

# Bethesda: The First Mennonite Mental Health Ministry in North America

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The Bethesda home in Vineland, Ontario is rooted in the Bethania Home in Russia, the first Mennonite Mental hospital in the world. As Helmut Huebert shows in his paper in this issue, Bethania wound down due to the changes in Soviet government policy, after which two of its workers immigrated to Canada and soon developed a ministry working with mentally ill in Ontario. Those two were Henry and Maria (Unrau) Wiebe.

Henry was born in Blumenhof, one of the Borozenko colony villages in the vicinity of Chortitza. He obtained his education in the *Zentral* and *Kommerzschulen* in Halbstadt, Molotschna Colony. He later received training and employment as a social worker at Bethania, a mental health hospital that had been established in 1910 in Alt-Kronsweide. Here he began his ministry to persons with mental illness and also to persons who were mentally challenged.

At about the same time Maria Unrau from Jachijewa was training as a registered nurse in the College of Medicine in Marya. For her practicum in nursing she worked in the Bethania Mental Health Hospital and it was here that she met Henry. They were married in 1926 and the two dedicated to serve in this ministry together.

But their time together in Russia was short-lived. In 1927 the hospital had already closed down and they found opportunity to immigrate to Canada. They settled first in Kitchener, then Stratford, and finally Camden near Vineland, Ontario. (Boldt, p. 1)

While living on rented property in Stratford in 1934, following a number of years of getting a new start in Canada, Maria and Henry received a visit from some of the leaders of the Kitchener Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church. (Bethesda p. 8) The leaders noted that Maria and Henry had obtained significant skills while working at Bethania. These church leaders were worried about some of the other Mennonite immigrants from Russia. For some of these immigrants the turmoil of the Russian Revolution and the resulting difficult years in Russia before they could immigrate, were simply too much to bear. Some were desperately in need of special care. (Bethesda p. 1)

To send them to hospitals was costly and there was no medical coverage. People who did not pay could face deportation. In one case a person was rescued from being deported in the nick of time in Montreal en route back to the Soviet Union because he had been unable to pay for his hospital costs. The plea to the Wiebes was that with their training they should help these "patients", as they were called.

Their modest effort, thus, began. Their venture prospered and soon they acquired a horse, and some chickens and cattle, in the hope of making the institution self sustaining. Some of their produce was sold on Saturdays at the Stratford farmers' market. But, many more people needed assistance than the Wiebes had room for. They began to look elsewhere for property and larger house. Mennonite farmers had recently begun moving into the Niagara Peninsula. Upon investigating the location they found a 75 acre farm between Vineland and Campden. The house was a large 100 year old building. In April of 1937 they moved to Vineland. (Bethesda p.2)

Not all the neighbours were approving of the coming of a mental institution. Distrust and suspicion crowded out compassion. The fact that the Mennonites mostly spoke German was not always favourably viewed. One of their neighbours recalled that, "Frequently we needed to put in a good word for this work, straighten a story that had grown, reassure the faithful." (Bethesda p.2)

In the fall of 1942 at the eleventh annual Ontario MB Conference, Henry Wiebe submitted a report on his and Maria's work. They called their ministry the "Home for the Harmless Mentally Ill." At this time they had seven residents. During the time that they were in this ministry Henry served as a pastor, leading the Vineland MB Church from 1938-40 and again from 1948-1957. (Boldt, page 2)

Interest in the ministry grew and by 1943 Henry reported to the Ontario MB conference that the home had eight "patients", two

of whom were noted to be of “English” background. Also at this conference, Henry was encouraged to send an annual report to the MB conferences in the west who knew very little of this burgeoning work. The Ontario MB conference pledged to help more in the operation of the home and agreed to make it available to patients in the west as well. (Bethesda p. 8)

The Bethesda home operated on minimal income. There was farm produce that was sold and some donations. But the majority of the income came from families of the residents. As noted in the minutes, “if next of kin cannot pay then it is up to the patient’s home church or the committee to come up with the balance. And should all these avenues of financial support fail, the patient should still be accepted and the conference will still extend the necessary support.” The cost per patient resident in the home, for example, was \$20 per month in 1945. (Files of Bethesda Home Vol. 52)

Within a year there were a total of 15 people in the home, with several from western Canada. Improvements were made to the home to accommodate these growing numbers. At the same time the Wiebes realized that they did not have the personal capital to grow the home as they felt it should and was capable of. They appealed to the Ontario MB conference for more support with the idea that the conference should take over the ownership and operation of the home.

On May 1, 1944 the Ontario conference agreed to purchase the “Home for the Harmless Mentally Ill,” including the 75 acres as well as farm buildings, for a total of \$17,618.50. They constituted a committee of five men (Jacob Bartel, Johann Wall, A. Dick, G.J. Enns and H. Wichert) to oversee the operation and retained Henry and Maria to manage the operation. The sale was finalized on February 17, 1945. (Bethesda p. 9)

In June 1945 the Northern District Conference (today the Canadian Conference of MB Churches) voted to support a take over by the Ontario Conference and elected two representatives to sit on the Bethesda Committee. They were C.A. DeFehr and C.F. Klassen, both from Winnipeg. (Bethesda p. 9) New guidelines were created by the Board of Reference and Council as well as structures for reporting and relating to the Conference. Guidelines for admission were established.

As the home grew provincial guidelines came more and more into play. In order to be registered with the provincial ministry of health for private homes such as Bethesda, the institution needed to meet certain conditions. Some were changes to buildings for safety reasons. Two patients who were considered dangerous to self and others were released. And a medical doctor was to be on staff or available to the facility. So Dr. Latham and his assistant Dr. Moss came on board. Having met these requirements on May 13, 1948, Bethesda received license under “The Private Sanitaria Act”.

At this time, too, a new building was erected but a more significant change was that steps were taken to transfer the ownership of the property to the newly formed Canadian Conference of MB Churches. The balance of membership on the Bethesda Committee also shifted and now there were three Ontario representatives and two from western Canada. (Bethesda p. 12) In 1951 the Wiebes resigned and new house parents, as they were called, took over leadership. (Boldt p. 2) Over the next years the home grew with the addition of land and buildings.

Close working relationships with the government of Ontario brought the home up to established standards. In 1959 a new direction began as the home received the first payment from the provincial government for operations through hospital insurance. Building debts were liquidated and a new building project with Ontario Government assistance was begun. (Bethesda p. 13) The following year government support enabled better wages to be paid and better care for the patients. It was now that the Ontario Hospital Service Commission began support for each patient. This was new in the history of Bethesda and appears to have been the only such case in all of Canada. While all provinces could administer federal medical dollars, Ontario was the only province at the time that fully recognized private institutions. (Bethesda page 13)

But the operation and direction of the institution was to change in 1966. Government funding sources were diminishing for the mentally ill and increasing for the mentally challenged. Since the conference support could not provide the necessary dollars to maintain a commitment to the mentally ill, the organization followed the flow of provincial support and began the shift in emphasis. Clearly it was pushed by a transition in government policies and financial commitments.

By 1969 the transition at Bethesda was well underway. The "Private Sanitaria Act" was repealed and new directions were encouraged by the province of Ontario. A recommendation was brought to the Council of Boards in Clearbrook, British Columbia that year and it was accepted that the focus of Bethesda should now be on the mentally challenged. At the same time the Ontario government assured the Bethesda Board that participation with government funds would in no way affect the autonomy, philosophy or control of the home. It did insist, however, that a shift away from the "medical model" as begun by Maria Wiebe and her nursing staff, to a "developmental model" providing a more normal living environment, take place. This change enabled each resident to better develop their abilities to "live as normal a life as possible." (CMBS, Bethesda files, Vol 52, file 36)

A development process was engaged with an increase to 48 beds in units consisting of a living room, dining room and kitchen. This addition was to be followed by the second phase with another 48 units once

the initial phase was completed. Total cost of this development was \$1.6 million of which two thirds was financed by the provincial government and the other third by the MB conference and the Bethesda Committee, now renamed an association. The association raised \$287,000 and the Conference put up a \$100,000. In order to make up its share of the agreement Bethesda sold the farm which over the years had provided cash for its operations. It was a major shift to reliance upon government funding, a move from the previous private and entrepreneurial funding that had sustained the operations since the beginning. (Bethesda p. 14)

Over the next few years from 1977-1979 Bethesda was incorporated as a non-profit Ontario corporation. In 1979 Bethesda officially became the Bethesda Home for the Mentally Handicapped Inc., while still owned by the Canadian MB Conference. However, in 1983 the Canadian Conference transferred back to the Ontario MB Conference. (Ontario Conference Yearbook, 1984) Today Bethesda is still owned by the Ontario conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. Its facilities have greatly expanded and today it has a staff of over 400 with approximately 1,100 individuals connected to the programs both on and off site. For over thirty years Bethesda's focus was on the mentally ill. It transitioned its focus to the mentally challenged as both social needs and, especially, government support, requested.

### References:

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