

Mennonite Voluntary Service Workers in Aboriginal and Metis Communities in Northern Alberta, 1954-1970.

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Introduction

In 1955 the small Alberta-Saskatchewan Mennonite Conference,² which then had a total membership of only 726 in nine congregations in southern and central prairie farming communities,³ began an ambitious new voluntary service outreach program in northern Alberta. It did so in close collaboration with the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities with headquarters in Elkhart, Indiana, and the Mennonite Central Committee. The new program was gradually extended to eight northern communities, most of which had a substantial Aboriginal and Metis population. All the communities served either had no established church, or lacked a resident priest or minister. The new program marked the first intense and ongoing contact between Mennonite voluntary service workers, many of whom came from the United States, enthusiastic but inexperienced members of the Mission Board of the Alberta-Saskatchewan Mennonite conference, and, of course, the Aboriginal, Metis and unchurched Euro-Canadians in northern Alberta. No new Mennonite congregations were organized as a result of the work of the voluntary service workers, and the program was gradually phased out as needs and circumstances changed. But those involved established new and different relations between Mennonites and the Aboriginal and Metis people in northern Alberta.

Antecedents

The voluntary service program in northern Alberta was initiated and shaped by several earlier Mennonite missions and service initiatives. The first of these is best described as rural or colonization evangelism; the second involved Mennonite alternative or civilian public service during the Second World War.

Rural or colonization evangelism was linked to frontier settlements. It involved pioneers moving west or north in search of better or cheaper land. The primary witness of these pioneers would be provided through exemplary Christian living. Conferences encouraged ministers to join the migration and provide spiritual leadership and, where numbers and commitments warranted, organize new congregations. The emphasis was on discipleship living rather than on aggressive evangelization of non-Mennonite neighbours.

In the 1930s Mennonite Bible Schools on the prairies, including a rather unique itinerant Winter Bible School organized by the Alberta-Saskatchewan Mennonite Conference, advocated more aggressive evangelization strategies. That resulted in a major new mission program in the late 1940s. Northern adventures, challenges and opportunities captured the imagination of many Canadians and Americans. A number of enthusiastic and idealistic Mennonite young people became enamoured with the idea of moving into unchurched rural communities in northern Alberta.⁴ The pattern of this early northern mission work remained consistent with established strategies of rural or colonization evangelism. Pioneers moved into rural and agricultural communities where there were settlement or employment opportunities but no established churches. There self-supporting Mennonite mission workers sought to provide a Christian witness by living in ways consistent with the dictates of Christian discipleship. New congregations were organized by and for the faithful, whose witness through exemplary living was supplemented by some teaching, particularly of children in Sunday and summer vacation Bible schools, and by occasional revival meetings.

In addition to the legacy of Mennonite colonization evangelism, the Mennonite voluntary service program in northern Alberta in the 1950s was also influenced by the legacy of the compulsory alternative service in lieu of combatant military service rendered by Mennonite young men during World War II.⁵ Reactions to and assessments of the wartime work done by Mennonite conscripts varied, but at least in the later stages of the war many rendered useful, constructive and humanitarian public service. After the war, human suffering and the need for such services remained. In the United States the military draft and the option of approved civilian service in lieu of military service continued after the war. In Canada military conscription ended after the war, but influential leaders and conscientious young people felt that the fine Christian witness and useful service could continue after the war in much the same way as during the war. American draftees could volunteer for such work in lieu of military service. The usual length of service was two years, but many voluntary service workers not subject to the draft volunteered for shorter periods for specific assignments, such as teaching a summer Bible class or assisting in a construction, gardening, health care or teaching project.

Voluntary service workers, like wartime alternative and civilian service workers, received only a very modest personal monthly allowance of \$10 in the first year and \$20 in their second year of service. Married couples who became unit leaders were given a \$50

monthly personal allowance. Some voluntary service workers obtained work for which other agencies, such as local school boards or health care agencies, paid regular wages. In those cases the voluntary service workers remitted their earnings to the voluntary service program. This paralleled wartime arrangements under which Canadian conscientious objectors, working in government approved salaried positions, had turned over to the Red Cross earnings which exceeded their approved monthly allowances.⁶

Voluntary service workers were young, idealistic, but not always mature people. They came from all parts of North America. Most had completed high school, and many from the United States were college graduates. A significant number stayed in northern Alberta after their term of voluntary service expired, to work in salaried positions, as businessmen, or as professionals. In some communities a voluntary service team or unit offered a range of educational, health care, social, economic and religious services. In others there was only a teaching, or health care worker or couple, assisted as seemed necessary by short-term workers.

Calling Lake

The decision to establish a voluntary service unit somewhere in northern Alberta was made in 1954 when the Relief and Service Committee of the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities in Elkhart, Indiana, was informed that a young Mennonite from Brownsville, Oregon, who was subject to the American military draft was interested in discharging his obligations through a service assignment in northern Alberta.⁷ Bishop Clarence J. Ramer of the Alberta-Saskatchewan conference agreed to investigate. He made an extended trip to the Peace River district in May of 1954, consulted with rural or colonization mission workers, and identified a number of possible voluntary service sites in the north.⁸ All the sites identified by Bishop Ramer had substantial Aboriginal or Metis populations. His report was compassionate, but confirmed and reinforced prevailing stereotypical images of Aboriginal people in the North.

The first unit was not placed in any of the sites initially identified by Bishop Ramer. After Ramer's visit, Willis Yoder, a mission worker in the mixed farming and lumbering community at Mirror Landing (later renamed Smith), became aware of plans to relocate the large Mirror Landing sawmill to the remote community of Calling Lake, about eighty miles north of the town of Athabaska. Calling Lake had a small Roman Catholic chapel, but no resident priest. Rolland Ellefson, the manager of the sawmill, was a devout Christian who had established close and amicable relations with Mennonite mission workers at Mirror Landing. He was concerned about moving his family and providing for the spiritual needs of his workers in a community with no active church. He offered to provide the necessary building materials, to be paid by labour in the sawmill later, if the Mennonites would establish a mission or voluntary service program at Calling Lake. Ellefson was also willing to make a proposed new building to accommodate meetings with his employees available for use as a chapel. The plan was to create a unit consisting of several workers who would serve as teachers, health care and social workers, while also providing spiritual instruction and leadership in a community which lacked all those services.

Once the decision was made to establish a voluntary service unit at Calling Lake, it became necessary to find appropriate leadership. Ike and Millie Glick of Harrisonburg, Virginia, who were then studying at the Eastern Mennonite College in Virginia, had expressed an interest in the north and were invited to lead the proposed voluntary service unit at Calling Lake,⁹ beginning work in the spring of 1955. While still in the United States, the Glicks purchased a 1941 Buick ambulance which they packed to the limit not only with personal belongings, but also with a washing machine with a gasoline engine, household goods and supplies. Their trip across the country with their infant son in the heavily loaded and trouble-prone ambulance, not to mention the formalities of crossing the Canada-United States border, became the subject of many amusing stories. Some modifications had to be made to fit the old ambulance for the rough roads in northern Alberta, but it provided a means whereby local people could be brought either to the unit house for treatment if the local roads were good, or, in serious cases, to take people from Calling Lake to the hospital at Athabasca. Plans for the new unit did not proceed quickly enough to allow Seth Miller, whose interest led to the early investigation of service needs and opportunities, to participate. But Richard Gingerich, a young Mennonite from Canby, Oregon, who was also subject to the American military draft, agreed to join the unit, which was organized on 12 July 1955.

Upon arrival at Calling Lake the first concern of the Glicks and of Richard Gingerich was to provide basic shelter for members of the unit. They were directed by the Ellefsons to a pile of lumber which, it was suggested, they could use to build a basic 12' x 14' granary in which they could find shelter during the summer while a more permanent unit house was built. The granary could then be sold to a local farmer, but only if it had no windows, except a small opening above the door near the roof, covered by a sheet of translucent plastic, which provided some light.¹⁰ Work was also begun on a larger and more permanent unit house. Lumber was advanced on credit, to be repaid by work in the mill by unit members, and a 24' x 24' one and a half story five-room building slowly took shape. By late November, when overnight temperatures in the granary became "rather brisk," the unit members moved into the still only partially constructed unit house.

Three new members joined the unit in February of 1956. Elvin Blosser from Dixon, Illinois, hoped to find short-term employment in the local sawmill, and to provide advice on gardening and agricultural matters. Elma Riehl, a nurse from Quarryville, Pennsylvania, added a health care component to the ministry of the unit. One of her first tasks was to set up a small medical dispensary in one of the rooms of the unit house, and to assist in difficult child-birth cases. The third new member was Shirley Steckley, who married and joined Richard Gingerich, also in February of 1956. That brought the number of people living in the five-room unit house to seven. The unit house was also a stopping-off place for many Mennonite mission workers, visitors, and other local and hungry travelers looking for food and lodging in a community which offered few commercial services. This often resulted in severe overcrowding. And there were plans to add a teacher to the staff during the summer of 1956, who was also expected to make her home in the unit house. Fortunately, a small cabin nearby became available, into which the recently married Gingeriches were able to move in the fall of 1956.

Visitors and short-term workers from congregations in southern and central Alberta

assisted in the summer Bible school, and in the weeding, picking and preserving of vegetables and berries in the large garden which was laid out by Elvin Blosser with the assistance of interested provincial government officials.

By the end of 1956 a multi-faceted health care, teaching, agricultural, social welfare and religious instruction and preaching program was in place at Calling Lake. It was described thus by Ike Glick in a March, 1957, report written for immigration officials who had to review applications by future voluntary service workers who would replace those completing their two-year assignments.

The present program being carried out by the unit includes medical services rendered by the registered nurse in co-operation with the Public Health and the doctors in Athabasca. At the present time a clinic building is being completed in the village which has been built co-operatively by the local residents of the village and the unit. The nurse also works with the Indian Bureau in providing medical care for Indians located on the reservation near Calling Lake. Miss Nafziger is teaching school in the public school at Calling Lake due to a shortage of teachers. Our original plans for Miss Nafziger were to have her organize a kindergarten to teach the Cree children English in preparation for entering public school. However, after several requests by the local school board, she did consent to teach the public school since no other teachers were available. We at the present time have organized a very simple children's club program for the pre-schoolers which we are hoping will develop into a kindergarten by this fall in preparation for the following year. Mr. Blosser will be serving the people in an agricultural program and is working with the local agricultural agent for the district in providing information and demonstrating techniques for this section.¹¹

Unit workers, and particularly the Glicks, spent much time and energy visiting the people, encouraging them to send their children to Sunday and summer Bible school, and inviting the adults to the worship services. They also became informed and effective spokespersons and negotiators with municipal, provincial and federal officials who had responsibility for the delivery of government education, health care, social and economic services.

It quickly became apparent to the Glicks and to their successors that real progress in addressing the problems of the community required new economic and financial initiatives. One of the later directors at Calling Lake expressed the problem thus: "I know that Voluntary Service is not primarily dealing with financial matters, but I do feel that second to the soul needs of these people is their need of financial assistance."¹² He was particularly interested in developing new community based co-operative business ventures and outlined some ambitious possibilities.

We have in this area a small tree known as Black Diamond Willow. This wood makes beautiful lamps, coffee tables, end stands, book ends, etc. This wood is available in large quantities in the bush. The basement of the Youth Center would be a suitable place to manufacture these articles because we have electricity, heat, and most of our wood-working equipment is there... We are now working on getting some samples ready which we can give to Ike [Glick] to use in the city as he seeks a market... Another possibility is the making of moccasins, jackets, and gloves from moose hide, which is available here in the community at the fur traders. When these articles are beaded

they are very attractive and bring large amounts of money. They would be a project for the women folks, supervised by a VSer. This would help to employ the girls and young women of the community and would help to keep them out of trouble and up the moral standards of the community. A market would probably be found in the city for these articles.¹³

It was not easy to start such projects. They required training and continuous supervision. Markets had to be developed, and the quality of workmanship had to meet standards set by urban jobbers and wholesalers. Ike Glick, who served for several years after leaving the north as pastor of the Holyrood Mennonite Church in Edmonton, worked with several others in marketing Aboriginal handicrafts in the city. But that all took time. In the meantime the director at Calling Lake also initiated a less demanding project which saw Aboriginal workers build rough wooden crates to transport chickens and turkeys. A Mennonite poultry farmer at Carstairs who manufactured such crates provided assistance in setting up the operation at Calling Lake. Rough wooden boxes to pack fish, cheese, fruit and other agricultural products were also built at Calling Lake. The skills required were minimal, but they provided local employment and the returns could be substantial.¹⁴

The director at Calling Lake also bought several piglets, hoping to promote the raising of hogs at Calling Lake. He proposed that the pigs be fed fish, which were in abundance in the lake. That suggestion, however, was not well received by one of the administrators in Elkhart who was a former missionary to China where he had eaten pork from fish-fed pigs. He warned that, in spite of his wife's best culinary efforts, it had been impossible to get a very unpleasant fishy taste out of such pork. None of these economic ventures at Calling Lake enjoyed substantial long-term success, but they provided much needed, albeit short-term, work and income.

The primary objective of the unit was to meet the spiritual needs of the people. They lived with and tried to serve the people, demonstrating through their lives what one voluntary service administrator called "a better way of life."¹⁵ Basic religious information was provided in the Sunday and summer Bible schools and in the worship services, but the workers were also encouraged to "get out and to meet the people and to become more aware of their needs and sympathetic with the problems they have."¹⁶ Unit members were not aggressive proselytizers. It was not necessary, and possibly counter-productive, some were told, "to go in with the Gospel message on your lips and try to accomplish a great deal that way in a short time."¹⁷ Some had difficulty in adapting to the Aboriginal culture, and many years later Elma Knapp, the first voluntary service health care worker at Calling Lake, recalled that "for years these people continued in their old lifestyle. Alcoholism was prevalent and no spiritual change was seen."¹⁸ The Calling Lake voluntary service program could not, for many years, boast of impressive successes in terms of the number of converts gained, or of successful church planting. But the work continued in spite of these disappointments, and eventually a small indigenous church with a young Aboriginal pastor was established at Calling Lake. That was a pattern repeated in other northern Aboriginal and Metis communities served by Mennonite voluntary service workers.

An important objective of all the voluntary service units was to provide urgently needed services, but only on an interim basis. The long-term objective was to help communities mobilize their own human and material resources, and to gain access to available municipal,

provincial and federal programs and resources. Ike Glick and others worked closely with northern school administrators to obtain qualified and competent salaried teachers for the schools in the communities served. They sought ways and means whereby health-care services available to other Canadians were extended to the northern communities. Some of the teachers, health care and other workers who came out under the voluntary service program stayed, and other interested Mennonite young couples were encouraged to take up salaried positions. But there was no opposition when the small band of converts at Calling Lake organized their own Aboriginal congregation. That very loosely organized congregation, led by a young Aboriginal convert, did not seek affiliation with the Alberta-Saskatchewan Mennonite Conference. Success, in short, eventually made voluntary service units redundant.

The voluntary service unit at Calling Lake operated from 1955 until 1969. During those fourteen years approximately sixty volunteers from Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kansas, Iowa, Michigan, Virginia, Oregon, Arkansas, Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta came to the community for varying periods of time, serving in different ways.¹⁹ There were others who caught the vision and came on their own to live and work at Calling Lake, complementing the voluntary service unit endeavours in various ways. When asked to reflect on what service in the unit meant to her, Nellie Alger of Broadway, Virginia, expressed the sentiments of many when she wrote:

While thinking what service here means to me, these tho'ts come to mind: planning projects to try to fill some of the needs of the Indian young folks...help improve their social and moral standards...some discouragements interspersed with encouragements...visitors (expected or otherwise)...hasty change of plans...mud...fitting the routine work of laundry, cooking etc with weather and canning, visiting and study for Sunday service...seeing God's wonderful nature...having a genuinely good time at a community softball game, and at the same time establishing a mutual acquaintance with the people in an "everyday" sort of way...learning something of trusting God to open doors where there is no door...learning patience when we seem to see only "through a glass darkly."

Service isn't a one sided thing by any means. We as unit members in ministering to the social and spiritual needs of this little community gain in return stronger and better character and growth in our own Christian lives.²⁰

Sandy Lake

Calling Lake was the first, and remained for many years the largest voluntary service unit in northern Alberta. The second unit was established at Sandy Lake in 1957 which was then a remote community consisting of Aboriginal and Metis families living along the shores of Sandy Lake, some 80 kilometers north of Calling Lake. While Calling Lake at that time was accessible by road, albeit only over poorly maintained roads which became virtually impassible during the spring thaw or in inclement weather, there was no year-round road access to Sandy Lake. Regular access had to be by air, usually with a small aircraft purchased with

funds raised by supporters in the United States.²¹

There was no school at Sandy Lake. The decision to place voluntary service workers as teachers in Sandy Lake was made after a special appeal by Sandy Lake parents who had heard about the organization that helped Calling Lake get a nurse.²² Fred and Elsie Gingerich, a recently married young couple from the Wellman/Kalona, Iowa, area agreed in 1957 to accept a voluntary service assignment at Sandy Lake. Government approval to open a private school was obtained, and an abandoned 22' x 24' log building was fixed up to meet minimum requirements. Instruction began on 13 September 1957, with seventeen pupils ranging in age from six to fifteen years. All but four had no previous schooling and were therefore placed in Grade One. School attendance in many northern communities was often erratic, but it was exceptionally good that first year at Sandy Lake. That prompted the government to authorize construction of better facilities for the second year.

Fred and Elsie Gingerich served as voluntary service workers at Sandy Lake for two years, and then taught there for a third year as salaried teachers. In addition to teaching in the small school, they organized a Sunday school and special youth activities. There were many visits with people in the community, and the school and teacherage became the center of most community activities. The Gingerichs very much enjoyed northern life, and after teaching for three years at Sandy Lake they went as salaried teachers to another pioneering school venture at Chipewyan Lakes. They were succeeded at Sandy Lake by Paul and Suzanne Landis, both natives of Pennsylvania. Paul had been to Calling Lake briefly during the summer of 1957 as a nineteen year old college student to help with some construction and manual labour. He had returned to Eastern Mennonite College for three years and then, together with his wife, accepted a voluntary service assignment at Sandy Lake to fulfill his selective service obligations.

Paul and Suzanne Landis, like Fred and Elsie Gingerich, remained as salaried teachers at Sandy Lake for an additional year after completing their two-year voluntary service assignment. Then they moved to Demarais, where Paul taught as a salaried teacher for two more years. The mix of voluntary and salaried appointments makes it difficult to distinguish clearly between voluntary service, independent, and salaried workers in places like Sandy Lake.²³ The objective was to place workers, particularly teachers, in needy communities where they would become effective witnesses to their faith.

Chipewyan Lakes

A small Aboriginal community along the shore of Chipewyan Lakes, approximately 250 kilometers north of Calling Lake faced unique problems. The community had been the home of a small group of Aboriginals who still followed a semi-nomadic way of life, and depended on the local Hudson's Bay Company store and trading post for supplies and as a place to sell their furs. Their way of life was seriously disrupted in the early 1950s when the Hudson's Bay Company store was closed and the provincial government became concerned about the lack of a school for the children. Arrangements were made for the relocation of families with children to a community with a school, located at Wabasca which was about 140 kilometers to the south. A few local people remained. Others returned seasonally to hunt and tend to

their trap lines. Most of those who had been moved to Wabasca said they would return if the store and trading post were reopened and a school established in the community.²⁴

Fred and Elsie Gingerich expressed interest in reopening the store and starting a school at Chipewyan Lakes. Special arrangements were made so they could buy and sell raw furs, and in 1959 the Gingerichs took up work in the store and in the school. Fred became particularly interested in northern business opportunities, and suggested that a volunteer service worker be recruited to teach in the school. Alvin Hershberger, a young single man from Kansas City, and later other former Mennonite volunteers, took over that responsibility, usually as salaried teachers or health-care workers.²⁵

Anzac

Good teachers and health care workers in remote communities were greatly appreciated, particularly by J. W. Chalmers, the Official Trustee of the Northland School Division. In 1962 Chalmers identified and tried to deal with an old problem. The Northern Alberta Railway line between Edmonton and Fort McMurray passed through long stretches of territory where there were no real communities and hence no schools. There were, however, Aboriginal people and a few families of railway workers living in scattered homes near the track. Many of these children were not attending any school. A proposal to run a daily school bus, equipped to run on the railway between Conklin and Anzac, was considered. But the distances and hence the time needed for travel if the children were to be brought to school every morning and returned to their homes every evening seemed prohibitive. Instead, a unique proposal was worked out between the school district administrator and Mennonite voluntary service officials. Residential facilities and additional classrooms were to be added to the one-room school at Anzac. A coach car would then be added to the train running from Conklin to Anzac on Mondays to bring the children to school on every second Monday. The children would stay in the residence at Anzac for nearly two weeks, returning to their homes every second Saturday on the regularly scheduled Saturday train. That arrangement would allow them to spend nine full days in school in each two-week period and return home every second week.²⁶

A number of pre-fabricated buildings from the recently abandoned Mid-Canada radar site near Anzac were available. They were purchased, moved to Anzac, and fixed up to provide needed facilities. The railway also made available some old cabooses which offered temporary housing for some of the students.

The key to the entire venture was staffing. The proposed school needed not only teachers, but also a nurse and staff for the dormitory. Dr. Chalmers agreed to look after the administrative and financial arrangements if the Mennonites would provide the necessary workers. Theodore and Arlene Walter who were coming off a three year voluntary service teaching assignment in the Ozarks accepted a new assignment as teachers at Anzac. Wilbur and Mary Litwiller of Parnell, Iowa, became the first house parents. Elaine Wideman, who had already served for two years at Calling Lake, agreed to go to Anzac for a year as cook. She was assisted by Betty Lou Yoder of Kokomo, Indiana, who was a licensed practical nurse. Sherman Kauffman of Fairview, Michigan, became recreation planner while John

Mast of Thomas, Oklahoma, looked after maintenance, repairs and many other necessary tasks.²⁷

The school followed the approved provincial curriculum, supplemented and enriched by the teachers and staff who also taught in the Sunday school and led worship services on weekends when the children were in residence. In an effort to help the children earn some spending money, and to promote local economic initiatives, the workers at Anzac also encouraged local people to pick berries in season, which were used to make preserves and jams. These were then sent to Edmonton and marketed through *Team Products*, which was a federal-provincial Indian Arts program based in Edmonton administered by Ike Glick.²⁸

Mennonite involvement in the new school and dormitory at Anzac was resisted by the Roman Catholic bishop based in Ft. Smith, North West Territories, who threatened in 1964 to withdraw all children of families affiliated with that church. He favoured expansion and consolidation of the residential school at Fort McMurray, and eventually prevailed on government inspectors to demand increasingly onerous improvements at Anzac. Tar sands developments, the construction of new roads, and the provincial government's aggressive program of school consolidations, resulted in the closing of the Anzac voluntary service unit in 1966. Thereafter the children were expected to attend the consolidated school at Fort McMurray which offered limited residence facilities for children from the more remote communities.

Anzac and Calling Lake were the only sites with "full service" voluntary service units that included teachers, nurses, social workers and support staff. At Anzac, in some years, as many as twenty-six children found accommodation and were thus under the care of voluntary service workers. While the Anzac project was in operation, the voluntary service workers had the children under their continuous supervision for almost two weeks at a time. They were therefore able to exert a good deal of influence. The children seemed to respond positively, and some of the workers regarded the Anzac project as their most successful venture in cross-cultural relations. (At the point of writing this article no instances of sexual or physical abuse have been reported). The basic objectives of the school were to teach the children not only factual information but an entire way of life which was, in some ways, alien to that of Aboriginal families. The voluntary service workers did not receive expert training in cross cultural relations before they were sent to Anzac, and had little understanding or appreciation of the spirituality of children who had grown up in the bush. The children, nevertheless, regularly returned to their home communities, and had to readjust to the lifestyles there. That created difficulties for some, resulting in suggestions by some of the students that the Anzac project was the least successful cross-cultural venture by Mennonite voluntary service workers.

Marlboro

The small, impoverished, mainly Aboriginal or Metis lumbering community west of Edson faced a serious threat in 1961 when the Imperial Lumber Company announced plans to close its planing mill. Under those circumstances, appeals to improve the inadequate school facilities of the community were ignored by officials of the Department of Education. Without

adequate physical facilities, it was almost impossible to attract qualified teachers. In an effort to resolve those problems, contacts were made with members of the small Mennonite congregation at Edson, approximately twenty-five kilometers to the east, to see if Mennonite voluntary service workers might be willing to send teachers to Marlboro. Appointment of voluntary service workers to teach in the threatened Marlboro school seemed an appropriate first step in the economic rehabilitation of the town. In the summer of 1962 the services of voluntary service teachers Bill and Doris Lauterbach, who came from Illinois, were secured. Assurance that qualified teachers would be available persuaded local school officials to improve the physical facilities of the school, and even to build a residence for the teachers. There were also tentative plans to place a voluntary service nurse in the community, but that became unnecessary when an appropriate salaried position became available. The economic problems at Marlboro were similar to those faced by many single-industry towns when their main employer shut down operations. They could not be solved simply by sending qualified teachers into the community and in 1961, Ike Glick, after a visit to Marlboro, suggested a number of economic initiatives designed to take advantage of native arts and crafts.

I visited a town Craft Center at Edson yesterday which suggests some real possibilities for the Marlboro community as well. It so happens that the whole area has the right kind of clay in different colors for pottery making. Marlboro's location right on the highway between Edmonton and Jasper Park could capture tourist trade if something were developed along this line. The center in Edson is only a local hobby center - not for sale. They do work in copper, leather, ceramics, weaving of different kinds. I also learned that poultry raising - especially layers could be a good venture for someone in the Marlboro area. Edson is importing all its eggs at present.²⁹

An interested Mennonite farmer from Iowa, working in the tradition of Mennonite rural or colonization evangelism, moved to Marlboro to start a poultry operation which provided employment for some of the local people. He was assisted from time to time by short-term voluntary service workers, particularly during the start-up period. The objective was to create economic and employment opportunities for the local people while at the same time providing an effective Christian witness through exemplary living which, of necessity, had to include exemplary employer-employee relations.

Conclusion

The voluntary service workers at Calling Lake, Sandy Lake, Chipewyan Lakes, Anzac and Marlboro involved extensive contact and work with and for Aboriginal and Metis people. Voluntary service workers also accepted teaching and other assignments in the communities of Eaglesham, Imperial Mills and Robb where there were fewer Aboriginal and Metis people. In each of those communities short-term voluntary service teaching assignments, sometimes followed by Mennonite teachers who accepted salaried teaching positions, formed the core of the programs. Often, however, short-term voluntary service workers from the older Mennonite congregations in Alberta and Saskatchewan, provided assistance

and support as teachers in summer Bible schools or as helpers in local building projects of various kinds.

The basic objectives of the voluntary service programs in northern Alberta were to meet urgent and immediate economic, social, educational and health care needs, while at the same time providing an effective Christian witness through exemplary living, teaching, preaching and worship services. The programs certainly provided significant short-term benefits for the people in the communities served. They probably ameliorated, but did not necessarily solve the long-term problems in those communities. There were relatively few converts, and no local Mennonite congregation was organized in any of the communities served by voluntary service workers. In retrospect, Ike Glick admitted that the program administrators may have been too much concerned about economic matters - in part because those communities faced desperate economic problems - only to discover the inadequacy of that approach.

Mennonite theology demanded that believers bring all aspects of life into harmony under the lordship of Christ. Lack of cross-cultural training made it difficult for voluntary service workers to appreciate and understand Aboriginal and Metis spirituality which was rooted in radically different cultures and lifestyles. Aboriginal culture and religion were rooted in hunting and gathering and, increasingly, on welfare dependent lifestyles which had only recently become an option in the area. Hunting and gathering required that people move frequently and adapt their lifestyles as much as possible to the dictates of nature. Accumulations of bulky surpluses and material goods made little sense in such an economy. Those dependent on welfare had to accommodate themselves to the vagaries and frequently changing regulations of distant bureaucrats which made long-term planning difficult. Accumulation of surpluses or the gaining of even very limited financial stability could result in reduced welfare payments which left the recipient as poor as ever.

The Mennonites, on the other hand, came from sedentary agricultural communities. They sought to create disciplined Christian communities which were not dependent on governments or other secular agencies, but which were instead separated and followed, in some fundamental ways, social standards and values contrary to those prevalent in Canadian secular society. Where Aboriginal culture demanded accommodation to, and exploitation of immediate opportunities, Mennonite culture emphasized separation from the world and long-term commitments to a disciplined Christian lifestyle regardless of the obstacles and difficulties involved. Without cross-cultural training it was difficult for some voluntary service workers to come to terms with Aboriginal values and differences. But those administering the northern voluntary service program learned much about cross-cultural barriers to communication, as did many of the workers, and through them other conference leaders and members of the home congregations.

In their own assessments, some voluntary service workers suggest that the program may have had its greatest impact on them. They were almost all quite young. Many were for the first time far removed from the restraining influences of families and home congregations. They encountered opportunities, challenges and situations where they had to think for themselves. They grew up, matured, and learned much about themselves, their faith, and what was really valuable in life. They provided much needed services, and often exerted a strong influence on the people they served.

The voluntary service program, and the workers involved in it, also had a significant

impact on the Alberta-Saskatchewan conference. Some of the social, cultural and religious practices long established in the home congregations seemed either irrelevant or inappropriate in the northern communities. Leaders had to think carefully about the various things they might expect or demand of their workers, and of converts, in the north. While most of the workers were young, they were usually also better educated than the leaders or members of the Alberta-Saskatchewan Mennonite Conference and brought greater sophistication to conference deliberations. Established institutional forms and practices, including familiar congregational organizations and conference affiliations, often seemed less important, and sometimes counter-productive, in the circumstances encountered by the voluntary service workers in northern Aboriginal and Metis communities. It was, for example, virtually impossible to explain specific Mennonite dress codes to northern converts. And many of the workers had difficulty justifying the exclusion of the Ellefsons who worked very closely and in harmony with the voluntary service workers but were not members of a Mennonite congregation, and of all converts not baptized as adults, from the "closed" communion services celebrated by visiting Mennonite bishops.

Aboriginal and local assessments of the work are difficult to obtain. One outside commentator praised the Mennonite voluntary service workers for helping to "debush" northern Aboriginal and Metis people.³⁰ He pointed to some local people who had radical life-changing religious, social and cultural conversion experiences as a result of the work by voluntary service workers. That, however, was not the case with most of the people served. The number of converts of that kind was small. And, included in that number, were some who seemed willing to make a fresh confession of faith whenever they got into trouble or needed or wanted something from the workers. Conversions were important, but the message communicated through teaching, helping, and preaching went far beyond that. It was designed to show the people a better way to live. And most of the workers quickly learned that living better in the north did not depend on an uncritical adoption of southern congregational or conference structures, practices and beliefs.

Aboriginal people who commented on the voluntary service work were generally agreed that the Mennonites rendered much needed and appreciated educational, health care, and social welfare services. Some also expressed appreciation for the economic initiatives, but others were less affirming of the materialistic attitudes and of some of the entrepreneurial methods and practices adopted. Specifically, there is criticism about the lack of appreciation or understanding of Aboriginal spirituality. The Mennonite workers often had difficulty accepting the ideals, beliefs, values and cherished practices of Aboriginal and Metis spirituality which differed significantly from their own understanding of Christian spirituality. The failure to provide effective cross-cultural training before sending the workers out was a failing identified not only by those served, but also, in retrospect, by some of the program administrators.

Aboriginal and Metis people in the north tended to be deeply suspicious of overt proselytization, and particularly the promotion of denominational interests. They were well aware of the often unseemly competition and "sheep-stealing" tactics of Roman Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian missionaries. They had no interest in becoming pawns in such battles, and the Mennonite voluntary service administrators deserve credit for recognizing the futility of such approaches. But their emotionally and institutionally less aggressive approach left them vulnerable to raids by more aggressive "hit and run" evangelists, usually

Pentecostal, who sought quick spiritual harvests in fields where the Mennonites had plowed, planted and watered.

One long-time Mennonite worker in northern Alberta, when asked to assess the legacy or contribution of the voluntary service program, compared it to a garden. The voluntary service workers had removed some of the stumps and stones and made the ground ready for the planting of a garden. But they had created no great garden themselves. Yet, when meeting some of the Aboriginal people in the city many years later, those people remembered some of the Bible stories they had been told as children. The Word of God, in another former worker's words, "was sown in various ways."³¹ It did not result in new Mennonite congregations in the north. That, at least in Ike Glick's view, demonstrated that the transmission of the Gospel was not necessarily institutional. The same point was made by a Mennonite journalist who spent two weeks in northern communities in 1965 when the voluntary service program there was being phased out. He offered the following assessment:

What does bringing in schools, bushmen's co-ops, medical aid, taking stands on integration, and developing native arts have to do with building the church of Christ in northern Alberta? Very little, say some. Very much, thinks this observer...True, a visible church in conventional terms is hardly evident...The church is being built in [people's] hearts and that's more permanent than church benches in any case. A genuine concern for their total welfare goes a long way in convincing an unsure people that there is certainty and genuine concern in Someone higher than both the white man and the Indian.³²

Notes

¹ This paper is based on research done for the centennial history of the Northwest Mennonite Conference, which is to be published in 2003.

² This conference was organized as the Alberta Mennonite District Conference in 1903, and was affiliated with the Mennonite Conference of Ontario. It became the Alberta-Saskatchewan Mennonite Conference following the organization and admission to membership of a new congregation at Guernsey, Saskatchewan. In 1971 it was renamed the Northwest Mennonite Conference. Since it was known as the Alberta-Saskatchewan conference throughout the period discussed in this paper, that designation will be used.

³ These figures are taken from the 1955 Mennonite Yearbook and Directory, p. 60.

⁴ The best known, most enthusiastic and charismatic promoter of a northern frontier witness was Linford Hackman, a native of Pennsylvania who devoted much of his life to northern mission and voluntary service work. His story is told, rather uncritically and sometimes inaccurately in Paul H. Martin, *As the North Called to Linford Hackman for Church Planting Along Northern Trails* (Des Moines, Iowa: Paul H. Martin, 1995).

⁵ Harold S. Bender, "Voluntary Service," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. IV (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1959), 848-850; John D. Unruh, "In the Name of Christ," *A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and Its Service, 1920-1951* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1952) 294-309; Ray Horst, "VS Looking Back," *Gospel Herald*, Vol. LVII, No. 32 (1 September 1964), 745, 748 and 764.

⁶ Extensive information about the voluntary service work administered by the Relief and Service

Committee of the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities in available in AMC IV-19-7.

⁷ AMC IV-19-7, Memo by Ray Horst on the proposed VS Unit in northern Alberta, 19 October 1954.

⁸ AMC IV-19-7. C. J. Ramer to Boyd Nelson, 24 May 1954, and C. J. Ramer to Ray Horst, 15 November 1954.

⁹ AMC IV-19-7, C. J. Ramer to Ray Horst, 15 November 1954.

¹⁰ Ike and Millie Glick papers, "Calling Lake VS Unit Monthly Reports, 1955-1956." There are also numerous letters from Ike Glick describing the early days of the Calling Lake unite in AMC IV-19-7.

¹¹ AMC IV-19-7, Ray Horst to H. L. Voisey, District Superintendent, Canadian Immigration Hall, 20 March 1957.

¹² AMC IV-19-7, J. B. Leonard to Don McCammon, 7 December 1960.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, John Leonard to Don McCammon, 4 May and 27 June 1961.

¹⁵ These were the instructions given specifically to workers at Sandy Lake, but they applied equally to those at Calling Lake. Paul Landis Papers, Don McCammon to Paul and Suzanne Landis, 25 May 1961.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Elma Knapp to Harry Stauffer, 19 November 1988, made available by Harry Stauffer.

¹⁹ These statements are based on information provided by Ike Glick to the author.

²⁰ Ike and Millie Glick Papers, Excerpt from the September 1958 Calling Lake Unit report published in *Agape*, a Voluntary Service publication from Elkhart, Indiana.

²¹ AMC IV-19-7, Ray Horst to Linford Hackman, 9 August 1955.

²² Ike and Millie Glick Papers, unpublished paper written by Millie Glick, entitled, "A School is Born."

²³ Information regarding the Voluntary Service workers at Sandy Lake was obtained from Paul Landis and Ike Glick.

²⁴ Ike and Millie Glick Papers, Folder of information entitled "Chipewyan Lakes VS Beginnings."

²⁵ Much of this information is drawn from Alberta VS newsletters variously called "Confab" and "Smoke Signals," and published between 1962 and 1965.

²⁶ Ike and Millie Glick Papers, J. W. Chalmers to Ike Glick, 1 March 1962; and AMC IV-19-7, Ike Glick to Ray Horst and Don McCammon, 26 February 1962.

²⁷ Ike and Millie Glick Papers, "Confab," Vol. 1, No. 1 (November 1962).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, "Smoke Signals," Vol. 3, no. 1 (March 1965), 2.

²⁹ AMC IV-19-7, Ike Glick to Don McCammon, 15 February 1961.

³⁰ Richard Benner, "Northern Alberta: Christianity in the Vernacular," *Gospel Herald*, Vol. LVIII, No. 46 (23 November 1965), 1032.

³¹ Elma Knapp to Harry Stauffer, 19 November 1988, made available by Harry Stauffer.

³² Richard Benner, "Northern Alberta: Christianity in the Vernacular," *Gospel Herald*, Vol. LVIII, No. 46 (23 November 1965), 1031.