

Willy and the South Church: A Short Story

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The name of Willy Becker's village, Adair, Saskatchewan, may seem a little strange at first when you think how many Mennonites live here. You would have expected, I think, something like Blumenheim or Roseneuhofnungsortenthalerfeld, or maybe Schweinwiese. But those villages are all quite far away, as much as twenty or thirty-three miles, and they're places Willy's only heard about here in Adair, where he lives.

You are probably wondering why is the village called Adair, and not Howafletj or Schnetjedarp, or one of those names which, as I say, I think maybe you expected? Well, I can tell you that, because Pete Hamm explained it to me once, the Pete Hamm that works in the Village Office and goes to the North Church. Adair was the back name, Pete said, of a certain politician who was quite well known at one time, I think around the turn of the century when this part of the prairies still belonged to the Northwest Territories. This Mr. Adair—Pete Hamm said he couldn't remember his front name—had done some quite important things. It's just escaped me at the moment what they were, or maybe Pete never got around to telling me; but as I say, they were such important things that Mr. Adair got a whole village named after him, and this is that village, where Willy Becker lives.

You can't call it exactly a Mennonite village. There are three Catholic families here, if you count the Sudermans who farm along the road to the Number Eleven highway. But they and the other two families have to drive fifteen miles to Emery Lake—thirty miles round trip—when they want to go to church, which I've heard tell they do sometimes. And there are a lot more Lutherans even than that—probably sixteen or seventeen families counting the farmers in the Pine Point district, who have their own little church, the one with the bell-tower two doors down from Beckers' house. Their church wasn't built in Adair; it was moved in from Pine Point two miles northwest around the time Willy was born in the mid-forties, I think. Their graveyard out there in the country is more or less the same size as the Mennonite graveyards in Adair which belong to the North Church and the South Church. So it looks as if the Lutherans are dying out a bit, and anyway I don't think they ever showed up for church as often as Mennonites, because where would they all have sat?

So you can't say Adair is a Mennonite village, but still there are enough Mennonites here that it hasn't been possible for them all to fit into one church, so as I say, there is the North Church and the South Church, each with about fifty families in it. One of them stands a block north of Main Street, the other a block south, so they're the same distance from the big intersection that has the Imperial Bank on one side and Art's Groceteria on the other. The two churches are quite far apart, really, when you think that pretty near half the village lies between them.

Sooner or later I'm going to tell you about a day when Willy Becker had come to such a state in his eleven-year life, that he knew it was high time to get saved. If you are not too sure what that means, don't worry, it will all get cleared up as we go along. How it happened that Willy became convinced of his need is another story. I'll only say here that it had something to do with going into Peggy Hinz's bedroom with her one Sunday evening after Christian Endeavor in the South Church—the church where both the Beckers and Hinzes went—and letting her talk him into taking down his pants in exchange for her raising up her dress. Although that sin, strangely, had never come right out into the light of day, and although after awhile Willy was able to forget about it sometimes, still it was the start of something which led to something else, you know how it is, and in the long run ended up with his stealing a pack of Vogue cigarettes from Art's Groceteria. He never actually smoked them, mind you, not one of them, because during that whole time he was getting up the courage to steal them, he hadn't got around to planning how or where he'd smoke them. And the Vogues had landed up in a poplar bush near the village well, where the Adairites pumped their drinking water. There's no doubt Willy had committed more sins than these two; still, it was when he stole those Vogues that for some reason he really became scared, considering his knowledge about hell and everything, that as I mentioned, he finally decided he better get saved.

But I think you should know a little more about the South Church, and some of the main differences between it and the North Church, if you're going to

understand me right about Willy's conversion. Some of the differences are quite complicated, as you will see, while others are more or less out in the open, so much so that if the Beckers had happened to belong to the North Church, Willy wouldn't really have needed to get saved at all. But as I say, this will become clearer as we go along.

When it comes to the differences between the two Mennonite churches, well, there are so many of them I hardly know where to begin. I already pointed out how the churches stand in opposite directions from Main Street, which runs east and west, so that two whole blocks separate them. That much is easy to say. As for the other differences, you'd notice a lot of them pretty soon if you lived here in Adair. For one thing, the North Church is attended by both P. K. Friesen and P. P. Friesen, while in the South Church there is only a P. L. Friesen. Similarly, Little Jake Martens goes to the South Church, but Big Jake, who is related to him pretty close (he is cousin-uncle over Little Jake's mother-in-law's second cousin) goes to the North. There is only one Elmer in Adair—Elmer Unger, who once in awhile goes to the North Church without his Presbyterian wife; and only one Rudolph, which is Rudy Regier who goes to the South. However there are Corneys in both churches—Corney Willems and Corney Dirks in the South, Corney Epp and Corney Friesen in the North. And both churches have ministers named Pete. Rev. Pete Nickel preaches in the South Church, while Rev. Pete Thiessen ministers in the North. The South Church has several Willems families—five or six, I think—but in the North Church you won't find a single Willems of any kind. In the same way, Jake P. Dyck, who farms about two miles from town, goes to the North Church and smokes openly; while Jake D. Dyck attends the South and only smokes in the granary behind his crabapple trees, barely a mile from town.

For another thing: you could say the North Church is made up half of farmers and half of village people, while in the South Church it's the other way around. In the South Church the young boys sit by themselves in the front benches, whereas in the North the boys of the same age sit up in the balcony. There are green hymnbooks in the North Church called *Songs of Faith and Life*, and in the South Church they have blue books called *Choice Hymns of the Faith*. And so on.

Of course these differences are not really all that subtle. Anyone can see them easily if they happen to go first into the one church, and then into the other. Some differences are a little harder to understand. For instance, in the North Church they have a big motto on the wall behind the pulpit that says, "Let all generations praise the Lord," whereas in the South Church a motto of roughly the same size and hanging in just the same place says, "Prepare to meet thy God." Again, in the South Church the offering bags are made of dark blue velvet and passed from hand to hand among the people in the benches. In the North Church, the bags are of the same velvet but they're attached to long wooden poles, so the ushers can pass them in and out among the benches from where they stand in the aisle, so you can see in the North Church it isn't really necessary for the people to handle the money bags at all.

I almost forget to say that in both churches the men sit on the left side facing the motto at the front—the “Praise” or the “Prepare” motto, as the case may be—and the women sit on the right (although from the viewpoint of the ministers, in both cases, it’s the other way around). The young boys, as I say, will sit either in the front benches away from their parents, or up in the balcony by themselves, according to whichever church they go to; so in that way they are the same. But the difference is that, though the families are all separated in an orderly way in both churches, in one case they face north while in the other they face west, because of how the two churches are built on their lots, the South Church in an east-west way, the North Church in a north-south way. So you see what I mean.

Then there’s the matter of the annual meetings. Here we come to quite a noticeable difference. In the North Church the annual business meetings are called brotherhood meetings, although the members never actually address each other as “Brother Quiring” or “Brother Penner”; whereas in the South Church they call their annual membership meetings business sessions, yet they address each other as “Brother So-and-so,” let’s say when they’re discussing a question like whether the piano needs tuning this year.

“I don’t agree with Brother Willems,” Transport Klassen might say, “I think we have enough musical talent right here that we could borrow a tuning fork and do it ourselves.”

And then Brother Corny Willems might take the floor again and say, “Brother Klassen is right that we have plenty of talent, but I heard say Frank Janzen from Nieaunloage doesn’t charge all that much,” and so on.

Here is another difference between the North and South Churches—or maybe it’s something they have in common, if you want to look at it that way. In the North Church they have quite a few brothers named Epp or Bergen or Peters, but none named Abdullah or Adilman or Xiaopeng. While in the South there are Klassens and Reimers and Rempels, but no Labossieres or Bigskys or Diazes. In the North you have a brother named Hamm but none named Hammond, and again in the South you have a member called Peters but none called Peterson. So I think you see my point.

In both the North and South Churches there are some people who are never called by their right names. Transport Klassen in the South, for example, is called that way because he drives a transport back and forth to Saskatoon every day, hauling pigs and steers to Intercontinental Packers, and bananas or corn flakes back again to Art’s Groceteria and the Co-op Store, which he’s done for so many years that only the old people know his real name. At least Willy Becker’s never heard what it is, as far as he can recall. In the same way, the North Church has a brother called Egg Enns who runs the candling station, and Willy doesn’t know his right name either. In the South there’s a Mr. Fast who is a few bales short of a load so they call him Slow Fast, but not right to his face; and in the North there is a Pracha Petash who they say is quite poor, who often goes visiting with an empty shopping bag and comes back home with something in it.

By the way, there's also a Barn Schmidt in Adair who doesn't go to either church except when there's a funeral. He's not a farmer, he's called that way because of his breath.

Now when it comes to the question of baptism, there are some small differences between the two churches. Whereas the North Church pours water on its people right inside their building, if the South Church wants to have a baptism, they have to wait till summer and drive down to the river on a Sunday afternoon, where they duck their people underwater. Sprinklers in the North and dippers in the South, you might say. But the difference isn't just on the surface (get it? the surface, of the river?); if you want to get the deeper meanings (oh this is good), you should listen to a conversation between some South Church members, who spend a lot more time discussing them than North Churchers do.

For example, you might hear Willy's uncle Harry Becker one afternoon, standing in front of the Chinese Cafe talking to Little Jake Martens about baptism, while Central Sawatzky from the North Church would probably be off in the country somewhere on top of a telephone pole, with a long cigarette holder between his teeth, not thinking about baptism at all. He'd be replacing an insulator that somebody had shot out, and maybe thinking to himself, "I bet it's that vedolt P. L. Friesen's kid from the South Church that did this again."

And Uncle Harry might be telling Little Jake, "I heard say Central Sawatzky's boy got baptized last Sunday. I can't see how that North Church would baptize a person like him."

"That's for sure," Little Jake would say, "you should have seen how that boy was turning U-balls with Central's car last week behind the community hall."

"Well, you know how they are," Uncle Harry would get into high gear now; "their kids just have to say the catechism, as if that's all it takes to get saved. And then they probably go behind their church after catechism and smoke."

Then Little Jake Martens would add, "All I can say is it's a good thing the revival meetings are coming. There's too many temptations for kids these days. Ours are being influenced all the time by those North Church teenagers. Last week I thought I could smell smoke on my son Abe when he came home after Young People's. We need an old-fashioned revival around here again."

Maybe you can see now how the order is a little different between the two churches. In the South Church it's something like this: first you are reminded about your sins until you feel quite bad about it, then you get saved, and one or two summers after that they dip you under the river and make you a member. Whereas in the North Church it's more like this: first you say the catechism, then (according to Uncle Harry) you have a smoke, then next Sunday you let them pour water on your head and you're automatically a brother, like that. This difference may not seem so important to you, but as I say, here in Adair it reaches quite a ways into life, even up to the insulators on the telephone poles.

But the place where it reaches most is into Willy Becker's head, which is

something he can't quite figure out about himself. He sees plain enough that the boys from the North Church never think about getting saved or lost. That's more or less what you would expect, like Uncle Harry says, from people who think it's so easy to get into heaven. And the Catholics—well, Billy McRae he smokes right in front of his parents so that doesn't even count. What bothers Willy more than anything, though, is how some boys from the South Church are like that too. He knows for sure Abe Martens smokes in the stockyard barn—Little Jake's right about that. And Jake D. Dyck's son does it too. Mind you, they say old Jake has been caught smoking himself and Rev. Pete Nickel hasn't even done anything about it so far, unless he doesn't know yet—so Johnny Dyck doesn't really count either. But somebody like Neil Dirks, Willy always thinks, how can he tell the Sunday school teacher he's saved, and memorize so many Bible verses that he usually wins the contest, and then go and have that little plastic viewer with a naked woman in it, like Royce Peters says he has in the hayloft?

Or you take like Willy's older cousin Tim. He is saved already but he brags how he bumped into Grace Neufeld's breasts from Schoenfeld, and anybody can see he doesn't feel very guilty about it. This eats Willy sometimes. How can somebody with their head full of breasts not be scared about hell and God?

I don't say Willy wouldn't like to see that woman in Neil's plastic viewer. Certainly he would; but Neil has never offered to show him. And in a way it's good Willy hasn't been tempted with that thing, because most likely he'd look if Neil offered, and then he'd have to go and worry about the fire again.

Oh, it gets quite bad for Willy sometimes. Two years back a family moved to Adair from South America who didn't speak English, they only spoke Mennonite. They had a six year old boy named Hauns who Willy and a few others from the South Church started teasing one day about how funny his clothes looked. Hauns had got madder and madder and they wouldn't quit teasing, till finally he yelled at them with his face all red, "Jesus voat die vebrenne, ha HA!" and then he ran off. The thing is, the other South Church boys just laughed even harder at him, but that curse smote Willy hard, so that he never teased Hauns again and couldn't stop thinking for a long time that that was exactly true about being burned by Jesus. So you see what I mean about those sins with Peggy Hinz and the Vogue cigarettes, how they would work fairly hard on Willy to get him feeling as bad as the South Church wanted.

Here is another thing about the North Church. They seem to have a lot of bake sales every year to raise money for the MCC, but as far as Willy can see this doesn't do too much for making them think about their sins. Of course they sometimes have those Deeper Life services, but there again, according to what he's heard, they are so deep that the old folks don't make their kids go too often. Whereas the South Church has revival meetings and evangelistic crusades and conferences about foreign missions. So you can see how there's sort of a difference between a bake sale and a revival crusade, and how Willy wouldn't likely have this problem if the Beckers were North Churchers; then he'd be

looking at a motto that told him Praise instead of the one that said Prepare.

Maybe now you can imagine also how Willy feels when he thinks about that upcoming revival. In a way it makes him shake a little when he lies in bed thinking what Henry Derksen from Nebraska is going to say—Willy knows more or less what that is, he remembers it pretty clear from last year; only then he hadn't piled up such important sins as this year, and it didn't seem too urgent to go up the aisle when the preacher made them sing *Just As I Am Without One Plea*.

And in another way he's almost glad those meetings are coming again, because now maybe he'll finally have to clear this all up about Peggy and the Vogues and other things, and be able to fall asleep a little easier at nights.

Then, Willy thinks, maybe God will leave him alone for awhile.