

Private Mennonite Education in Ontario after World War II

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The focus of this article is primarily on the educational experiences and institutions of Mennonites in Ontario. It traces the development of the Ontario Mennonite Bible School and Institute, Rockway Mennonite School, Conrad Grebel College and the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana, as these have served the educational needs of Ontario Mennonites.

Bible School

To understand what was happening in the education of Ontario Mennonites (at least the branch from which I come) in the 1950s, one has to know something about the history of the Ontario Mennonite Bible School (OMBS). How did the Bible school in Ontario get its start? In the latter part of the 19th century, John S. Coffman came to Ontario to hold evangelistic meetings. As a result 325 young believers came to the church seeking instruction in the Christian faith. A decade later, there was another increase of 385 persons who came to faith as a result of the ministry of A. D. Wenger. This was an important factor in the renewal of Mennonite life in Ontario.

This blessing, however, also brought with it a big problem. How were all these young people to be instructed in the faith. The first answer (1897) was to hold Bible conferences. The stated purpose was "not to train preachers or missionaries" but "to instruct Christians to appreciate the Bible, to know the will of God, understand the Christian life, and then give faithful testimony both in life and service."¹

The second wave of conversions led to a more extended and systematic effort, namely the Winter Bible School. The first curriculum was primarily Bible study with courses also in music and "Sunday School Normal." By 1916 courses in agriculture and "home and health" were added and in later years,

introductory courses in English, history, sociology, psychology and typing.

During World War I, the enrolment of male students dipped sharply and during World War II the total enrolment dropped significantly. A few years later the enrolment went up again, but in the 1950s, a decline set in (from 162 to 84) and in the 1960s it went down rapidly from 60 to 5 in the last year, 1969.

Why the dramatic decline? An era had ended with the passing of the "big four," S. F. Coffman, Oscar Burkholder, J. B. Martin and C. F. Derstine. These men were regarded as "real leaders" though their formal education was minimal. When they retired, they were replaced by teachers who had more impressive academic credentials (most were seminary graduates) but who did not have the stature of their predecessors. The academic level of the faculty had risen; so had the academic level of potential students but these students were not for the most part looking to a Bible school to meet their educational needs.

The '50s, and '60s were a time when Ontario youth were going on to college and university in growing numbers. At the beginning of the '50s it was possible to identify those few Ontario persons who had graduated from the church colleges in the USA; very few had graduated from Ontario universities. But the world in which Mennonites lived was becoming more complex. Farmland was becoming more expensive and youth were obliged to leave the farm to seek their living elsewhere. The war had broadened people's horizons as well and the city and the university were no longer the alien territory they once had been. Young people were more sophisticated and they entered the world beyond the rural Mennonite communities with greater freedom. More and more were graduating from high school (both the public schools and Rockway Mennonite School) and an increasing number were going on to teachers' college and the university.

Bible Institute

At about the same time, discussions began in Ontario about establishing an "advanced Christian workers training program." Out of these discussions emerged the Ontario Mennonite Bible Institute, a school closely linked with OMBS. The Bible Institute (OMBI) opened in October 1951 with essentially the same administration and faculty as the Bible School. Two of its stated purposes were: "5. To prepare students for definite Christian service in the home congregation, home missions and foreign missions; 6. to offer a course of study that will meet the current standard and demand of the church for the Christian ministry."²

It became clear as the school developed that there were aspirations to have the Bible Institute serve not only as a lay training school (as the Bible School did) but as an undergraduate seminary for the training of ministers and missionaries. In fact there were a number of consultations with the church-wide (MC) Mennonite Board of Education about the Bible Institute serving the entire Mennonite Church in this way. By 1961 there were no

Ontario students in the graduating class and the question was raised whether the school should be moved out of Ontario. No encouragement was given for either of these proposals to be considered further. Since the school no longer had a clear mandate and since the source of students, especially from Ontario, was drying up, the school closed its doors in 1969. It was noted in so doing that the educational requirements for ministry in the Mennonite Church were exceeding what the Bible Institute was able to offer and that those students who were still coming were from a more traditional and conservative background. The Institute leaders concluded that its mission was complete and that is what they titled the history, *Mission Completed*.

It is evident from all this that there were two currents of thought in Ontario during the 1950s about what the needs for ministerial training were. Some believed that the church was not ready for a seminary trained ministry while others were convinced that that was the way to go. In the end, the trend toward seminary education prevailed.

The ambivalence in the constituency was not only about different levels of education for ministry but also about differences in theological perspective. OMBS and the Ontario Conference in the earlier years were characterized by a premillennial theology. The seminary at Goshen, on the other hand, was oriented around an amillennial eschatological stance. In the early '50s, there was intense theological debate over this issue, so potentially divisive that a special conference was held to discuss these differences and to preserve the unity of the church. So successful was this conference that the debate was laid to rest for all time and nobody seems to bring up the subject of eschatology anymore, a rather unfortunate result.

There were other theological changes under way during these years from a conservative to a more progressive approach to the Bible and to the Christian faith. Newton Gingrich describes this shift with these words:

Most of the [Bible School] faculty in the latter years refused to accept the Fundamentalist line. Christianity was not a simple yes to certain memorized scriptural theories and terms. It was a way of life. To be honest with one's own conscience and to help our youth experience what was sincerely believed to be the heart of Christianity led the faculty into a rejection of the easy, pat, finalistic answers to a searching, developing stance under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.³

High School

It was in 1943 that the question was raised by the Bible School board whether the Mennonite Conference of Ontario should establish a high school. The board in its report to conference spoke of the "increasing demand for a church high school in Ontario" (Gingrich, p. 32). Ferne Burkhardt has published a brief article entitled "Rockway Mennonite School: Conception and Birth" in *Mennogespräch*, a journal of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. A longer version of this article may be found in the Conrad Grebel College Archives.

What was behind this “increasing demand?” A growing number of Mennonite youth were going to high school at a time when the nation was at war. There was a strong emphasis on patriotism and on winning the war. Some public high schools had compulsory cadet training with students required to wear cadet uniforms.

Beyond the issue of militarism in the schools was the disquietude of Mennonite families about the environment of the public high schools, unfamiliar turf for most if not all of them. There were only 65 students from Mennonite homes in the public high schools when the study committee made a survey and 14 students in Mennonite high schools in the United States or in the Brethren in Christ high school at Fort Erie, Ontario. In the Ontario Amish Mennonite Conference the number was even lower, perhaps fewer than 10 students. However, in the 1950s the situation began to change rapidly as consolidated high schools were established. The 1950s marked a shift in educational priorities from primarily the study of the Bible to the study of the academic disciplines of science, history, mathematics, language and literature.

The stated purpose of the new high school was to meet the need for “trained and dedicated workers to carry on the work of the church” (also the stated purpose of the Bible School) and “to provide a Christian alternative to the public school.” There was much debate in the 1950s as Mennonites (both students and teachers) came to feel more at home in the public high schools as to whether such an alternative was necessary and/or desirable. The war was over and the pressures of militarism had abated. Furthermore, it was expensive to send one’s children to Rockway and there was not adequate provision either for boarding or transporting the students. Some felt that a private Mennonite high school was too sheltered or protective an environment for students and that it ill equipped them for life in the “real world.” Their mood was one of entering or penetrating society rather than withdrawing from it. Some of this reflected a missional stance of going out into the world with a Christian witness; some of it simply reflected a growing feeling of being at home in the world in which we live. This debate precipitated a search for a philosophy of Christian education that would guide the educational enterprise.⁴

Higher Education

At the beginning of the ’50s, there were to my knowledge only two Ontario Mennonites with doctorates and both (Dr. Norman High and Dr. Earl Snyder) were professors at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph. Later Dr. High became dean of the liberal arts faculty at the University of Waterloo. There were not many Mennonite students in the Ontario universities at the time although there were some attending teacher’s college and entering the teaching profession in elementary schools. Most Mennonites going on to higher education attended the Mennonite colleges in the USA.

As this trend became apparent, there came the realization that there was a need for an intellectual center in Ontario similar to that provided by the Mennonite liberal arts colleges in the U.S.A. and by the Bible colleges in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Such a center would not only permit students to receive a higher education but would be a resource for the churches in a variety of ways.

There was also a growing recognition that while the Bible is important, even central for our knowledge and self-understanding, it alone is not sufficient. Somewhat more slowly came the recognition that we cannot even interpret the Bible properly without the disciplines of history, literature, sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, language, philosophy, etc. There was also an increasing attention to the question of our philosophy of education, the question of why as well as of what and how.

There was in the Kitchener-Waterloo area at that time an inter-Mennonite ministers' fellowship. Henry H. Epp, Harvey Taves and Ross Bender were elected as the leadership committee in March, 1959. Henry Epp was the spark plug for the idea of a Mennonite college in Ontario. He kept the idea alive and gave active leadership through the several phases of discussing and studying it until a decision was made to bring Conrad Grebel College into being. Epp, now a pastor in Kelowna, B.C., generously made his files from that period available to me and in addition wrote an extensive letter detailing the events as they unfolded. These materials are available in the Conrad Grebel College archives.

The scope of this paper does not permit a recital of all these developments. However, the earliest conversations reflected a certain degree of trepidation about the possibility of the Mennonite church going to the university and what would happen to the Mennonite faith. Henry Epp's view was that this was a *kairos*, that just as in times past there were frontiers for Mennonites to cross, so today "we must enter the new frontier of the univeristy; we must be the church there where our young people need the presence of the church most, where they are most in danger, in the world of ideas and thought." This spirit of optimism, courage and conviction ultimately prevailed over a spirit of hesitation and fear.

Each of the three of us (Taves, Epp, Bender) were asked to convene a subcommittee (facilities, strategy, philosophy) to discuss various aspects of planning for such a college, connected in some way to the university. My committee was on the philosophy of education. In our report we addressed five issues as follows: a) the nature of truth; b) our pastoral responsibility; c) witnessing to the learning community; d) motivation for education; and e) the function of the Bible in education. We recognized that this was not a complete and adequate philosophy of Christian education but it did mark out some important points of reference to guide the work of a Mennonite college within the context of the university. At one point the name Pilgram Marpeck College was seriously proposed and researched but as we all know the name Conrad Grebel College eventually prevailed.

There was never any serious discussion about setting up a full-blown liberal arts college similar to the American pattern; nor was there any consideration of the model of the Bible colleges in Winnipeg. However, the British model of a church college within a university was attractive. There was no constitutional impediment such as exists in the United States for a church college to link up with a publicly supported university. University officials clarified the distinction between a residential college (with a chaplaincy program) and an affiliated college which would offer courses for credit within the university faculty.

Waterloo College (Lutheran) had appointed a new president, a local industrialist who created an associated faculty of engineering with a novel calendar and apprenticeship system. Waterloo College was to become the liberal arts faculty of the new university whose major emphasis would be engineering. The new university received a university charter from the province of Ontario. So also did Waterloo College with the intention that Waterloo College would not invoke its charter rights to grant degrees. The president of Waterloo College moved over to the new university (University of Waterloo) as its president; Waterloo College appointed a new president and in the ensuing conflict between these two institutions, the agreement fell apart. At the root of the conflict, it was said, was that the Lutheran Church feared it would lose control of its college because of the proposed new arrangement.

Eventually a Mennonite, Norman High, became the liberal arts dean of the University of Waterloo which developed its own liberal arts program and in due time another Mennonite, Frank C. Peters, became the president of Waterloo Lutheran University. It was not too long after that that the Lutheran church did, in fact, lose its control and WLU came to stand for Wilfrid Laurier University. Mennonites were now a part of the university world.

Frank Peters played a significant role in the development of Conrad Grebel College in that he discouraged the participation of the Mennonite Brethren in the project. He was at the time president of Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg and had developed a school to school relationship with Waterloo College which allowed transfer of credits to Waterloo College for MBBC students. Peters visited Kitchener-Waterloo during the early discussions about a Mennonite college and addressed the pastors on the subject. Although there were several MB leaders who were actively involved in the discussions for a time, they gradually moved from participant to observer status and when the college became a reality, the Mennonite Brethren were not a part of it.

Seminary

At the beginning of the decade of the '50s, there was only a small handful of pastors in any of the Ontario Mennonite conferences who had formal

seminary training. Some had Bible majors from Goshen, Eastern Mennonite, or Bethel College. Other educational backgrounds were studies at various Bible colleges/schools or self-study. There was no Mennonite seminary in Canada (there still isn't) although for a short time in the '60s there was a seminary department at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg.

In the late '40s, the number of Canadian seminarians who attended the Mennonite seminaries in Goshen and Chicago (later Elkhart) was only a trickle. Goshen Biblical Seminary began its 5 year Th.B. program in 1942 and its full B.D. (now M.Div.) program in 1946. Mennonite Biblical Seminary opened its doors in Chicago in 1945. The trustees had inherited the assets of the Witmarsum Theological Seminary of Bluffton, Ohio (1921-31). Mennonite seminary education was a relatively recent development as the '50s began.

Among the General Conference Mennonites in Ontario and in western Canada, there were several pastors who had graduated from Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. When MBS opened its doors in Chicago in the mid forties, there were a dozen or so Canadian students in the student body. However, very few went back to Canada; some became overseas missionaries and some went on to graduate school. It was only in the early to middle '50s that the first graduates returned to pastor Canadian churches (according to Henry Poettcker in a telephone conversation).

In the early to mid-fifties a number of young men and women from the Ontario Amish Mennonite Conference went off to college and seminary at Eastern Mennonite and Goshen. There was strong encouragement from the conference for this; some of this encouragement came in the form of financial support from a newly created fund, the Christian Service Training Fund. Some of these persons went into overseas missions, some became pastors in Ontario and elsewhere and took up leadership roles in the conference and in the denomination.

This trickle of Canadian students to GBS and MBS (now AMBS) in the late '40s and early '50s became a steady stream in the late '50s continuing until today. In 1955, there were four Canadian graduates, in 1960 there were five; in 1970, three, in 1980, six, and in 1988, twelve. This does not include the Canadian students enrolled but not graduating.

As the first seminary graduates found their way into the pulpits of the Ontario churches, they were greeted with some degree of reserve. It was a new thing for the church to look to men for leadership who had been "schooled" in school rather than in the crucible of actual ministry under the tutelage of wise old pastors. It was not easy to make the transition from the "real" leaders to these "school boys." Not only were the new leaders young and educated (though inexperienced), they articulated a new theology and expressed a different piety from that of the older leaders. But the day of seminary trained leadership had dawned and there was no turning back to the ways of the past. For better or for worse, the congregations of the future would be led by professional (seminary educated, salaried) pastors.

One additional significant development is the number of the women in the student body. There were, of course, some women in the seminary student body in the 1950s but in 1970 there were still only five. However, by the end of the decade there were approximately 90 women students at AMBS, well over one-third of the student population. Since 1970 35 Canadian women have graduated from AMBS. The first woman student to receive the B.D. degree (in 1956) was Alice Kehl from Kitchener. There are today in Ontario a number of woman pastors, a development that could not have been foreseen at the beginning of the 1950s.

In 1958, MBS moved from Chicago to Elkhart to begin a cooperative program with GBS known as the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. Since 1964 one person has served as dean of both seminaries and in 1969 the curriculum was fully integrated into one program on the Elkhart Campus.

There have always been Canadian Mennonites on the AMBS faculty. Since 1964, the AMBS dean has been a Canadian. Currently the MBS president is a Canadian and there are 6 Canadians on the AMBS faculty.

During the 1970s, AMBS negotiated an arrangement with the Ontario Pastoral Leadership Committee to grant transfer credit and advanced standing to students who had studied at an Ontario seminary. A similar arrangement was negotiated to grant advanced standing to graduates of Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg who went on to graduate from a Canadian university. More recently, Conrad Grebel College has developed a two year master's program in theology and has recently received a royal charter to offer a doctorate in theology although no such program has yet been developed.

Conclusion

My presentation has for the most part focused on Mennonite education in Ontario. However, the story in western Canada is to a remarkable degree very similar.⁵ First came the elementary schools (none among the MCs) in the pioneer days whose task among other things was to preserve and pass on the Mennonite religious and cultural heritage, including the German language. Then came the Bible schools and institutes beginning with Herbert Bible Institute in 1913, followed by others in the late '20s, '30s and '40s. With two exceptions (Mennonite Collegiate Institute, Gretna, 1889, and Rosthern Junior College, 1903) the high schools were founded in the late '30s and '40s. MBBC was founded in 1944 and CMBC in 1947 as the need for higher academic studies became apparent.

Among all the Mennonite bodies, the need for Mennonite schools on successively higher academic levels was making itself felt decade by decade. Mennonites responded by making the needed provisions for their youth. This was not without vigorous debate, however, nor was it without significant sacrifice. Some schools have folded or merged as circumstances changed.

New ones have been brought into being. In each generation there were those who had a vision and who were able to inspire others.

Notes

¹Newton Gingrich, *Mission Completed* (Kitchener, Ontario n.d.) This is the primary source of information about the Ontario Mennonite Bible School and Institute.

²Ibid., p. 36.

³Ibid., p. 56.

⁴A development of wide-reaching significance is presently unfolding at Eden Christian College in Virgil, Ontario. The board is entering into a special arrangement with the Lincoln County Board of Education for Eden to become an alternative school within the public school system. How much control the Mennonite Brethren will be able to retain in this arrangement over the years and whether this is a model for other Mennonite high schools remains to be seen. See the report in *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Apr. 1, 1988, pp. 16–18.

⁵Rudy Regehr, "A Century of Private Schools" in Poettker and Regehr, eds., *Call to Faithfulness*, 1972, traces the development of schools among the Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites in Canada.