the hope that God's grace would be sufficient to sustain them as faithful followers of Christ. Their theology was characterized by hope in the future and a sense of humility before God. The sermons they heard used the language of conversion, commitment, and discipleship (*Nachfolge*).

Old Colonists believed that a church should have a bishop and ministers elected from their midst. Un-ordained lay members did not play public roles or have a say in church matters. Their church had rules by which members were to live. The rules addressed many areas of life including military service, dress, lifestyle, modes of transportation, vocations, sexual relationships, conspicuous consumerism, and interpersonal relationships. They celebrated communion twice a year. Their church emphasized that before people come to communion, they needed to "make things right" with one another.

For a variety of reasons, many of the Old Colonists who came to Canada were marginal to their home church. Some were marginal because they were poor and had to move out of financial desperation. Others had not fully obeyed all the requirements of the church, and still others had wanted more change and innovation than the church was willing to allow. Some were excommunicated. Oftentimes they possessed some measure of pain and hurt from their church and community experiences, affecting their ability to form relationships to churches in Manitoba. For some, these negative experiences made them suspicious of any church; for others this background made them reluctant to commit to any church. For some the experience of the power of the bishops was too arbitrary. Some bishops equated obedience to them with obedience to God. This represented a loss of Wiebe's original vision that church leadership represented the

collective will of the members.<sup>11</sup> For those who were excommunicated, they may well have additional issues and feelings to process. The gospel was often presented as a rule-based message. This meant that the teaching of the church sometimes became more of a burden than a liberation.

For most of the immigrants, the school system designed to prepare them for life in the village and community in Mexico did not prepare them adequately for life in Manitoba. Some were able to overcome this liability with native ability, but many suffered as a result of this problem. Women in Mexican Mennonite communities often felt disempowered because of lack of knowledge or because of deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes. This sometimes resulted in an exaggerated sense of submissiveness on the part of women, and a sense on the part of men that they had a right to control their wives and daughters, resulting in various forms of abuse.

Many of the returnees had lost a sense of “rootedness” in their spiritual heritage. They knew little about Anabaptist and Mennonite history, and were not able to recognize or utilize the resources for renewal within it. Some of the churches that came to them with a message of renewal further alienate them from their own heritage by requiring the kind of conversions that include a rejection of their past, and a condemnation of it as unchristian.

### **Characteristics of the Old Colony Immigrants**

Old Colonists usually return to Manitoba for economic reasons, not because they are looking for a different church, or because they feel that their vision of church could be better expressed in Manitoba than in their country of origin. This is in contrast to their forebears who left Manitoba in the 1920s to preserve a vision of church.

Second, the returnees come as individual families, as chain migrants. This is in contrast to the group emigrations of their parents or grandparents who moved to Latin America from Manitoba in the 1920s, 1940s or in the 1960s. Even though the returnees tend to cluster together in the same areas in Canada, their arrivals span many years and often are the result of many trips back and forth from Mexico to Canada. Consequently, the returnees bring with them very little in the form of community support systems or leaders who can give them guidance.

Third, one of the few support systems the Old Colonists have is networking. Family and friends may help the new immigrants find housing, make connections with Mennonite Central Committee personnel, find out where to shop, and make contact with churches.

By the same token, returnees who do not have these connections may well have greater difficulty finding resources and a church home when they arrive in Canada.

### Churches that Receive the Low German Immigrants

Many of the Old Colony and Reinland Mennonite immigrants from Mexico find their way to the Old Colony and Reinland Mennonite Churches in Manitoba.<sup>12</sup> In a real sense, these two churches also represent the vision of Johann Wiebe. There is thus a kinship between them and the immigrants. The difference is that the Old Colony and Reinland churches in Manitoba, while still retaining many of the same principles, have made many more accommodations to the host society than their churches in Mexico had done. The immigrants are attracted to these two churches because both have made deliberate attempts to minister to them. In both churches the style of worship is similar enough to the style the immigrants had in Mexico that they feel comfortable. Both churches have changed their language of worship from High German to Low German to accommodate the immigrants. In Mexico many of them were unable to understand the High German sermons.

The Old Colony immigrants are attracted by the Sunday schools these churches provide. Even the music is familiar, in that the same hymnbooks are used although the singing style is different. Both the Reinland and Old Colony churches use a more modern style of singing instead of the traditional "Lange Wies."

About ninety percent of the present membership of both the Reinland and Old Colony Mennonite churches in Manitoba is made up of *Kanadier* immigrants. Both churches have about 1,100 members.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the formal members, many immigrants receive their spiritual nurture in these two churches even though they may not become members.<sup>14</sup> Relatively few Old Colony immigrants join the Sommerfelder Church because it normally uses Low German in only a portion of the worship services, or not at all. More of the second-generation immigrants join the Sommerfelder Church. Not nearly all Old Colony immigrants relate to a church. Possibly up to a third remain unchurched.<sup>15</sup> For a variety of reasons they do not find a church home.

The number of *Kanadier* who move on to become members of the Sommerfelder Church is hard to estimate.<sup>16</sup> Some returnees join the Zion Mennonite Church south of Winkler. It also has its roots in the Old Colony Church, even though it recently allied itself with the Chortitzer Mennonite Church. It also has a Low German service. A

barrier for many in joining this church is that in order to become a member, the church requires a public confession of faith, and the confession has to include a conversion experience. Since for many coming to faith was a lengthy process instead of a particular conversion experience, they find this requirement difficult to fulfill. Also, many people find making any public statements overwhelming.<sup>17</sup>

Many of the Kleine Gemeinde returnees from Mexico and Belize are attracted to the Interlake Mennonite Fellowship (IMF) at Vidir, north of Arborg. The IMF also includes some of the Old Colony and Reinland people from these two countries.<sup>18</sup> IMF has worship services in Low German and uses patterns familiar to the immigrants. IMF has recently divided into two worship groups. One group has developed a worship style and ministry more suited to those who have been in Manitoba for some time and the other is more suited to meet the needs of recent immigrants.<sup>19</sup>

Most of this study focuses on the returnees from Mexico. It should be noted that there are also *Kanadier* returnees from a variety of other countries. Their numbers are smaller, their situations vary, and the issues they face when they arrive are often quite different. However, they also form part of the larger story of the return of *Kanadier* to Manitoba.<sup>20</sup> The returnees from the Bergthal Colony in East Paraguay, settled in 1948 by people from Manitoba, usually return to the Chortitzer Mennonite Churches where their parents or grandparents originated. They are primarily drawn to the CMC congregations in Steinbach, Niverville, and Winnipeg. Each of these congregations has a German service.<sup>21</sup> The Sommerfelder who migrated to the Santa Clara Colony in Mexico in the 1920s, and to the Sommerfeld colony in East Paraguay in 1948, primarily return to the Reinland or Sommerfeld Mennonite Churches on the West Reserve. People from the Menno Colony in Paraguay usually end up in Winnipeg, and are attracted to the River East Mennoniten Gemeinde, the Springfield Heights Mennonite Church, and the Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church. Family connections and worship services in German are often the deciding factors as to which church they will join. Manitoba Reinland members who moved to Bolivia in the 1960s, and returned, have joined the Reinland, Old Colony or Sommerfelder churches.

### Reception of Immigrants

The churches, which receive most of the returnees from Mexico, are often referred to by outsiders as conservative. These churches are the Old Colony, Reinland, Sommerfeld, Zion, Interlake Mennonite

Fellowship (IMF), and Chortitzer.<sup>22</sup> “Conservative” is a valid designation if one uses the criteria of the relationship to society. Most of these churches do not see themselves as fully integrated or acculturated. They are conservative in what they accept of the lifestyle of the society, and usually adopt some visible features, like head coverings, as signs of distinction from it. However, the designation “conservers” might be even more appropriate since each of these churches sees itself as trying to “conserve” or continue their Anabaptist Mennonite heritage. They are the churches that have felt that it is important to maintain continuity with the received faith heritage. Innovation and change is not their goal. The churches themselves reject the adjectives “conservative” and “conserving,” and maintain that they are simply Christian. They say that under the grace of God, they follow the teachings of the Bible to the best of their ability and insight.

In the past number of years, some of these churches have distanced themselves from their earlier conservative character, and now describe themselves as evangelical. This is the case especially for the Chortitzer and Zion Churches even though a number of others have also made changes in this direction. These churches, whether so called conservative or evangelical, have shaped their ministry to address the needs of returnees from Mexico or from other areas of Latin America. They try to make their churches inviting to the returnees, communicate the gospel of Christ to them, and help them come to faith in God and to membership in the church. Before these churches accept the immigrants as members they expect that they worship with them for at least half a year to a year. This allows the church to get to know the immigrants, and also allows the immigrants to become familiar with the church so that they can make an informed decision when they decide to apply for membership.

The churches recognize the immigrants’ baptism in their home congregations as valid, and do not require them to be re-baptized. In this way they accept the churches of origin as sister Mennonite churches.<sup>23</sup> The designation “sister churches” is used loosely, because not all Mexican Old Colony Churches will extend the hand of fellowship to Manitoba churches. The most conservative Mexican churches believe that the Manitoba churches compromised with the “world” by not moving to Mexico in the 1920s.

The procedure for accepting immigrants from Mexico as members, in particular the Old Colonists, is similar in the various churches. The immigrants who want to become members indicate this to a minister of the church. The church usually asks two ministers, or the ministers together with their wives, to visit the candidates requesting membership. In the Manitoba Old Colony Church the

candidates for membership will attend the monthly meeting of the ministers where they present their request for membership and give their testimony of faith.<sup>24</sup>

The meeting with ministers is held in order to discuss with the candidates their faith in God. In each case, the leaders indicate that their church wants to know whether the candidate's faith is genuine. Has the person been baptized simply because his or her parents wanted them to be baptized, or because they wanted to get married, or because it was simply the thing to do, or is there evidence of a genuine personal faith in God, and a desire to follow the teachings of the Bible?<sup>25</sup> The ministers check with the candidates whether there are any matters that need to be cleared up. In some cases there are conflicts that have to be settled, outstanding financial debts to be repaid, or a drinking problem that needs to be addressed. The church works with each of these issues until it is resolved before a person is accepted into the church. In the case of alcohol problems, a number of churches indicate that they arrange for counseling.

If the person has been banned, meaning that the person has been excommunicated by his or her home church in Mexico, the churches check out the reasons why. Depending on the reason why a person was banned, it may be necessary to contact their home congregation to clear up whatever the problem was before the person is accepted as a member.<sup>26</sup> The churches in Manitoba decide whether the ban was due to an issue they consider important. When all issues are cleared up, the minister or bishop announces to the congregation that the candidate wishes to become a member, and if anyone has any concerns or questions about this person becoming a member, they are asked to speak to a minister. A week or two after this announcement, the person is accepted formally into membership. In some cases the candidates are publicly asked questions about their faith and commitment to the God and the church. In other cases, these questions are asked within a smaller circle of leaders. Acceptance is indicated with a handshake.

The churches try to get the candidates to bring some written testimony from their home church. Some immigrants come with a sealed letter of reference from their home church in Mexico stating that they are in good standing, or indicating problems if there are such. In some cases the candidates will request letters of recommendation from their home congregations as part of the process of becoming members. In other cases, churches in Manitoba will phone ministers in Mexico. The most conservative churches in Mexico and Bolivia will not give a letter of reference since they may even have placed the person under the ban for emigrating.<sup>27</sup>

## Concluding Observations

The churches in Manitoba indicated above have provided a significant ministry to the *Kanadier* immigrants and in particular to the Old Colonists. They have accepted them, nurtured them, have not required a break with their spiritual past, and have given them opportunity for growth and maturation. Thus, in contrast to the experience in Ontario and Alberta, Old Colony immigrants to southern Manitoba have not formed new churches. An exception are the *Kanadier* immigrants in the Interlake district where they have formed the Inter Mennonite Fellowship, a church consisting of both Kleine Gemeinde and Old Colony immigrants.

Still, the number of *Kanadier* who are being served by the Manitoba Mennonite churches is large. They include the many people who have joined churches on the West Reserve, East Reserve, Winnipeg, and near Vidir. In addition, many immigrants attend but have not formally joined churches. If to this are added the large number of children, the total number of *Kanadier* who find spiritual nurture in Mennonite churches in Manitoba could well be 8000-10,000. These churches in Manitoba provide a very significant ministry. Clearly the *Kanadier* Mennonites have made and continue to make a strong contribution to Mennonite Churches in Manitoba. As one of the ministers said, "These new members (Old Colonists from Mexico) are wonderful people with a strong, quiet faith in God."<sup>28</sup>

One of the challenges that Canadians face in relation to the *Kanadier* is seeing them as people with a rich religious heritage. They are people who have made huge cultural and church transitions. They have overcome major challenges of language, finances, customs, and sometimes prejudice. They are a resilient and resourceful people, many of whom have a deep faith in God. They have contributed much to church and community in Manitoba.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Alien: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 18.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.
- <sup>3</sup> Johann Wiebe, *Die Auswanderung von Russland nach Kanada* (Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua, Mexico: Campo 6 ½ , Apartado 297, 1972); and Isaak M. Dyck, *Auswanderung der Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde von Canada nach Mexico* (Cuauhtemoc, Mexico: Campo 6 ½ , Apartado 297, 1971, second edition).
- <sup>4</sup> See Wiebe, *Die Auswanderung von Russland nach Kanada*; Peter D. Zacharias, *Reinland, An Experience in Community* (Reinland, MB: Reinland Centennial Committee, 1976) 53f and 185f; Delbert Plett, *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada 1875-2000* (Steinbach, MB: Crossways Publications, Inc, 2001), 45-72; John J.

- Friesen, "Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde" in Plett, *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada*, 3-19; Adolf Ens, "A Second Look at the Rejected Conservatives" in Plett, *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada*, 27-32; Peter D. Zacharias, "Aeltester Johann Wiebe (1837-1905)" in Adolf Ens, et al, *Church, Family and Village Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve* (Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), 53-66.
- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the struggles that developed between Mennonite church and civil leadership in Russia see James Urry, *None But Saints* (Winnipeg, MB: Hyperion Press, 1989), 78ff; and John J. Friesen, *Mennonites in Russia* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1989), 58ff.
- <sup>6</sup> Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens? The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-1925* (Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 62f and 105-170.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 105f.
- <sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the reasons why the Old Colony Mennonites moved to Mexico in the 1920s see the book by their long time bishop in the Manitoba Colony in Mexico, Dyck, *Auswanderung der Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde von Canada nach Mexico*.
- <sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the struggle with modernity in Mexico, see H. Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought A Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971), 299ff; and Calvin Wall Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 123ff.
- <sup>10</sup> For a discussion of Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico, see Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*. For an update of his earlier study see Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *Sie Suchten eine Heimat Deutsch-Mennonitische Kolonisierung in Mexico 1922-1984* (Marburg, Germany: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1986). See also Walter Schmiedehaus, *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott. Der Wanderweg eines Christlichen Siedlervolkes* (Blumenort, Chih: G. J. Rempel, 1948).
- <sup>11</sup> This view was quite evident in the Reinlaender Church before the migration to Mexico. When issues related to military conscription and school attendance came up in the years from 1915-1922, the bishops called frequent membership meetings at which the issues of the day were discussed at great length. Only after the membership had decided, did the bishops take a stand. For example, see Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?*, 183.
- <sup>12</sup> The Reinland Church in Mexico is not a descendent of the Reinlaender Mennonite Church which immigrated to Mexico in the 1920s. That church renamed itself as the Old Colony Church. The present Reinland Mennonite Church in Mexico was organized in areas where Old Colony bishops emigrated to escape the modernization. In most cases, e.g. in the Santa Rita and Swift Colonies, the majority of members did not follow the bishops. They were leaderless, without ministers, and no one to perform the regular services of weddings, communion, baptism, and funerals. To fill this void, the bishop of the Reinland Mennonite Church in Manitoba came to Mexico, and organized the Reinland Mennonite Church in Mexico. In some of the colonies it became the largest Mennonite Church.
- <sup>13</sup> Based on interviews with Abe Rempel, Old Colony minister, October 2000 and September 2002, and William Friesen, Reinland Mennonite Church bishop, September 2002.
- <sup>14</sup> The various leaders indicate that for a variety of reasons, numerous Old Colonist immigrants will attend their churches for many years without becoming members.
- <sup>15</sup> This number is based on estimates made by MCC personnel who work closely with *Kanadier* returnees. It is not based on a scientific poll or survey.
- <sup>16</sup> Abe Wiebe, Sommerfeld Mennonite Church minister, interview September, 2002.
- <sup>17</sup> Bill Thiessen, Zion Mennonite Church minister, interview September 2002. The Zion Church recently joined the Chortitzer Mennonite Conference. It is a

- requirement of the Chortitzer that every new member make a person public confession of faith. Thiessen indicated that many of the Mexican returnees found it difficult to verbalize their faith publicly.
- 18 The Kleine Gemeinde members who come to Vidir, come from at least two sources. Some come from Los Jagueyes (Quellen Kolonie), the historical Kleine Gemeinde Colony in Mexico, founded in 1948 by Kleine Gemeinde immigrants from Manitoba. The other Kleine Gemeinde returnees come from Kleine Gemeinde churches which were organized in the Swift and Santa Rita colonies after their Old Colony bishops left when the colonies modernized. These people are thus Old Colony in background, upbringing, and family relationships, but members in the Kleine Gemeinde church. Thus, when they come to Manitoba, they may be attracted to the southern Manitoba churches where the other immigrants from Old Colony churches in Mexico reside, or they may move to Vidir, where their fellow church members have settled.
- 19 Based on interview with Milton Loewen, minister and former bishop in the Interlake Mennonite Fellowship, Vidir, September, 2002.
- 20 The term *Kanadier* has a number of meanings. In its broadest meaning it includes all the Mennonites, and their descendents, who immigrated to Manitoba and Saskatchewan from Russia prior to World War I. This includes both those who emigrated to Latin America from Canada, as well as those who remained in Canada. A more restricted meaning of the term *Kanadier* includes those who emigrated to any of the Latin American countries, and their descendents. This includes those who returned to Canada. The most restricted form of the term is to use it to refer primarily to the Old Colonists who migrated to Mexico, and their descendents. This usage tends to focus primarily on the Old Colony returnees to Canada. In this paper the focus is on the most restricted meaning, even though in some references, the second use is also employed.
- 21 Interview with Cornie Martens, Chortitzer Mennonite Church assistant bishop, September 2002.
- 22 In order to gather the material for this section, I interviewed Abe Rempel, Old Colony Church minister, William Friesen, Reinland Mennonite Church bishop, Abe Wiebe, Sommerfelder Church minister, Bill Thiessen, Zion Mennonite Church leading minister, Milton Loewen, Interlake Mennonite Fellowship minister and former bishop, and Cornie Martens, Chortitzer Church assistant bishop.
- 23 Evangelical Mennonite churches have often not accepted the *Kanadier* immigrant's baptism as valid, and have required both a conversion experience according to their church's form, and a rebaptism. This procedure in which the people's past religious experience is judged negatively has caused personal anguish for many, as well as a sense of being cut off from their own spiritual heritage. For a discussion of these problems, see David Schroeder, "Evangelicals Denigrate Conservatives" in Plett, *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada*, 33-34.
- 24 Interview with Abe Rempel, minister, September, 2002.
- 25 The leaders of the various Mennonite churches used very similar language when they described the testing of the personal faith of the applicants for membership.
- 26 In the interviews it was evident that clearing up old personal problems or sins in the applicants' lives was of major concern for the leaders, and took considerable time and energy.
- 27 The most conservative churches in Mexico, Belize, and Bolivia also do not recognize any churches in Manitoba as sister churches. If ministers from the churches in Manitoba visit, they are not asked to speak or give formal greetings. Some of the less conservative churches in Mexico will extend the hand of fellowship to the Manitoba churches. Those are also the ones who will provide references.
- 28 The comment was made by Bill Thiessen, Zion Mennonite Church, but reflects well the view of the other people interviewed. September, 2002.