

Northfield Settlement, Nova Scotia: A New Direction for Immigrants from Belize

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Nova Scotia is known for its fishermen, its lighthouses, and its Celtic culture and history. Much of its population has roots in the United Kingdom. Still, in 1984, a group of *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites from Belize founded a settlement at Northfield in rural Nova Scotia. In 2002 the settlement had approximately 55 families and a church with about 155 members, about 300 people in total. This paper will examine the structure and function of this new community. It is based on oral history, thanks to interviews and visits with different people in the settlement. It is not meant to be exhaustive and certainly does not cover the range of diversity in the community; it merely offers a quick snapshot that it is hoped will provide some insight into a unique and thriving community.

History

After World War I, the Canadian government assumed control of the private, parochial school system in an attempt to make it more

uniform with the public system. Many Canadian Mennonite parents feared that their children might be taught and trained in accordance with the "world's spirit," so they chose to emigrate."¹ Between 1948-1952, many *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites sold their farms in Manitoba and moved to Mexico, where they had the freedom to conduct their private, parochial schools in complete and unconditional accordance with their personal convictions and desires as a group. Modeled after the early pioneer years in Canada, the goal of these schools remained to train a child to be humble and meek in order to prepare him/her for early conversion to Christ through the Holy Spirit. That aim included learning to read and understand God's plan of salvation essential in the study of the Bible. The communities hired teachers from their own brotherhood, believing this would have a positive influence on children's character.

However, after only eight years, the Mexican government announced plans to reform its school system, curtail the further purchase of land, and enforce a Social Security System throughout the nation. This meant the building of hospitals, schools, sport and recreational facilities, public institutions that were contrary to the religious convictions of the Mennonite communities. The creation of sports facilities to encourage homogenous society was out of the question.² As a result, many Mennonites decided to move to the British Honduras (now Belize) in the late 1950s. The *Kleine Gemeinde* delegation chose to move to a place called Spanish Lookout. The first seven families left on March 5, 1958.

The Spanish Lookout years were both difficult and rewarding. The Mennonites worked hard to establish themselves as farmers. They grew corn and beans and raised dairy cattle and chickens. They built roads and a power plant and ran a store and trading centre owned by the farmers, similar to a co-op.³ Martin Penner says the Mennonite families were blessed and became wealthy compared to the natives. As they prospered, their neighbors began to feel jealous. They began to attack the community, stealing their possessions and terrorizing the families. Community members were shocked when one young man from the settlement were shot and killed in 1961. "People were worried about their health. Over there, we were strangers and Canada was our home. That could've been a reason we came back to Canada," Penner says.⁴ People began searching for a different home. In 1983, a delegation was sent to Nova Scotia to scout the land and assess the possibilities there.⁵

Penner, a farmer and one of the settlement's ministers, was part of a delegation that came to Canada in 1983. The delegates left their wives in Manitoba and then drove through Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. They did not see anything that appealed to them, so

they returned to Manitoba and took a bus through Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Penner says they were attracted to Nova Scotia because it seemed simpler and less “advanced” than many other provinces in Canada. It also had limited settlement in the province’s interior, where there was room for agriculture. “We were looking for land where we as farmers could live together again. We didn’t want to be so isolated but we wanted to live in a group. We found this place, about 2,700 acres, and bought it from the owner,” Penner recalls.⁶ About 25 families moved to Nova Scotia in 1984-85.

When their parents had moved to Mexico and British Honduras, they had asked the governments for special privileges in education. Penner says the group did not make a similar request when they moved to Nova Scotia. “We trusted the government so much that we thought maybe it was not necessary. We wanted to show our beliefs, so maybe we didn’t need to ask for differences – we just wanted to be a light to the world.”⁷

One of the long-time community representatives, Levi D. Friesen, says his father was also a scout. He and his family moved in November 1983 and he says he has never regretted it. For one thing, Friesen says the climate in Nova Scotia is much better than the hot, humid conditions in Belize. As well, he says the Mennonites feel safer in Canada. “The people are better. The difference is like black and white,” Friesen says.⁸ “There, we were ‘higher-grade’ people and the natives were stealing from us. It was dangerous. We were the targets because people want to take from the rich. Here, we are the ‘lower-grade’ people, so our neighbors are not jealous of us. I am increasing my dairy farm slowly, but we are smaller in farming so the neighbors are not jealous of us.”

Things have not been completely peaceful, though. There have been some incidents of stolen produce from some of the settlements’ greenhouses. There was also a time when some of the local boys went on a rampage and destroyed many of the mailboxes belonging to Northfield’s members. Sometimes, the community leaders have called in the police, but more often, they accept this as part of the cost of being different in a more worldly society. More recently, there are concerns that some of their neighbors have chosen to live nearby because they know the settlement has a reputation as a law-abiding community, and they are involved in illegal or questionable activities.

Overall, however, settlement leaders say they get along well with their neighbors. As the community has grown, it has bought up land adjacent to English-speaking Nova Scotians, some of whom now live within the settlement boundaries. “We’re glad they’re there. We get along well with them and respect them,” Levi D. Friesen says, echoing the sentiments of many other people on the settlement.⁹

When asked, most people in the neighboring communities know about the Mennonites. Many admit they have not visited the settlement. They have a lot of questions about the Mennonites' lifestyle, religion, and education. Some express concerns about how the women and children are treated. However, most seem to have respect for the community's work ethic and quality agriculture and furniture produced there. Many people make a weekly trip to local farmer's markets to buy produce and baked goods from the Mennonites. Others boast of the beautiful kitchen cabinets or bedroom furniture they had custom-made by people living on the settlement.

Church Community

In order to understand the Northfield Settlement, one must understand the role of the church. It is the physical and spiritual centre of the community, the focal point from which all other activities, such as schools and missions, stem. People become church members when they are "full and grown and have been born again," the head minister, Klaas Penner, explains. "When they are baptized, they are taken as a member. From age 15, most people are members, men and women."¹⁰

The church is part of the larger *Kleine Gemeinde* ("Little Church") conference, with sister churches in Central America, Mexico, the U.S. and Canada. The *Kleine Gemeinde* congregation, say the Northfield settlers, used to be part of the *Grosze Gemeinde* ("Big Church") in Russia. In Manitoba, the part of the *Kleine Gemeinde* that did not move to Mexico in 1948 has become the Evangelical Mission Conference. The current *Kleine Gemeinde* church administration runs the local schools, facilitates womens' groups, helps organize the missions programs, and other social structures.

In the Northfield congregation there are five ministers (one of whom is working with the mission church in Leamington) and two deacons. The leadership team takes turns preaching and bringing the meditation on Sunday mornings. They have life terms and serve as long as they are healthy and able. All are volunteer positions. No one at Northfield has ever been asked to step down from the ministry. The community takes its qualifications for a minister from the biblical books of Titus 1:5-9 and I Timothy 3:1-7. Qualifications for the deaconate come from I Timothy 3:8-13 and Acts 6:1-4. All have other occupations during the week – most of them farm for a living.¹¹

Church services take place every Sunday morning at 9:30 a.m. They are traditional in nature, with the men sitting on one side and the women on the other. Martin Penner says they believe this practice

comes from the Bible and that it helps both genders focus on God, rather than concentrating on each other. "It's not wrong to sit together, but we think it's easier to concentrate on God if we're separate."¹² Sisters wear a black head covering, although the church does not insist visitors wear one. "Head covering is not salvation," Penner explains. "If they're saved, the Holy Spirit would tell them according to Scripture to wear a head covering."¹³ There are no instruments, only *Vorsangers* (song leaders) at the front who introduce the songs and lead the singing. The Northfield Settlement uses two hymnals, one in High German without any music, and another in English with the traditional four-part harmony, although most of the singing is done in unison.

Every service includes a meditation and a sermon, both of which are explanations of specific Bible verses chosen on a theme.¹⁴ None of the church leaders have formal training, although several attend regular ministers' conferences in Belize. Their philosophy is simple: "We try to be open to the Holy Spirit, to not go by our own understanding, but to look to the Scripture and try to find answers through prayer."¹⁵ Their goal is to encourage members to believe in Christ and follow His commands, denying any fleshly desires that will take people away from God.

Most of the service is in High and Low German, but the church leaders are open to speaking in English when there are visitors present. At the end of the service, there is an opportunity for people to bring their prayer requests to the community and comment on the service. Women are free to speak out during this time. Church leaders are in the process of establishing an English-language evening service once a month so the community will be more welcoming for visitors. They say they want their neighbors to feel comfortable visiting them and learning more about their faith.¹⁶

After the service, the members stay together for a time of visiting, either in or outside of the church building. It is quite a colorful sight to see the men, in their white shirts and black pants, visiting on one side of the church parking lot, and the women, in their dresses and black head coverings, on the other side. Children run to and fro, many of them dressed similarly in the same fabrics so it is easy to identify family units.

The brethren have regular Bible studies to discuss spiritual matters, such as how to be a good member and how to work for the Lord. Every year, they vote on positions such as the school principal. As well, different committees are struck and members are involved in regular meetings.

The ministers' responsibilities include leading meetings, doing baptisms, weddings and funerals, bringing the sermon, and doing home visits. Sometimes, they go as deacon couples and the wife does

some counseling if a sister needs help.¹⁷ Deacons are responsible for taking care of the alms and making sure they get to people who need them, either needy people in the settlement or through missions. They also participate in mediation, if necessary. Excommunication from the church is not common. However, it is still practiced if one is living in sin or fornication and refuses to confess and repent. If someone has fallen away from the church in this way, the ministry will talk to the member and invite him or her to return to the community. If such members confess, they are invited back into the church. If they do not confess, they are excommunicated from the church and shunned by the members.¹⁸

Women do not take part in church leadership; nor do they have a vote in church matters. All church committees are run by men because they believe that is what the Bible instructs. However, some of the women participate in recently established monthly home-based meetings, in which the older women instruct the younger ones on how to be a good wife and helpmate, how to raise the children, and how to do practical tasks around the house.

Community Structure

Much of the community structure comes from the church organization. At annual settlement meetings (usually in January), the brethren are presented with the financial statements and a census that provides an economic snapshot of the community. They also elect one of three representatives for a three-year term. These representatives may serve for two terms at a time, and then step aside for at least a year to let someone else get involved.¹⁹ They are charged with taking care of the people, which involves finances, real estate transactions, and a host of other community programs.

In the beginning, the founding seven or eight families of the Northfield Settlement pooled their money together, borrowed more from the Farm Loan Board, and bought about 2,700 acres of land. Their names were on the original deeds, but the land was later parceled up and sold to individuals. Since then, the community has bought more land three more times, so the settlement is now approximately 4,200 acres.²⁰

During the business meetings, the representatives offer any available land for sale to the members. Individuals need permission from the community to sell land to non-church members.²¹ The representatives are involved in borrowing money to buy more land so no individual person is responsible for the loan. They also pay property and land taxes for the community. Part of this is rooted in

the way the land was first bought; not everyone has the deed to their land because it was purchased as a large block by the founding families.²² The land has since been sub-divided, but there may only be one deed for five parcels of land. Therefore, the tax bills are sent to the representatives, who collect the taxes from the families living on that block of land. They collect a little bit extra to cover bookkeeping expenses, and then they pay the taxes. The representatives also provide financial advice for community members.²³

Although taxation has been a concern for some churches in the past, the Northfield Settlement has not balked at paying them. "We don't look too deeply into what the government is using it for. That's their responsibility. But if they would have a form and ask us, 'Do you want to pay X amount for the military,' I would hesitate," Martin Penner says.²⁴

Most members of the Northfield Settlement have chosen not to take life insurance for their loans on their properties. They believe that God loves them and will take care of them through the community. The government has allowed them an exemption, provided the community signs away the right to sue in case of loss or damage. As a result, the community is responsible to take care of their neighbors if someone dies and has an outstanding loan. Since the community was established in Nova Scotia, this has never been necessary.²⁵ Many community members also do not have fire insurance. In 2001, the community came together to help rebuild a furniture shop shed for a member when it burned down. One of the current representatives says this is an example of the idea of community – the responsibility to love your neighbor as yourself and take care of them. Levi D. Friesen says there is less emphasis on individual than community rights at Northfield and this works because community members love and listen to each other. "How would a church stay together if the members didn't want to cooperate?" he asks.²⁶

Most members have their own bank accounts, but they are also able to borrow money from the community. There is a system in place called the *Hilfsverein* (helping group). This is run by a three-person committee, which is also elected every year.²⁷ At least once in the last two decades, people in the community have put money into the fund for others to borrow. Most of the donors do not receive any interest on their contribution. Borrowers pay interest, but at a much lower rate (usually half) of what the banks offer. The community is talking about taking that collection every five to seven years, to keep the fund viable. The amount everyone pays is calculated in the following manner: The number of people in the family multiplied by \$2,000, and then multiplied by 0.25 per cent. For example, if a couple has two children, it would pay 0.25 per cent of \$8,000. Then, on the amount of the

family's net worth above the \$8,000, the family would pay 0.04 per cent. Net worth is based on a suggested price of things such as land, to make the transaction as fair as possible.²⁸ The community representatives are also the first place many people will go to help solve disputes. They will ask one or two brothers to mediate and if that does not work, they will take the issue to the church.

Education

Education is very important to the Northfield community members. It's one reason they have moved before in their history. However, they believe too much education can be a dangerous thing. Members believe that education until Grade 8 for both boys and girls is helpful, but anything beyond that level is not a good use of time. "Eight years is long enough," says 32-year-old Elizabeth Dueck. "Everything else, I can learn at home."²⁹ Her husband, 24-year-old Edwin Dueck, agrees. "I use a lot of things I learned from Grade 8, but I didn't want to go to high school. Experience is better. When we have children, they won't go to high school. We'll get them working instead. They'll help in the shop."³⁰ Peter Penner, 29, says he only went to school until Grade 7 and "that was more than enough for me. I was not interested in going to school. There was lots to learn working on the farm."³¹ None of the young people go to high school or university, although a few have chosen to write their GED exams. After age 14, the young people go to work on the farm or in other industries connected to the settlement. "No one's ever asked to go to high school," Principal Henry Friesen says.³² "Some individuals wish they could learn a little more. Some think they learn too much."

Friesen says the young people do not have the same pressure to compete for jobs because they all find work on the settlement. In fact, the farmers, carpenters and other industries need more workers than the settlement can supply. "We trust the Lord is helping us, so we don't have to be concerned like they are in the world to go to school and university," Friesen says. "If people go to school too long, from the age of 15 to 20, it affects what they're going to be after. We want them to learn to work, so they should keep working."³³

In 2001-2002, there were 40 students aged six to 14 going to school on the Northfield settlement. The community has a one-room school in which a male teacher instructs Grades 1-8. Classes are also taught in the church basement, which is on the other end of the settlement from the school. There, a female teacher instructs Grades 1-3 and a male teacher has students from Grades 1-8. There is also a part-time teacher who instructs a student with learning disabilities.

The teachers have no formal education degrees. They are elected by the brethren once a year, although many of them have been teaching for many years. As with the other major positions, the brethren write a name on a ballot and the people with the most names are chosen to be teachers. The principal is elected by the church ministry; the current principal, Henry Friesen, taught for about a decade and is also a deacon.

The students are taught 60 per cent in English and 40 per cent in High German. Henry Friesen says when he first taught in Belize, one day a week was in English and the rest was in German. However, the young people, particularly the Grade 1 students, had a hard time settling in either language. On the Northfield settlement, they divide up the year based on terms instead, so the students do not get as mixed up. It is easier for the students to study in one language for a dedicated block of time and then switch to the other for later on.³⁴ The students are taught math, history, English, geography, science, and Catechism. There is a Bible lesson every morning and the students memorize Bible verses and sing hymns.

Friesen says education is important so the students can learn to write what is on their mind. "We feel that it's important for them to learn to express themselves, but we also want to teach them to get along with each other," Friesen says.³⁵ The students are also taught order, discipline, and how to be responsible. The students do not write exams. It is up to the teacher to decide if they should proceed to the next grade. The school year runs from mid-September to mid-May, from 9 a.m. to 3:15 p.m., so the students can help with the spring planting, fall harvest, and daily chores.

Northfield settlement can choose its own curriculum and run the system the way it wants because it does not accept any money from the provincial Department of Education. The school is funded by the church and the community. The people of the settlement see teaching as a semi-mission.³⁶ Every male church member pays \$15/month plus a percentage of their income for education (3 per cent of their labor or net business income and 1.5 per cent from timber, milk, beef, pigs, vegetables, or custom work). People without children in school pay a maximum of \$50/month. Women do not pay the \$15/month fee, but are charged a percentage of their income to a maximum of \$35/month. Those percentages may increase in the near future because the community is building a new school in 2003 to accommodate a growing number of students.³⁷

Sometimes, people from other settlements come to visit for extended periods of time. Their children are welcome to go to school, but their families are asked to pay approximately 75 per cent of the cost of attending.³⁸ Teachers are paid a salary based on how many

years they have taught and how many children they have to feed. The average salary is \$1,300 for the months school is in session; during the summer months, most teachers work on the farm or in local carpentry shops.³⁹ The principal receives about \$600/year.

Henry Friesen says no provincial funding means the settlement is free to have its Christian school without interference. He says the school inspectors have not visited for several years because they appear to be satisfied that the children are learning what is necessary. However, education does not end when the students finish Grade 8. Young people and married couples attend Bible school during the winter, which includes 11 evening sessions and homework. Young parents are given child-training instruction. All the programs are run by the church.

Industry

“Farming is in the blood,” says Levi D. Friesen, one of the community representatives. “Almost everyone would farm if they could.”⁴⁰ In the beginning years, the majority of the settlements’ income came from carpenters, many of whom worked off the settlement. The children contributed by picking blueberries and strawberries. As people began to buy their own land, they invested in cattle or hogs, or began planting crops. Now, the majority of the community earns its living on the settlement. In 2002, there were six dairy farmers, six hog farmers, several gardens, some furniture shops, welders, and mechanics. Several of the farmers sell their produce and bakery at farmers’ markets in Truro, Halifax, and Dartmouth, as well as through roadside stands.⁴¹ Dairy, vegetables and hogs are the top three agricultural industries.⁴² Friesen says there is enough land for everyone to work in agriculture, but it has become prohibitively expensive for young people to start up farms. Some borrow money from the community or the Nova Scotia Farm Loan Board to get started, but others work in different industries until they can afford their quotas.

Meanwhile, a new generation of young people is starting to thrive in non-agricultural sectors. Peter Penner, 29, is one of the young people who has chosen to start his own business. He runs a welding shop and does custom work for people on the settlement. Penner has up to two people working full-time for him. His wife does the book keeping for his business.⁴³ Edwin Dueck says he is another exception to the farming rule – he would not want to be anything other than a wood worker. He has loved making things out of wood since before he went to school. At the age of six, he was using a hacksaw and nails to

build toys. After school, he built houses in the Halifax area and trained as a carpenter. He began working in his brother-in-law's woodworking shop and eventually bought one of his own. Dueck does not advertise his work, but customers from around the Maritimes wait up to six months for custom kitchen cabinets and furniture.⁴⁴ Dueck has helped start up shops in the Annapolis Valley and on the settlement which work for him. He says someday, he may buy a few chickens or a cow to provide food for his family, but that will be the extent of his farming experience.

Missions

The Northfield settlement takes the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 seriously and is involved in a number of different missions programs. It has a mission church in Leamington, Ontario. A member and his family moved there several years ago to start a new church. More recently, a second minister moved there for a term. The ministry has not decided yet if they will extend the term or replace the minister with another. Northfield Settlement supports the pastor financially and also supplies part of the teacher's salary. Members of the community also visit and volunteer at the Springhill Correctional Institution once a month. They join the inmates in the chapel for singing, praying and sharing their testimonies.⁴⁵

The biggest outreach program, however, is housed in something called the Christian Relief Service. The community collects used clothes from second-hand stores around the province. They sort them into different categories, wash and mend them, then put them into bales. Every year, the community sends two 40-foot shipping containers full of clothes to the former Soviet Union via Germany.⁴⁶ The mission began in the church basement, but it began to grow too large, so the community built a large warehouse (with financial help from churches in Belize). People volunteer there twice a week during the winter months. For the young people, it is a place to meet and get to know each other better. For young mothers, it is an opportunity to get out of the house and visit with their friends while they mend the clothing.⁴⁷

Role of Women

Members of the Northfield settlement have a very traditional view of women. Their roles are to work inside the home – to take care of the children and the household. They take direction from verses in I

Corinthians, which say the men should work outside of the house and be the head of the household. "According to Scripture, they should be submissive to their husband," says Martin Penner.⁴⁸ "Too many women now want to be equal with the men. We don't believe it should be that way. Of course, they should not be our slaves, either."

The Northfield women know most of their neighbors do not live this way, but they seem to be content and happy with their roles. "Men are more important in church. That doesn't bother me because I don't want to preach. And I don't even think about not being able to vote on things," says Elizabeth Dueck. "I mostly work in the house – being a housewife and mother is all I need."⁴⁹

While most girls go to school until Grade 8, they are also taught how to be good homemakers by their mothers and sisters. "Most girls by age 16 know how to bake and cook and can, and some might know how to sew their own dresses," says Anna Friesen.⁵⁰ Friesen is half of a deacon couple and helps her husband oversee the warehouse and the sewing circle. She says she does not mind being submissive to her husband. She says men are more responsible to know the Scriptures, so it is only fair that they vote on matters of faith while the women do not.

The church ministry recently started three monthly ladies' groups, which more and more women are attending. "The Bible says the older women are to teach the younger women to love their husbands and keep the house," says Mary Penner. "A big part of what a wife can do to make their husband happy is to love them and have time for them, to be a helpmate. Scripture says wives should be submissive. We talk about how to accept the husbands' way of thinking, and how to raise the children."⁵¹

The head minister, Klaas R. Penner, and his wife Maria started the groups because they wanted a place where women could share their experiences, teach skills such as child training, and learn how to honor their husbands.⁵² They follow a book entitled (in English) *You can be the Wife of a Happy Husband*, by Darien B. Cooper. The chapters include lessons on how to do devotions together as a couple and how to live a satisfying life. "God planned a wonderful marriage, so we learn to accept each other so we can have a wonderful life together. We also want to take our husband as he is. We are not able to change him," Maria Penner says.⁵³ The book teaches women to help their husbands love themselves, how to make them the first priority, after God, and how to follow them as the leaders of the household. Chapters also include lessons on how to be joyful and handle conflict. It also encourages women to please their husbands. "When he comes home, I should not go to the door with a dirty dress and hair, but go to make the husband feel welcome at home," Maria Penner explains.⁵⁴ There

is also a chapter on God's plan about sex. If healthy, women are advised not to use birth control other than the natural rhythm method, unless both partners agree to abstain for a period of time.

Dating and Marriage

Young people on the settlement date, but not in the way most North Americans might think when they hear the word. A young man will go to a young woman's house and visit her on a Sunday evening. They will sit in the living room or bedroom and talk, sometimes with other family members present and sometimes without. By the time most reach their early 20s, they are advised to get married and have a family.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, on such a small settlement, it is sometimes difficult to find a mate. In 2001-2002, there were several single women between the ages of 25 to 40 because more girls were born in that age group than boys. At the same time, there are more teenaged boys than girls. Peter Penner, 29, says most of his friends are still single.⁵⁶ As a result, some of the boys marry older girls. Others will look to other settlements in Canada, Mexico or Belize to find spouses. Young people are strongly encouraged to marry a Christian with the same beliefs and faith.

Some single women have a difficult lot in life. Most live with their parents until they get married. Many will help their sisters with their children. Others will find work on the settlement, either cleaning houses, the church and the school, or working in the bakery, the gardens or at the farmers' markets. Elizabeth (Penner) Dueck has several friends in that situation. She married her husband, who is eight years younger than she is, in May 2001. Dueck worked at the Saturday farmers' market in Halifax for many years, but says she was always glad to go home at the end of the day. She says she will never move away from the settlement. She and her husband had their first child in 2002 and planned to build a new house in 2003.

In the World but Not of It

In the past, *Kleine Gemeinde* settlements have been characterized by their isolation and separation from the surrounding communities. People on the Northfield Settlement say they want to continue living together and running their community in the way they believe God has instructed them to. However, they also do not want to be completely isolated. For example, Martin Penner says most

community members also do not mind being identified as Nova Scotians or Canadians. "Our allegiance is to God, not the government, but Scripture says to be submissive to government," he says. "If something is against Scripture, we want to listen to God first. Nothing the government wants us to do we disagree with – so far."⁵⁷

The community is also starting to reach out to their neighbors. That is one reason they are starting an English-language church service on Sunday evenings. "We want the English people to feel more welcome," Martin Penner says. "We want them to be saved. According to the Bible, Jesus will return and gather the believers and our desire is that more and more would be saved. If we invite them to our church, maybe they can be saved. But it's not the only place to be saved. To be saved, they must accept Jesus in their heart. That is more important than the name of the church."⁵⁸ Penner says the community also wants to continue its simple, biblical lifestyle. For him, that means living according to the Word of God and "living such a life so Jesus is the leader in our life."⁵⁹

Henry Friesen says that can sometimes lead to clashes with Nova Scotians who do things differently. Recently, the settlement has been talking about joining a local fire department, but there are concerns because the volunteers are involved in dances and fundraisers the community leaders feel uncomfortable with. Friesen says it can also be difficult to run a business according to biblical principles. "For example, I raise vegetables and we have orders with wholesale companies. They want us to bring it over on Sunday afternoons and we say no, we keep the Lord's Day. So they say OK, we can bring it on a Saturday instead. We try to be cooperative as long as we're not going against Scripture."⁶⁰ Friesen says that position often costs him business. Some people want to pay for their firewood or produce in cash so they can avoid the Harmonized Sales Tax (HST). Friesen says he refuses because that is cheating the government.

Meanwhile, he also says he has concerns with the way all levels of government support low-income and seasonal workers in Nova Scotia. "We try to make our living on our own, but prices on agriculture are so low they can subsidize other areas. I try to keep away from their grants and subsidies and that sometimes makes it hard to survive. The Bible says we should make a good life and not be in debt to the world, so I don't want to owe. I try to work for what I have instead of being given it," Friesen says.⁶¹ Overall, Friesen says the neighbors are friendly and respectful and he hopes the settlement members are, too. He believes the settlement has become part of Nova Scotian culture.

Vision for the Future

Community leaders say they are happy with the way the settlement has developed over the last two decades. "We are satisfied in this country and province we are living in. We trust this is a good place to the children growing up in the future," Martin Penner says.⁶² Levi D. Friesen says the community has changed significantly in the last decade. Ten years ago, the land looked like a wilderness. The fields were overgrown and unkempt because no one was taking care of them. "Now all the lands are being used that can be used. I think that will continue. If people are honest and want to work, they can make a living most everywhere," he says.⁶³ Friesen adds that his hope and dream is that everyone who wants to farm, will be able to.

However, community leaders are also acutely aware of the challenges involved in being a good witness to their neighbors. Martin Penner says he hopes the settlement will continue to be a place where God's word is loved and respected and lived. His rule for living comes from Matt. 5:14, in which Jesus instructs the disciples to live as though they are light in the darkness. 'You are like light for the whole world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.' "Our desire is to live as good examples which could help us to be a help for others and we could be blessed that way," Penner says.⁶⁴ Head minister, Klaas R. Penner, agrees. "We want to follow Jesus and his footsteps. Sometimes we feel sorry because we see the joy in being a Christian and our neighbors don't see it. We wish they could."⁶⁵

One of the biggest challenges likely to face the settlement in the upcoming years is the decision to start another church somewhere else. There is already debate about whether Northfield is too big. "I think it's better not too big," Henry Friesen says. "But people are different. Some say it's too small and I think it's maybe too big already."⁶⁶ Martin Penner says the community is growing and thriving, but the goal is to have small districts, rather than large ones in which community members are not accountable to each other and cannot be supported properly. He says it is almost time to start another church in an area that could benefit from their presence. He takes his guidance from the story of Abraham and Lot, in which they decided to go their separate ways because the area was getting too crowded.⁶⁷ Most community leaders believe the next church will likely be in Nova Scotia – perhaps the Annapolis Valley where some of their relatives already live. New Brunswick is another option.

No one has come forward and offered to move yet, but Klaas R. Penner says he expects that will happen soon because the church building is almost full on Sunday mornings. "If someone feels the leading, they'll volunteer to start another church in another place and

they'll go with a few families. We're thinking and praying about it right now."⁶⁸ When that happens, it will be interesting to see how and where the new settlement will establish and develop itself. Already, one can see a slow evolution in the way Northfield operates. It remains a community rooted in the church and agriculture, but one can see a gradual diversification of its economy. There are also significant ties to the city – many of the vegetable farmers travel to Halifax at least once a week to sell their produce. The wish of leaders such as Martin Penner to be less isolated will inevitably bring pressures from the outside world. The community's young people will see another way of life and may begin to ask questions or have doubts about their own lifestyle. Some may feel the need to move off the settlement in order to pursue further education or find a satisfying job.

These are some of the challenge the community and its leadership will face as they walk the line between assimilating and adapting. Already, one can feel the tension between the wish to be accepted by the larger Nova Scotian society to enable a Christian witness, and the wish to remain separate and protect a unique way of life. One hopes the Northfield Mennonites are able to find the balance, so they can continue to contribute to the diversity of the province, and still remain true to their God, their lifestyle, and their witness. For the members of the ministry team, it is a matter of prayer.

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Notes

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- 5 "Spanish Lookout Colony in Retrospect," John K. Reimer, Gerhard S. Koop, *Pioneer Years in Belize*, translated from German book, *Pionier Jahre in British Honduras*, 1973, G.S. Koop, 1991, 133.
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65 Klaas R. Penner, Interview.
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67 Barker, *NIV Study Bible*, *Gen.*13:1-9
68 Klaas R. Penner, Interview.