

“Very Welcome Brothers and Sisters”: The Vietnamese and Chinese Church and Winnipeg’s Mennonite Community, 1981-1991

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Since the arrival of the first wave of Mennonites from the Russian Empire to Canada in 1874, the southern portion of Manitoba, where many of the immigrants settled to form close-knit rural communities, has become known for its substantial Mennonite population.¹ With this large concentration of Mennonites also came a specific Mennonite culture that the immigrants transplanted from their old homeland to their new communities in North America. This identity was characterized by aspects of German culture such as language, literature, and music, and combined with Mennonite theology to create a distinct ethnicity for the Dutch-Russian Mennonites in North America.² While the Mennonite community in Manitoba has undergone tremendous change since their arrival in the late nineteenth century, unique religious values and cultural traits still exist that are specific to this ethno-religious group.

Juxtaposed against this mainstream Mennonite identity in Manitoba, however, are congregations with Asian, African, and South American roots that are remarkably different from those that characterize the majority of Mennonite churches in the province.³ This paper focuses on the associations and links forged between two of these ethnic Mennonite congregations, the Vietnamese Mennonite Church and the Winnipeg Chinese Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church, and the wider Mennonite community in Winnipeg, Manitoba. These particular religious communities offer a unique perspective on religion and ethnicity due to their distinctive histories of affiliation with, and eventual belonging to, two different Mennonite conferences.

Specifically, insights into the connection between ethnic congregations and their parent denominations may be gleaned through a study of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church. Studying the relationships between Southeast Asian Christian congregations

and the Canadian denominations to which they belong, Judith Nagata suggests that the presence of ethnic congregations within an Anglo-Canadian religious denomination “does not significantly encourage sustained social interaction among different [cultural] segments of the same denomination...but tends to reflect the subtle ethnic ranking of the wider society.”⁴ While Nagata contends that the relationships between ethnic congregations and their parent denominations are often based on discrimination and inequality, the case of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church demonstrates that this association can be characterized by mutual respect and cooperation.

This paper focuses on the first ten years of this ethnic congregation using the minutes of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church’s Advisory Council meetings, the files of the MB Conference of Manitoba and those from the office of MB Missions and Church Extension, as well as conference reports, personal letters, and field research conducted in 2002. Official documents like minutes are rich historical resources for they appear at regular monthly intervals over a long period of time and have a standardized format within which their information is presented.⁵ Attempting to determine the nature of the relationship between an ethnic congregation and its parent denomination using official documentation, however, proves to be a challenging endeavour, as there are limitations to their use. Such sources, for example, most often present the voice of the Euro-Canadian conference leadership and therefore do not focus on the level of individuals belonging to either mainstream Mennonite churches or the ethnic congregation itself. Additionally, as the Advisory Council consisted mostly of European-descendant Mennonites, the minutes of the Council’s meetings reflect the attitudes of the Canadian majority rather than the Asian minority. Consequently, the perspective of the Vietnamese and Chinese church’s leadership and members, as well as other peripheral voices, and dissenting opinions may not be given adequate attention in such narratives.⁶

Despite these limitations, however, these sources nonetheless present valuable historical evidence. Historian Adrian Wilson argues that, despite inherent limitations in any historical documents, they are useful “as effects, that is, as reflecting some set of past processes,” rather than as transparent “windows on the past” or as impartial “witnesses” to historical events.⁷ Thus, scholars must move “beyond the naïve assumption of transparency [in the historical record],” thereby widening the scope of enquiry beyond the immediate question at hand to take into consideration the processes by which sources are created.⁸ When the provenance as well as the content of historical evidence are analysed, their inherent limitations are largely overcome. For, according to Wilson, this practice leads to the realisation that “society ‘records itself’ in the processes which

generate documents,” which then allows every document to act as a “‘record’ of the society” that produced it.⁹ Thus, omissions in structure or content speak as loudly as the information that is included in historical sources.¹⁰

Official documents, therefore, provide an important perspective when examining an ethnic congregation within the context of an Anglo-Canadian denomination. They demonstrate that the relationship between the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation and the four Manitoba Mennonite conferences with which it was affiliated was one of mutual respect. Though there is evidence of occasional unease within the leadership of the Mennonite conferences due to the cultural, linguistic, and theological differences between them and the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation, these instances are overshadowed by evidence supporting the idea that a spirit of collaboration characterized the relationship between the leadership of these two groups.

Historiography

Much historical and sociological work has been done on immigrants in North America and the organizations these communities establish in order to maintain their cultural traditions and way of life. In his study on refugee adaptation and the structure of immigrant communities in Quebec City, sociologist Louis-Jacques Dorais draws attention to the “strong set of ethnic religious organizations...that contribute greatly to the social life of the refugees.”¹¹ Janet McLellan concurs, arguing that religion has an important function in “the negotiation of cultural and social identity” for many immigrants by promoting social cohesion within the ethnic group.¹² McClellan’s study on Cambodian refugees in Ontario highlights the role of religious institutions that, alongside social organizations and kinship networks, form the most significant facets of ethnic identity among this immigrant group by helping them to preserve their Cambodian culture.¹³

When newcomers to Canada and United States seek to join religious organizations, however, many choose to become connected to churches that are outside of their traditional religious background. The involvement of such immigrant groups in Christian churches often links these ethnic communities with Canadian or American denominations that may attempt to assimilate them into the wider North American religious mainstream. Sociologist Fenggang Yang argues that the denominational hierarchy of a Christian church typically acts as a mechanism of assimilation by imposing “policies either for religious uniformity or for Americanization” among its member congregations.¹⁴ This possibility is very real, for as sociologist Norman Buchignani demonstrates, many Christian immigrant congregations, particularly in Vietnamese communities,

typically form affiliations with existing churches that are not ethnic-specific.¹⁵

The emphasis on consistency and standardization among North American Christian churches belonging to a specific conference may in turn create tension between an ethnic congregation and the leadership of a religious organization. Many anthropologists and historians studying the interaction between ethnic churches and their parent denominations have concluded that these relationships are often based on inequality and characterized by a lack of trust from the leadership of a church conference toward its ethnic member congregations. Judith Nagata's study on the role of religion in the lives of Southeast Asian immigrants in Toronto addresses the relationship between an ethnic congregation and its parent denomination. Focusing on four different Southeast Asian churches,¹⁶ Nagata demonstrates that interaction between these congregations and their Anglo counterparts is very limited. By studying the experiences of these churches, Nagata argues that ethnic congregations reproduce "ethnic separatism" and do not become fully accepted in the English-speaking, Canadian denominations in which they belong.¹⁷ Indeed, many of these relationships are characterized by a strict denominational hierarchy in which an ethnic congregation occupies a much lower position than its mainstream counterparts and the conference's leadership. In addition, any connections that are built between these two groups are often filled with racial or cultural tensions and uncertainties, and thereby lack a considerable degree of trust.¹⁸

As Daphne Winland's study demonstrates, the lack of cooperation between the ethnic congregations and their Anglo-Canadian parent denominations in Nagata's study is indicative of many other such relationships as well. Winland's research on the Mennonite-affiliated Hmong Christian Church in Ontario sheds light on the complications involved in the relationship between the Ontario Mennonite Conference and its Hmong congregation. As in the case of the ethnic congregations in Nagata's study, there is very limited contact between the Hmong congregation and mainstream Mennonite churches in the province. This is due not only to the cultural and linguistic barriers that exist between them but also to the ambivalence felt by both sides toward the other.¹⁹ Therefore, rather than enjoying a harmonious relationship with mainstream Mennonite churches specifically, and with the Ontario Mennonite Conference in general, the Hmong congregation occupied a "tenuous place...in the ethnic Mennonite church community and society at large."²⁰

Winland does, however, also suggest that the ambivalence that existed between the Hmong Christian Church and its Mennonite parent church was not the result of an explicit policy on the part

of the leadership in either of the churches.²¹ It is clear, therefore, that the leadership of the Euro-Canadian and Hmong Mennonite congregations did attempt to bridge the gap between these two groups. Indeed, Winland asserts that “the Mennonite community and the church with which the Hmong church is affiliated do not seem to place a great deal of pressure on [the Hmong] to conform to strict doctrinal principles of the Mennonite faith.”²² While the practices of the Hmong church were monitored by its parent church and the Mennonite conference and while this Southeast Asian congregation did occupy an ambivalent place in the Mennonite community, Winland demonstrates that a measure of good will did exist between the Mennonite leadership and the Hmong Christian Church.

Winnipeg’s Vietnamese and Chinese Mennonite-Affiliated Church reinforces Winland’s observation. It is clear, in the case of this congregation, that the Mennonite conferences involved in the life of the church provided it with a great deal of support and compassion and that this was a deliberate policy of the leadership. Where this case differs from the patterns set out by Winland’s study, however, is in the level of cooperation that existed beyond the level of leadership to the Euro-Canadian Mennonite churches and their individual members.

One reason for this divergence could be the emphasis Winland’s study in particular places on the congregational life of the Hmong Christian Church rather than on the leadership of the Mennonite conference with which it is affiliated. By relying largely on oral interviews with church members for this portion of her discussion, Winland’s study provides for a greater emphasis on dissenting voices and offers a wonderful glimpse into the individual experiences of parishioners belonging to minority immigrant churches. The discrepancies between the analyses by Nagata and Winland and the case of this Southeast Asian congregation may, therefore, be accentuated by the diverse source bases used in each different circumstance; while oral interviews provide a glimpse into congregational life, official documents and council minutes illuminate the perspective of the conference leadership, upon which this paper focuses.

The case of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church of Winnipeg adds to the historiography of religious organizations in immigrant communities and ethnic churches by challenging existing interpretations of the relationships between Anglo parent churches and their ethnic daughter congregations. While historians and social scientists emphasize the fact that the relationship between these groups is often based on inequality and distrust, by researching the origins and first ten years of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church it becomes clear that the relationship between the Mennonite conferences and this congregation was not based on suspicion and

unease. That occasional unease existed at the official level of the Mennonite conference toward their Asian members is undeniable. It is also apparent, however, that these instances are eclipsed by numerous others that demonstrate the open, cooperative, and compassionate nature of the relationship between conference leaders, Mennonite churches, and individuals from the wider Mennonite community in Winnipeg and the Vietnamese and Chinese Church.

The Vietnamese and Chinese Mennonite-Affiliated Church of Winnipeg

In order to study the relationship between the Vietnamese and Chinese Church and its four sponsoring Mennonite denominations, a brief sketch of Winnipeg's Southeast Asian population in general, and of the church's origins specifically, is necessary. Prior to 1975, the Southeast Asian community in Winnipeg was very small as it was only after 1979 that a sizeable number of these immigrants began to settle in Manitoba. According to Nancy Copeland, approximately four thousand Southeast Asians, eighty per cent of which were under the age of thirty, arrived in Manitoba from 1979 to 1980.²³ By 1986, approximately two thousand Vietnamese refugees had arrived in Winnipeg. With high percentages of unemployment,²⁴ a fragmented ethnic community,²⁵ and an unwelcoming host society,²⁶ these refugees from Vietnam, as well as the city's wider Southeast Asian population, experienced a difficult transition to life in Winnipeg.

Mennonite involvement in the lives of Southeast Asian immigrants to Canada most often came through the avenue of refugee sponsorship.²⁷ In the Manitoban context, individual Mennonite churches as well as the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) also sponsored a large portion of the Southeast Asian refugee population settling in Winnipeg during this period.²⁸ Since their arrival in Winnipeg in the late 1970s, concern for the spiritual lives of these refugees began to build up within the Mennonite churches in the city. This concern eventually "gave rise to the consciousness of a need to plant a church for these people."²⁹ Accordingly, in 1981 Frank Isaac, a member of a Mennonite church in Winnipeg and future member of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church Advisory Council, began discussing the possibility of a Vietnamese church with others in the city's Mennonite community.

Thus, while the Vietnamese and Chinese Mennonite-Affiliated Church was formally established in October 1983, its roots date back at least a year prior to this date when James and Rebecca Duong arrived in Winnipeg from Prince George, British Columbia and began work with Vietnamese individuals in the River East MB Church. Initially, the group functioned on a very small scale, focusing mainly on holding Bible studies and providing social services for the group's

participants.³⁰ While the focus had always been on the Vietnamese refugees, many Christians from other Indochinese backgrounds were quickly drawn into the group as well. From its inception, therefore, the Vietnamese and Chinese Church was multi-ethnic and multi-lingual. By October 1983, when the Southeast Asian group held its first baptism at their official chartering service, the church became independent, though still maintaining its ties with the Mennonite conferences that had sponsored it.³¹

Soon after its inception, however, the multicultural nature of the church began to create a division between the Vietnamese and Chinese populations in the church. Already by late March 1984 the on-going disconnect between these two groups gave rise to the idea of a congregational split.³² The linguistic³³ and cultural³⁴ differences between the Vietnamese and Chinese congregants both proved to be insurmountable obstacles for the church. Thus, owing to these persisting tensions, the congregation eventually voted to divide on January 27, 1986. While the Mennonite Church, the MB Conference, the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (EMC), and the Evangelical Mennonite Missions Conference (EMMC), along with the MCC, had supported the church financially and spiritually since its inception in 1981, the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation had not been a formal member of any Mennonite conference. With the division of the church, however, each half came under the auspices of one of the two largest Mennonite denominations in Canada; the Vietnamese in the church chose to become members of the Mennonite Church of Canada, while their Chinese counterparts elected to join the MB Conference.

The Vietnamese and Chinese Church in the Mennonite Context

The first ten years in the life of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church was characterized by extensive cooperation between the Asian congregation and its sponsoring Mennonite conferences. The collaborative relationship between these two groups is primarily demonstrated at the official level of the Mennonite conferences in their work with the congregation through the church's inter-Mennonite Advisory Council. As Winland's study on the Hmong Christian Church also suggests, the Mennonite leadership was supportive of the new Asian church and remarkably sensitive to cultural differences that existed between the two groups. This cooperation did not end, however, at the conference level; rather, it is also evidenced in the close relationships that were built between Euro-Canadian Mennonite churches and their individual members with the Vietnamese and Chinese Church.

The most readily apparent avenue of cooperation between the Vietnamese and Chinese Church and the Mennonite conferences in

Manitoba can be found in the church's inter-Mennonite Advisory Council. The Advisory Council consisted of representatives of four Mennonite denominations, namely the Mennonite Church, the MB Conference, and the EMC and EMMC Conferences, a representative from the MCC, one member at large, and the pastor of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church, James Duong.³⁵ Established as a joint effort between these four Mennonite conferences together with the MCC and the Vietnamese and Chinese Church, the Advisory Council was designed to guide the congregation through its first stages as a Mennonite-affiliated religious organization.

Thus, the relationship between the Advisory Council and the Vietnamese and Chinese Church was characterized by collaboration and cooperation. The Council was meant to assist the church in its daily life and decision making, not to govern the actions of the congregation. The joint effort between the church and the Advisory Council is demonstrated in the 1984 Summer Report of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church:

Our church would like to express our many appreciations to the (our) Advisory Council who has given guidance and raised funds for this ministry in the last two years. I believe that from now on, our (my) Advisory Council is able to perform activities larger than before. Thanks to EMC and EMMC who joined the MCC, Manitoba Mennonite Brethren and General Conference [who] participated in this Council.³⁶

While James Duong, the author of the report, expressed gratitude and appreciation for the spiritual and financial direction given to the church by the Advisory Council, he also emphasized that his newly formed Church Council was prepared to take on greater responsibility in the life of the church, thereby alleviating the Advisory Council of some of its duties. This report demonstrates that, from the perspective of the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation, the Advisory Council was meant to work alongside the ethnic church, providing assistance when needed and stepping back when the church was able to function on its own.

Additionally, though the majority of the Advisory Council consisted of representatives and members of the four Mennonite conferences,³⁷ they frequently sought the contribution of senior members of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church. Thus, it is important to note that the contribution of the congregation extended beyond James Duong's presence on the Council. When matters crucial to the life of the church were being discussed in Advisory Council meetings, the minutes reveal the presence and contribution of various members of the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation. On a day when they were discussing the need for separate services, for example, Hinh Tran

was present at the meeting to give the perspective of the Chinese people.³⁸ Similarly, when the tensions between the Vietnamese and the Chinese were being discussed at a meeting in May 1985, a senior member of the congregation by the name of Ha was present to describe the difficulties the two groups had understanding one another due to their cultural and political differences.³⁹

The presence of Hinh Tran and Ha demonstrates that although the Council was dominated by men from the Mennonite conferences and the MCC, the advice and input of members from the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation was actively sought out when it came to important matters such as the tense relations between the different cultural groups in the church or a possible congregational split. At the very first meeting where the possibility of holding two separate services was introduced, the Council concluded that three of its members would consult with outside individuals to seek their insight before the issue would be further discussed. Of the three consultations that are specifically listed in the minutes of the meeting, all involved discussing the matter with members of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church itself.⁴⁰ Again at the November 30, 1985 meeting of the Advisory Council, it was suggested that the “decision to go to two services should have strong consultation between the Conferences and the church.”⁴¹ It is clear, therefore, that the Council considered it necessary to involve the Asian congregation in any of their deliberations about the future of the church.

While the existence of the inter-Mennonite and inter-ethnic Advisory Council demonstrates the cooperative relationship that existed between the Mennonite conferences and the Southeast Asian church, the minutes do reveal certain instances of unease within both conferences, but in particular among the MB leaders, toward the Vietnamese and Chinese Church.⁴² After the 1986 congregational split, for example, the MB Conference repeatedly expressed concerns that the leadership of the Chinese MB Church did not have enough knowledge about MB doctrine and theology. These concerns were expressed most often after the Chinese congregation hired Job Ng as their new pastor in 1989, at which point the conference repeatedly suggested that they “orientate”⁴³ both Ng and his wife Jenny to the MB Conference.⁴⁴ These examples of unease correspond to Winland’s observations on the Hmong Christian Church. She found that the Mennonite parent church, though not directly pressuring the Asian church to conform to their Mennonite doctrine, monitored the congregation in an attempt to “bring the Hmong church leadership in line with ethnic and Mennonite religious practices and beliefs.”⁴⁵ Such instances of tension and distrust between the Mennonite conferences and the Vietnamese and Chinese Church, however, appear infrequently. When they do surface in the Advisory Council minutes

or in official conference proceedings, they are overshadowed by more numerous instances that demonstrate that, at the official level, the Southeast Asian congregation had a reasonably collaborative relationship with its sponsoring Mennonite denominations.

Though minutes from the Advisory Council and from the MB Missions and Church Extension meetings illuminate brief moments of unease at the official level, these documents provide no such evidence when examining the relationship between the Southeast Asian congregation and other Mennonite churches in Winnipeg. Throughout the three years prior to its division in 1986, the Vietnamese and Chinese Church enjoyed close relationships not only with the representatives of the Mennonite denominations on the Advisory Council, but also with several individual churches in the Mennonite Church and the MB Conference. Home Street Mennonite Church, Central MB Church, as well as another Mennonite congregation located in Steinbach, fifty kilometres southeast of Winnipeg, in particular were significant sources of support for the newly established Southeast Asian church. Along with one or two other churches, these three congregations partnered with the Vietnamese and Chinese Church in its first years to provide facilities, to hold special joint services, or to cover special expenses that their Asian counterparts could not afford on their own.

Home Street Mennonite Church was the most involved of these three congregations in the life of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church. Their most important contribution was to invite the Asian congregation to use its facilities. From soon after the Asian church's official chartering service in 1983⁴⁶ until September 1986, Home Street Church rented their building to the Vietnamese and Chinese Church for twenty-five dollars a month, allowing it to hold weekly worship services Sunday afternoons, and make use of the kitchen and other specified areas of the church during allotted times.⁴⁷ The amiable relationship between these two congregations is demonstrated in the preamble to the guidelines they drew up to govern their rental agreement:

In the honour of Christ the Head of the Church we wish to set in words the following guidelines that can help us as two congregations do the work of faithful believers in and out of the same building. The Vietnamese and Chinese are very welcome brothers and sisters in the sanctuary at 318 Home Street and trust the following will strengthen our bonds of love and goodwill.⁴⁸

When the issue of renting the Home Street facilities was discussed in Advisory Council meetings, the relationship between the churches was said to be "good,"⁴⁹ and later a note suggested that the agreement

was “working pretty smoothly.”⁵⁰ Despite occasional logistical concerns regarding use of the kitchen⁵¹ and finding adequate time for the caretaker to clean the church,⁵² the official minutes suggest that the relationship between the two churches was good-natured throughout the duration of the rental period.

In addition to the original rental contract, the Home Street congregation also allowed James Duong to use office space in their building for no additional increase in rent. At the February 19, 1985 meeting of the Advisory Council, the pastor’s informal office in the Home Street facilities was the first item on the Council’s agenda. While such an arrangement had not been part of their 1984 rental agreement and though the Council understood that eventually complications might arise for both parties regarding aspects such as the accessibility of a telephone for Duong, they concluded that from their point of view the new arrangement was working well. Evidently Home Street Mennonite Church shared this perspective, for the minutes of this Advisory Council meeting also state that Duong “is welcome” to use their facilities in this way.⁵³ Moreover, a month later the Home Street congregation is said to have broadened their invitation for Duong’s continued use of the building for office purposes. The minutes of the March 22, 1985 Advisory Council meeting, where this issue was raised once again at the beginning of the gathering, read:

James is using a room upstairs for an office but is still not needing to use a telephone. [He] does not expect to use the church as much in the near future though the door is wide open for continued use and the freedom to install a telephone.⁵⁴

Not only was the Vietnamese and Chinese Church invited to keep using the Home Street Church for office space, but they were also invited to customize the space with which they had been provided to their own needs by adding a telephone line.

The rental arrangement with the Home Street Mennonite Church eventually ended in 1986, a few months after the Vietnamese and Chinese Church split into two separate congregations. For ten months after the division, however, from November 30, 1985 to September 1986, the Home Street congregation continued to open their doors to their Asian counterparts. The only alteration in their arrangement was an increase in rent from the previous amount of twenty-five dollars to sixty dollars.⁵⁵ Though the rental agreement had worked well between the two churches for a period of time, evidently the practice of sharing one facility among three different congregations was not deemed to be practical, and thus this facet of the relationship between the Home Street congregation and the Asian churches was concluded in 1986.

The Steinbach Mennonite Church, located in rural Manitoba, played a smaller and much less direct role in the life of the Asian church. Still, they repeatedly partnered with the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation as well as with the Vietnamese Mennonite Church, after the 1986 division. In 1985, for example, the Steinbach Church, in cooperation with Winnipeg's Braeside Evangelical Mennonite Church and the Asian congregation itself, helped the Vietnamese and Chinese Church purchase a van meant to transport many of its congregants to and from weekly worship services.⁵⁶ Once the congregation divided into the Vietnamese and Chinese churches, Steinbach Mennonite Church maintained its association with the Vietnamese Mennonite Church by hosting special worship services in Steinbach for the Vietnamese congregation. At a special service held on January 15, 1986 in Steinbach, the church made a \$125 donation to the Asian congregation. In turn, the Vietnamese Mennonite Church invited their Steinbach counterparts to their year-end banquet in Winnipeg.⁵⁷

Another Mennonite church, the Central MB Church in Winnipeg, developed a similar relationship with the Chinese branch of the Southeast Asian church after the 1986 split. Throughout the early 1990s, the Central MB congregation often partnered with the Chinese MB Church in holding joint services on special occasions. Good Friday services were held together in both 1990 and 1991, a joint service of baptism was held in 1990, and the two congregations also joined together in the summer of 1991 to offer a Vacation Bible School for children.⁵⁸ Therefore, while Home Street Mennonite Church assisted the Vietnamese and Chinese Church before its congregational split, the Steinbach Mennonite and Central MB churches assumed a supportive role in the lives of the fledgling Vietnamese and Chinese congregations after the 1986 division. The partnership among these various churches demonstrates a cooperative relationship between this ethnic church and Mennonite conferences in Manitoba, not only at the official level of the denominational hierarchy but also at the grassroots level.

In addition to these signs of cooperation, Winnipeg's Mennonite community also supported the ethnic congregation by providing its members with a number of much-needed social programs. Finding work, learning English, and providing general support to the Asian newcomers were some of the immigrant church's more prominent needs during this early period. In the first few years of its existence, many in the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation experienced a prolonged period of unemployment.⁵⁹ The pervasive and persistent nature of this issue made it "the greatest problem in the church,"⁶⁰ and caused great concern for the church's leadership, as well as for the Advisory Council, during the first three years of the church's

existence. The problem of unemployment was particularly pressing in 1984 when approximately fifteen out of twenty-six members of the congregation were without a job.⁶¹ While this topic received only a brief mention at the March 15, 1984 meeting of the Advisory Council, it received considerable discussion and was the third item on the Council's agenda the next month.

The April 19, 1984 gathering of the Advisory Council demonstrates that it was not only the Vietnamese and Chinese Church that was involved in addressing the unemployment question. The wider Mennonite community was also involved in attempting to alleviate the situation. While Ernest Wiebe, a member of the Advisory Council, and James Duong visited fifteen unemployed members of the congregation in order to encourage them, the Mennonite community in Winnipeg, in particular, members from the Home Street Mennonite and River East MB Churches, provided much-needed assistance in preparing the recent immigrants for employment and finding suitable positions for them. A job skills search class was taught by Lois Edmund from the Home Street congregation, two members of the Advisory Council placed announcements in the bulletins of Mennonite churches in the city, and Len Defehr from River East MB Church acted as an employment officer.⁶²

Likewise, general support, as well as specific assistance in the form of English language classes, was also offered to the congregants of the Asian church by individuals from the wider Mennonite community. In an article written for the church newsletter at Home Street Mennonite, Lois Edmund recounted the difficulties she experienced while teaching the job search skills course for members of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church. The class, she concluded, "was mostly a failure, because we didn't get at the real problems [the immigrants] face."⁶³ Among the problems Edmund saw as being at the heart of the difficulty for the Vietnamese refugees were physical and emotional violence in both Vietnam and Canada, little command of the English language, discomfort in an individualistic and unsupportive Canadian society, and a lack of knowledge of the Canadian labour laws, making the immigrants susceptible to being taken advantage of by their employers at the factories in which they worked. She concluded:

What they need is simple things, like a newspaper they cannot afford or even read well. They need more complicated things, like someone to accompany them to job applications to explain the more difficult words. They need intangibles, like Christian mercy in giving jobs which are not clearly deserved.⁶⁴

Edmund's article ended with a plea to the Home Street

congregation: "Can we help in some way? Can we make them belong in a strange country? Can we share more from our fullness?"⁶⁵ Edmund's article highlighted many of the needs felt by Vietnamese refugees and also encouraged continued assistance from the wider Mennonite community.

Social programs for the members of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church were not only needed in the first years of its existence. In 1991, five years after the congregational division, a lack of basic English skills was still noted as prevalent in the Chinese MB Church. In response to this need, Erna Janzen from the River East MB Church held English language classes for members of the congregation.⁶⁶ What these instances demonstrate is the willingness of Mennonite congregations and their members in assisting members of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church by providing them with general support and more specifically focused social services.

Conclusion

From the point of contact with Mennonites, to affiliation with Mennonite religious organizations, to eventual membership in various Mennonite denominations, the Vietnamese and Chinese Church stands as an example of how an ethnic church can enjoy a close and collaborative relationship with its parent denomination. Beginning in 1981, two years before the church's actual inception, the involvement of the Mennonite Church, the MB Conference, the EMC, and the EMMC assisted the Vietnamese and Chinese Church in its first few years as an independent congregation. This support was given at an official level through the body of the Advisory Council whose monthly meetings were used to discuss issues that were important to the life of the church. Though the Council was undoubtedly dominated by Euro-Canadian members of the sponsoring Mennonite denominations and not by members of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church itself, a detailed study of the minutes of each meeting from 1983 to 1987 reveals that the opinions, advice, and input of individuals from the ethnic congregation were actively sought out in especially important matters. Therefore, while Advisory Council minutes and conference documents reveal examples of unease and distrust between the conferences and their Vietnamese and Chinese members, these instances prove to be brief and infrequent, and are overshadowed by numerous other instances that depict a genuinely cooperative relationship between these two groups.

Moreover, it is significant to note that the official assistance rendered by the two main Mennonite denominations, the Mennonite Church and the MB Conference, extended beyond the denominational leadership to the level of individual Euro-Canadian Mennonite churches and their members. In addition to the support given to

the church by the conferences themselves, Mennonite churches frequently partnered with the Asian congregation. The Home Street Mennonite Church provided them with facilities in which to hold their worship services, while the Steinbach Mennonite and Braeside Evangelical Mennonite Churches assisted with special purchases the Vietnamese and Chinese Church could not afford on their own. These associations with individual Mennonite congregations extended beyond the division of the Asian church in 1986, at which time the Steinbach Mennonite Church and the Central MB Church undertook a supportive role in the life of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church by holding joint worship services on special occasions with the Vietnamese Mennonite Church and the Chinese MB Church respectively.

In addition to these relationships with other churches, persons from the Vietnamese and Chinese Church enjoyed the friendship of various individuals of two mainstream Mennonite congregations. The Advisory Council itself represented a diverse body of Mennonites who came together to lend guidance and assistance to the fledgling Asian church. Similarly, members from the Home Street Mennonite Church and from the River East MB Church provided important social services for members of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church. Holding job skills workshops, teaching English language classes, and acting as employment officers, the contributions of these various individuals demonstrate that the cooperation between the Mennonite conferences and the Asian congregation ran deep and extended far beyond the denominational hierarchy of each conference. Where tense moments between the official Mennonite conference body and the Asian church can be seen in the Advisory Council and the MB Missions and Church Extension committee minutes, no such instances can be found in these documents when analysing the relationship between the Vietnamese and Chinese Church and other Mennonite congregations. The same can be applied to the interpersonal connections woven between individuals in the Vietnamese and Chinese Church and in the wider Mennonite community, which demonstrate the existence of compassion and mutual respect between these two parties. This suggests that the links forged between the European Mennonite congregations and the Southeast Asian church were even stronger among the laity than they were with the official denominational leadership.

The case of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church and its two daughter congregations illuminates an aspect of the relationship between an ethnic church and its parent conference that has been underdeveloped. The extensive association between these four Mennonite denominations and this Asian church demonstrates that, unlike the case of the Southeast Asian congregations in Nagata's

study, ethnic churches may indeed enjoy a harmonious and extended relationship with their parent churches and conferences. The fact that the Mennonite conferences expressed considerable good will toward the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation confirms Winland's suggestion that the denominational leadership did not harbour enmity toward its Asian congregants.⁶⁷

Postscript

Despite this beginning, however, field research conducted in 2002 presents a different picture of the relationship between the Vietnamese and Chinese congregations and their Mennonite affiliates. Present circumstances would indicate that the level of interaction between Canadian Mennonite churches and the Vietnamese Mennonite and Chinese MB churches has diminished considerably.⁶⁸ While special annual events are celebrated together with the wider Mennonite community in Winnipeg, the Vietnamese Mennonite and Chinese Mennonite Brethren Churches seem to worship at a distance from the Euro-Canadian Mennonite churches. Thus, although not the case at its inception, it appears that the Vietnamese and Chinese congregations, together with their respective Mennonite conferences, have come to mirror Winland's assertion that there was "a minimal degree of social interaction" between the Hmong and the Mennonites in her study.⁶⁹

While further research is needed to examine how this shift between the Vietnamese and Chinese churches and the broader Mennonite community took place, it is clear that the leadership as well as the laity of Euro-Canadian Mennonite churches in Winnipeg were quite involved in the life of the Asian churches during their establishment. The overall response from the Mennonite community in Manitoba to the needs of their Vietnamese and Chinese members demonstrates that the relationship between an ethnic congregation and its Anglo, North American parent denomination can be one based on cooperation and mutual respect.⁷⁰

Notes

- 1 Ted Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996): 15.
- 2 Steve Nolt, "A 'Two-Kingdom' People in a World of Multiple Identities: Religion, Ethnicity and American Mennonites," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73, 3 (1999): 494.
- 3 According to the Mennonite Church of Canada and Mennonite Brethren Conference of Manitoba websites, there are eight ethnic congregations in these two denominations in the Winnipeg area. Under the banner of the Mennonite Church of Canada are: Iglesia Jesus es el Camino, the Korean Mennonite Ministry, the Vietnamese Mennonite Church, and the Winnipeg Chinese\ Mennonite Church. Mennonite Church of Canada, church directory. <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/directory/congregations>. [accessed August 21, 2005]. The Mennonite Brethren churches are Église communautaire de la rivière-Rouge, Centro Famaliar Spanish Church, Winnipeg Chinese

- Mennonite Brethren Church, and the Portuguese Mennonite Brethren Church, which dissolved in 1992. Mennonite Brethren Conference, Manitoba Churches. <http://www.mbconf.ca/churches/cong-mb.en.html> [accessed August 21, 2005].
- 4 Judith Nagata, “Is Multiculturalism Sacred?: The Power Behind the Pulpit in the Religious Congregations of Southeast Asian Christians in Canada,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 29, 2 (1987): 26.
 - 5 The Vietnamese and Chinese Church Advisory Council consisted of six members representing the General Conference, the Mennonite Brethren, the Evangelical Mennonite Missions Conference, the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, and the Mennonite Central Committee. The seventh member of the committee was the pastor of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church, James Duong. The Council met regularly once a month and its minutes usually consisted of two to three typed ages per meeting. Most often the minutes record summaries of the discussions that took place between members of the council, though upon occasion they also include results of important congregational votes, as was the case on January 27, 1986. Throughout the years under review certain topics were routinely discussed. These included dialogue on the support, financial and otherwise, offered to the congregation by the four affiliated Mennonite conferences; discussions of the congregational life within the church, such as dates of baptism services, membership counts, the issue of language, the possibility of forming two separate churches for the Vietnamese and Chinese groups, and the status of the church’s leadership; and the congregation’s relations with other churches, both within the Mennonite community and without.
 - 6 Official minutes and denominational documents and publications also go through numerous steps of editing and thus can present a polished front as the conference seeks to put its best foot forward.
 - 7 Adrian Wilson, “Foundations of an Integrated Historiography,” in *Rethinking Social History: English Society 1570-1920 and Its Interpretation*, ed., Adrian Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993): 303.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, 314.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, 319.
 - 10 Illuminated in this way, it is apparent that the aforementioned limitations of official documents such as the minutes of the Advisory Council can themselves be seen as evidence of the inter-ethnic relations that existed between the Vietnamese and Chinese Church and its affiliated Mennonite conferences. Such sources then provide an opportunity to examine the dynamics between ethnic congregations and their Anglo-Canadian parent denominations at the level of leadership. While perspectives other than that of institutional leadership deserve to be heard on this subject, this paper seeks to examine how an ethnic congregation fits into the wider life of its parent denomination. It therefore relies on official sources in order to illuminate this relationship at the institutional level from the perspective of the Euro-Canadian Mennonite conferences that were associated with the Vietnamese and Chinese Church. Specifically using the minutes of Advisory Council meetings from 1981 to 1991 as a foundation offers a number of significant benefits. Since the Advisory Council met on a monthly basis throughout its duration, the minutes of each gathering provide a regular and detailed source of information over an extended period of time. These minutes were also written in a standardized format in which specific topics are addressed each month.
 - 11 Louis-Jacques Dorais, “Refugee Adaptation and Community Structure: The Indochinese in Quebec City, Canada,” *International Migration Review* 25, 3 (Autumn, 1991): 563.
 - 12 Janet McLellan, “Cambodian Refugees in Ontario: Religious Identities, Social Cohesion, and Transnational Linkages,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 36, 1 (2004): 110.
 - 13 McLellan, “Cambodian Refugees in Ontario,” 110.
 - 14 Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 31.
 - 15 Norman Buchignani, “Research on South Asians in Canada: Retrospect and Prospect,” in *The South Asian Diaspora in Canada: Six Essays*, ed. Milton Isreal (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1987): 28.
 - 16 Nagata’s study examines a Filipino Catholic congregation, a Filipino Seventh Day Adventist church, and two Indonesian religious communities, one Catholic and one evangelical. Judith Nagata, “The Role of Christian Churches in the Integration of Southeast Asian Immigrants to

- Toronto," (Toronto: The Joint Centre for Modern East Asia, York University, 1986).
- 17 *Ibid.*, 28.
 - 18 See Nagata's example of the Filipino Seventh Day Adventist Church. *Ibid.*, 15.
 - 19 For its part, the Mennonite conference of Ontario and its member churches tended to harbour doubts about the sincerity of the conversion experiences of the members of the Hmong congregation. Additionally, Winland asserts that, though the Hmong Mennonite Church professed to adhere to the Mennonite Confession of Faith, most of its members, with the exception of the church's leadership, demonstrated very little real comprehension of Mennonite beliefs and values. Daphne N. Winland, "The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement: The Case of the Hmong," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 24, 1 (1992): 102, 106, 110.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, 111.
 - 21 In one instance, attempts were made to integrate the Euro-Canadian and Hmong congregants by organizing a joint summer picnic. This initiative, however, proved to be disappointing as very few members of either congregation attended. *Ibid.*, 110.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, 110.
 - 23 Nancy Higgitt Copeland, "The Southeast-Asian Community in Winnipeg," in *Ten Years Later: Indochinese Communities in Canada*, eds., Louis-Jacques Dorais, Kwok B. Chan, and Doreen M. Indra (Montréal: Canadian Asian Studies Association, 1988): 97, 99.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, 101.
 - 25 Copeland asserts that the "institutional structure" of the Southeast Asian community in Winnipeg was, at the time of her study, less well-developed than the inter-personal networks of support between members of this immigrant group. She declares that ethnic media were "virtually absent," that there were few ethnic businesses and organizations, and that religious activity "rang[ed] from total segmentation to shared participation with the larger society." Though the Southeast Asian community in Winnipeg has likely developed since Copeland's study in 1988, no recent comparable data on this immigrant community could be located. *Ibid.*, 112.
 - 26 According to Copeland, a *Winnipeg Free Press* poll in January 1986 indicated that fifty per cent of the 3,200 Winnipeggers who responded to the poll "wanted fewer immigrants from Asia and Central America. Respondents [also] indicated a preference for European immigrants who were less 'visible.'" *Ibid.*, 111.
 - 27 Doreen Marie Indra, "Social Science Research on Indochinese Refugees in Canada," in *Uprooting, Loss and Adaptation: The Resettlement of Indochinese Refugees in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Public Health Association, 1987): 7.
 - 28 Letter from the Vietnamese and Chinese Advisory Council and Vietnamese Search Group, 20 April 1986. Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies [hereafter CMBS]. BC 270, 2 & 3, file 46.
 - 29 Joint Service of Celebration and Commissioning, 1986. CMBS. BC 270, file 39.
 - 30 *Ibid.*
 - 31 *Ibid.*
 - 32 Vietnamese and Chinese Advisory Council, 19 April 1984. CMBS. BC 270.7.
 - 33 Throughout the next two years, the issue of whether church services were to be held in Cantonese or Vietnamese presented an urgent dilemma for the congregation and for the church's Advisory Council. Indeed, the issue of language surfaced in nearly every meeting of the Advisory Council between 1984 and 1986. Vietnamese and Chinese Advisory Council. CMBS. BC 270.7.
 - 34 Advisory Council minutes reveal that the two main groups, the Vietnamese and the Chinese, did not feel comfortable with one another. Though the Christian members were willing to worship with one another, non-Christians in the church were "not as open to being together" with members of the other group. Vietnamese and Chinese Church Meeting of the Church Leadership, 11 January 1985. CMBS. BC 270, 2 & 3, file 46.
 - 35 During the years under investigation the Advisory Council did not undergo any significant alterations in its membership. From its inception around 1984 to its dissolution in 1987, Ernest Wiebe fulfilled the role of Chairman and the Mennonite Church representative. Ernie Braun represented the MCC, John Stoesz sat as a member of the EMC, Bill Stoesz represented the EMMC, Frank Issak acted as the Council's member at large, Ken Neufeld was the recorder and representative of the MB Conference, and James Duong represented the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation itself.

- 36 Vietnamese and Chinese Church Report, Summer 1984. CMBS. BC 270.7.
- 37 From the minutes of Advisory Council meetings from 1984 to 1987, it appears that James Duong was the only member of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church who was also a permanent member of the Advisory Council. The other members were all apparently from the Mennonite conferences and the MCC.
- 38 Vietnamese and Chinese Church Advisory Council, 19 July 1984. CMBS. BC 270.7.
- 39 Ha was also present to explain rumours circulating in the congregation that he, as a member of the church’s leadership, was disseminating Communist propaganda through his ministry at the church. Vietnamese/ Chinese Advisory Meeting, 1 May 1985. CMBS. BC 270.7.
- 40 Frank Isaak, the Advisory Council’s member at large, met with Son Ho, a member of the Vietnamese and Chinese Church Council and in charge of music in the church. Ernie Braun, the representative of the MCC, met with a member of the congregation by the name Me. Ken Neufeld consulted with another member of the congregation, Cam Lee. Vietnamese and Chinese Advisory Council, 19 April 1984. CMBS. BC 270.7.
- 41 Vietnamese and Chinese Advisory Council, 30 November 1985. CMBS. BC 270, 2 & 3, file 46.
- 42 The General Conference initially had “some struggles” about sponsoring the Vietnamese branch of the Southeast Asian congregation. The Southern Commission of the Missions and Church Extension committee of the MB Conference, who had already accepted the Chinese, felt the need to actively encourage the General Conference to accept the Vietnamese. Missions and Church Extension, Full Board Meeting, 28 February 1986. CMBS. BC 270, file 38.
- 43 Missions and Church Extension, Southern I Commission, 27 September 1989. CMBS. BC 270, file 40. This concern was also expressed on a few other occasions at Mission and Church Extension meetings, (Mission and Church Extension, Southern I Commission, May 1989 and 7 September 1990. CMBS. BC 270, files 42 and 40.), and in the Conference’s welcome letter to Ng (Ken Neufeld to Job Ng, 17 May 1989. CMBS. BC 270, file 40).
- 44 This concern was not particular to the Chinese MB Church, for the MB Conference expressed the same concerns regarding its Spanish congregation as well. Additionally, it seems to have been a priority for the Conference throughout the 1990s as the MB leadership sought to open dialogue between the Conference and its churches in order to “maintain [a] consensus on essentials.” Indigenization of Churches, established by Missions and Church Extensions, a draft copy, February 1990. CMBS. BC 270, file 40.
- 45 Winland, “The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement,” 110.
- 46 The guidelines for the rental agreement between Home Street Mennonite Church and the Vietnamese and Chinese Church is, unfortunately, undated. The next available date pertaining to this subject is October 1984, where the relationship between the two churches in terms of sharing the facilities is said to be progressing smoothly; however, it appears that enough time has passed since the Vietnamese and Chinese congregation began renting the Home Street Mennonite Church for a few minor issues of contention to have surfaced pertaining to the use of the kitchen. It can be assumed, therefore, that the Vietnamese and Chinese Church began renting the facilities at Home Street a considerable time before October 1984, likely soon after their official chartering in October 1983.
- 47 “Guidelines re Rental Relationships Between Home Street Mennonite Church and The Vietnamese and Chinese Church,” n.d. CMBS. BC 270.7.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 Vietnamese and Chinese Advisory Council, 27 October 1984. CMBS. BC 270.7.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 19 February 1985.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 27 October 1984.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 19 February 1985.
- 53 *Ibid.*
- 54 *Ibid.*, 22 March 1985.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 30 November 1985.
- 56 Report of James Duong, 7 October 1985. CMBS. BC 270, 2 & 3, file 46.
- 57 Vietnamese and Chinese Advisory Council, 15 January 1986. CMBS. BC 270, 2 & 3, file 46.
- 58 Missions and Church Extension, Southern I Commission Meeting, 11 May 1990. CMBS. BC 270, file 40; 22 & 23 March 1991; 2 August 1990.

- 59 Lois Edmund, "The Vietnamese and Chinese Church," *Home Street Mennonite Church Paper*, May 1984. CMBS. BC 270.7.
- 60 Edmund, "The Vietnamese and Chinese Church."
- 61 It is difficult to give an accurate count of the total number of unemployed in the Vietnamese and Chinese Church due to the unavailability of statistics on unemployment and church membership for the same time period. However, it is clear that in April 1984 fifteen members of the congregation were without employment. Two months later, in June 1984, the congregation's membership stood at twenty-six. Vietnamese and Chinese Advisory Council, 19 April 1984 and 7 June 1984. CMBS. BC 270.7.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 19 April 1984.
- 63 Edmund, "The Vietnamese and Chinese Church."
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 *Ibid.*
- 66 Missions and Church Extension, Southern I Commission Meeting, 7 November 1991. CMBS. BC 270, file 40.
- 67 Winland, "The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement," 109-110.
- 68 This observation is based on two oral interviews conducted in 2002 with Luc Tran, the pastor of both the Vietnamese Mennonite and Chinese MB Churches, as well as attendance at a service of the Chinese MB Church, which suggest that both of these churches are not presently extensively involved in the wider Euro-Canadian community. Interview with Luc Tran, March 7, 2002 and March 14, 2002.
- 69 Winland, "The Role of Religious Affiliation in Refugee Resettlement," 109-110.
- 70 The title for this paper was taken from: "Guidelines re Rental Relationships Between Home Street Mennonite Church and The Vietnamese and Chinese Church," n.d. CMBS. BC 270.7.