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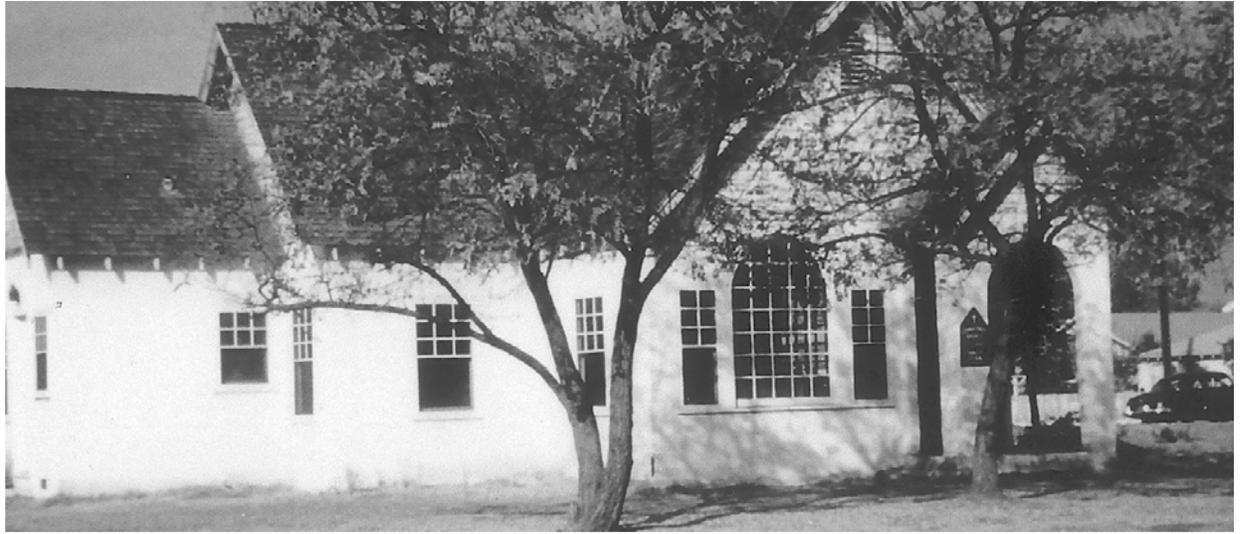
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# California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin

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*Fresno Fellowship meeting place at Olive and Fisher (1953-1955), 1955*

## *Back to the City:* **Mennonite Community Church Fresno, California 1954-2004**

by Rod Janzen

*This article is being published in two parts and is a much abbreviated and revised rendition of the book, Back to the City: Mennonite Community Church, Fresno, California: 1954-2004.*

### **Part I**

#### **Mennonite Community Church: The First Thirty Years**

One of the first worship services of what became the Mennonite Community Church was held in an upstairs room in an Armenian-American social hall located in downtown Fresno. Here, in early 1953, ten-year-old Connie Epp remembered stepping

carefully around the beer bottles lined up near the bar, on her way to the meeting. Although these first services were conducted in traditional Mennonite fashion, with four-part hymn-singing, a Bible-based sermon and a warm sense of ethno-religious camaraderie, central Fresno was an environment that those in attendance were not accustomed to; very unlike the small towns

and rural communities from which they came.

In the city, the creation of a dynamic church was a complicated and difficult endeavor. Members came and went, following jobs and opportunities elsewhere and there were dozens of denominational options. How a small group of 25 General Conference (GC) Mennonites—and those who

*“In the city, the creation of a dynamic church was a complicated and difficult effort.”*

followed—dealt with this unique set of social circumstances is the focus of this article.

Mennonites originated in the 16th century Anabaptist movement, which began and had significant following in some of the larger cities of Europe. In the beginning, Anabaptism was an urban phenomenon, a movement led by the patrician Conrad Grebel, the Hebrew scholar Felix Manz and the mining engineer Pilgram Marpeck. The movement’s metropolitan character was especially evident in the Netherlands.

Although Mennonites continued to maintain an urban presence in parts of Europe, government and church-sponsored persecution and social constraints eventually drove them into the more isolated rural areas of Switzerland, southern France and the Vistula Delta. Beginning in the late 18th century, thousands of Mennonites also moved to the Ukrainian steppes. It was in these places that a Mennonite rural existence became normative.

As late as 1936, 82% of American Mennonites continued to live in rural areas or in towns of less than 10,000 people. But the urbanization of American society was moving ahead at breakneck speed and Mennonites were eventually swept along by this social and economic wave. This is the context in which a small group of GC Mennonites talked

about starting a church in Fresno, California, in the early 1950s.

Kevin Enns Rempel has described the intense loneliness felt by the first California Mennonites who moved to the city; James Juhnke, the ‘vast cultural barriers’ that confronted urban congregations in general. Life in the city provided a condition of anonymity not realizable in a village or small town. As Delbert Wiens noted in the mid-1970s: “Two people sitting side-by-side on Sunday morning may actually be living in different ‘universes.’” Many Mennonites enjoyed this new-found freedom and release from traditional social obligations. But others found city life disorienting and daunting and they became deeply, spiritually distressed by the loss of community. Rachel Fast puts it this way, “I thought this (Fresno) was the worst place in the world to live.”

## **Mennonites in California**

The California experience has been given short shrift in most works of Mennonite history. As California archivist Kevin Enns Rempel puts it: “Mennonite historians have a hard time looking west of the Rocky Mountains.”

The latter-day nature of settlement in the West helps explain some of the omissions. But perhaps it is more than this. Older Californians often talked about a sense of betrayal felt by their friends and relatives who (in the California frame of reference) “stayed behind.” In addition, the state of California has always had a reputation for indolence and decadence related to its favorable climate, its lemon and grapefruit

groves, its utopian health cure centers and religious cults, and, in later years, hot tubs, kiwi salads and celebrity politicians. Could it be that in a subtle manner this is what has kept Mennonites-to-the-east from treating California Mennonites with an appropriate degree of seriousness?

Mennonites first came to California in the late 19th century, attracted by the mild climate as well as the abundant undeveloped farm land. Settlement was heavily promoted by railroad land agents via pamphlets and newspaper ads as well as by land speculators like Julius Siemens and Henry R. Martens.

The first Mennonite congregation was organized in Paso Robles (on the central coast) in 1904. But many more Mennonites were attracted to land near the town of Reedley, 150 miles inland, on a semi-arid plain in the central San Joaquin Valley. Plentiful water from the Sierra Nevada snow-pack made it possible to farm the extremely fertile soil. The first General Conference Mennonite church—“First Mennonite”—was organized in Reedley in 1906.

## **A General Conference Fellowship in Fresno: 1952-1954**

In the early 1950s, a number of General Conference Mennonites began to move to Fresno, an emerging city with a population of about 108,000. Many came from the Reedley area, 25 miles southeast. Others arrived from the Midwest. Most were looking for jobs, and with farming backgrounds, many were attracted to blue collar positions. Others took employment in small business and education. Verna and



*Women's Missionary Society, 1954*

Howard Epp opened a hardware store, Orlando Schmidt worked as a printer for the Fresno Bee, while Ervin Koop was employed by the Southern Pacific Railroad.

When the Rev. Aaron Epp moved to Reedley in 1952 to pastor the First Mennonite Church he was struck by the fact that about 35 members of the congregation were commuting from Fresno. Epp decided this would be an opportune time to start a GC congregation in the city and he shared this notion with a number of the Fresno families. Charter member Pearl Janzen calls Aaron Epp the "instigator" of the Fresno fellowship.

One Mennonite Brethren (MB) congregation already existed in Fresno. Established in 1942 and eventually called the Bethany MB Church, most people in that group, too, were blue collar workers who sought jobs in the

*"Epp decided this would be an opportune time to start a GC congregation in the city..."*

city during the 1930s and 1940s. A second MB congregation, the Butler Avenue MB Church, was established fifteen years later.

But General Conference Mennonites had no church to call their own. The problematic impact of this phenomenon is shown in the life of Ken Quenzer, who grew up in a General Conference Mennonite congregation but married a Mennonite Brethren woman, Muriel Heinrichs. At first they attended Butler, but Ken was not allowed to transfer his membership there because

he was unwilling to be re-baptized by immersion. A GC fellowship in Fresno not only provided a place for those who commuted regularly to Reedley but for those like Quenzer who were not accepted in Mennonite Brethren congregations. It also offered an option for those GC Mennonites who had joined other denominations or were not attending church at all.

Fresno resident Verna Epp decided that a first step would be to invite all First Mennonite members living in Fresno to a picnic at Roeding Park on October 28, 1952. Twenty-eight people attended that event. Interested members continued to meet for a variety of potluck social gatherings in the weeks that followed. As Pearl Janzen notes, "Food brings people together." Soon the group decided to worship together as well.

In addition to the upstairs meeting hall at the American Armenian Citizens Club, the group also met in the chapel of the Pacific Bible Institute, at the Missionary Baptist Church and at the Holmes Playground.

In March 1953, the Fresno group established a business committee and began to call itself the "General Conference Fellowship of Fresno." Two months later, a Women's Missionary Society was formed. And following quickly thereafter was the establishment of a ladies' trio, a men's quartet and a variety of other music groups, as well as a full-scale Sunday School program. Then the group fortuitously found a vacant church building (on Olive Avenue near Fisher) where they could hold regular meetings.

*"...the fellowship eventually purchased three acres of land at Willow Avenue, in a yet un-subdivided cotton field."*

During that first full year of meetings—from May 1953 until July 1954—the Rev. Dan F. Schellenberg served as a regular supply pastor. Schellenberg was the youngest son and twenty-first child of well-known MB elder Abraham Schellenberg. Spouse Viola also came from a prominent MB family—she was the daughter of P.C. Hiebert, one of the founders of the Mennonite Central Committee.

The Fresno group was directed to Schellenberg by Aaron Epp, who continued to serve the fellowship as an informal "advisor." Epp in turn had been introduced to Schellenberg by Schellenberg's son, Dean, who (crossing the MB/GC divide) was at the time singing in the choir at First Mennonite. All of this is intriguing since relationships between GC Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren historically have been laden with conflict, ever since the MBs split off from the Mennonite Church in Russia in 1860.

Needing a permanent location and greater space, the fellowship eventually purchased three acres of land at Willow Avenue, in a yet un-subdivided cotton field. The congregation also began work on its first Constitution (adopted in October, 1954) and searched for a full-time minister.

### **The First Eight Years, 1954-1962**

The first full-time pastor of the Fresno fellowship was Peter Ediger, who led the group from 1954-1961. Peter, his spouse Marjorie (Marge) and their three children arrived in Fresno with a spirit of great anticipation and excitement. For Ediger this was his first ministerial assignment and an endeavor to be undertaken alongside a group of pioneering GCs who had spent the past two years laying the foundation for a brand new church.

Ediger's arrival coincided with the congregation's charter service on November 21, 1954. On that day, thirty members of the First Mennonite Church in Reedley—and eleven others—joined the assembly now formally christened "Mennonite Community Church."

Prior discussion included the possibility of not using the word "Mennonite" in the church name; some believed it might be a "distraction." But those who wanted to keep it won out.

The congregation also held its first fund drive for a new church building. It was decided to construct a social hall first, as a general purpose meeting room with a seating capacity of 180. Plans were to build a sanctuary as soon as attendance warranted and sufficient funds were available. Groundbreaking was held on August 7, 1955, and the meeting place was dedicated on April 22, 1956, with over 300 people in attendance.

One interesting feature of the interior design was the back wall on the east side, right behind the stage, constructed entirely, both inside and out, of earth-tone adobe bricks. According to Pearl Janzen, this wall symbolically tied members of the congregation to their rural roots—to their background as people of the land—in Eastern Europe, the American Midwest and the Reedley area. Superimposed on the wall—the bricks jutting out in a pattern of twenty-six images—were crosses representing Jesus' death and resurrection.

Worship services during the Ediger years were similar to those found in other GC Mennonite churches, with hymn-singing, choral music and a standard 20-30 minute sermon. As has been the case throughout its history, anybody who wanted to could sing in the choir, perform special music or teach Sunday School. Mennonite Community also held evening services on Sundays and Wednesdays.

Delbert Wiens has noted that when Mennonites first formed

churches in the city they often built them “in the image of the one they left behind.”

Mary Koop started attending Mennonite Community in 1959 and says that it was very much like the rural church in Kansas where she grew up. “Here they did things like we used to,” she notes, unlike the church she and her family attended in Wichita. Harold Fast, a native of Mountain Lake, Minnesota, also says that at Mennonite Community, “things were done like back home.”

With regard to the church neighborhood, a developing middle class population was buying houses in all directions. Ediger and interested members tried to establish relationships, inaugurating a process of engagement that has continued intermittently for the next 50 years. Ediger worked on this issue, beginning with a tract distribution effort in the spring of 1955, but he and others ran into a number of barriers. Already in fall 1955, Ediger wrote, “Personal contacts in this area have convinced me more than ever that we will face a real challenge as a church in the community.”

As Ediger recalls, the most significant success was the creation of a weekly Bible Study—what he describes as a “prayer therapy group”—that included two families from the church and four or five families from the neighborhood. This group engaged in a more intense sharing of diverse spiritual journeys than Ediger had ever experienced. There was less “Mennonite piety” and more openness of expression. Ediger says that he was confronted for the first time with people experiencing heavy emotional and psychological problems.

The neighborhood prayer group functioned outside the boundaries of the regular church program. Although three of the couples attended services for a short period of time only one individual became an active member. Throughout the history of the congregation, members of the church—as well as its various pastors—engaged in door-to-door conversations with neighborhood residents. Yet the church program was primarily attractive to people who did not live nearby.

The reason for this involves foundational differences in culture, belief and worship style. As Orlando Schmidt and Daniel Ewy put it in their unpublished 1984 record of events: “Efforts to reach members of the surrounding community were made, but with meager results.” The congregation had better luck with neighborhood children. In a report to the GC Board of Missions in 1958, Ediger confirmed that non-Mennonites in

*“Ediger wrote, ‘Personal contacts in this area [establishing relationships] have convinced me... that we will face a real challenge as a church in the community.’”*

the community were often interested in the children’s Sunday School program, but nothing else.

Ediger notes that during the time he was at Mennonite Community there were two general “strands” of members. The first were people with a strong “evangelical” and what he calls

• THE CALIFORNIA MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY •

## Annual Spring Meeting

**April 1, 2006**

**College Community (MB) Church**  
2529 Willow Avenue  
Clovis, CA

**Topic:** *Mennonites in Poland at the End of World War II*

**Speaker:** Ted Regehr

3:30 p.m. Genealogy workshop

6:00 p.m. Dinner

7:30 p.m. Meeting and speaker

**Dinner Cost:** \$10 (members)  
\$15 (non-members)

*Reservations required. Call (559) 453-2225*



a more “inclusive” perspective; the second, those who liked the “Mennonite ethnic heritage” and were primarily concerned with creating a “comfortable” place to worship in an urban setting. Ediger saw both groups struggling with the shift from rural to urban life, trying to figure out how to do church in the city.

During the mid to late 1950s Mennonite Community was a church that had many families with young children. By 1960 the membership had grown to 105 people. People who attended Mennonite Community in the 1950s hailed from various parts of

*“Members in a complex city environment did need something secure to hold onto...”*

California and the Midwest. They held different educational experiences and job types and—as increasing numbers of white collar workers joined the church—exhibited greater occupational diversity than was found at the church in the early 2000s after the membership had become more professionalized.

Schmidt and Ewy, in their short history of the congregation, noted that because many members came from rural areas, “the work and efforts of the congregation were directed primarily in the direction of assimilation and the development of a cohesive Christian Fellowship in a growing city.” This sentiment, similar to that expressed by those

representing Ediger’s “Mennonite heritage” path, was ideologically and practically oppositional to successful evangelism outside the Mennonite cultural context.

Members in a complex city environment did need something secure to hold onto, a spiritual center made manifest in a dedicated body of believers. A people undergoing radical personal and social change could perhaps not be expected to make major alterations to the traditional ecclesiastical culture. This is not to say that members did not want to win non-Christians to the faith. But how much were they really willing to change personally in order to have the opportunity to change others? Throughout its history Mennonite Community has struggled with this question, never reaching consensus on it.

During the 1950s, church members were also actively involved in the local community. Beginning a practice that was replicated annually for a number of years, the congregation, in December 1954, distributed Christmas gifts to the children of migrant workers. (Members were instructed not to donate “guns or war toys” nor items that had been used.) The congregation also took public positions on social issues. In March 1955, an announcement in the church bulletin urged a “yes” vote on a bill allowing Bible reading in public schools. In 1958, Ediger promoted a recommendation to ban the testing of nuclear weapons.

For women in the church, one of the most important entities was the Women’s Mission Society (WMS). Not only did the WMS group make quilts and other clothing items for conference mission projects, they also provided food and clothing for

migrant farm workers and the Fresno Rescue Mission. And the WMS played an important social and spiritual role for women in an era when most (at least at Mennonite Community) worked inside the home.

During his seven years of leadership Peter Ediger oversaw a church that grew significantly, both in terms of numbers and

### **Mennonite Community Church Charter Members, 1954**

*Elizabeth Andres  
Agnes Becker  
Jacob John Buller  
Herbert L. Caskey  
Julia Ann (Unruh) Caskey  
Edward Dettweiler Jr.  
Katharine Edna (Wiens) Dettweiler  
Peter J. Ediger  
Marjorie L. (Reimer) Ediger  
William Howard Epp  
Verna (Janzen) Epp  
Harry F. Ertmoed  
Harry Friesen  
Betty (Janzen) Friesen  
Jacob J. Gaede  
Anna (Fast) Gaede  
Clarence Hagen  
Lulla (Zielke) Hagen  
Pete Huebert  
Helen (Krause) Huebert  
Arnold Huenergardt  
Hulda (Janzen) Huenergardt  
Jacob J. Janzen  
Susan (Schroeder) Janzen  
Victor Janzen  
Pearl (Mierau) Janzen  
Ernest R. Koop  
Ruth Helen (Siebert) Koop  
Dora (Ertmoed) Mertz  
David Mierau  
Helena (Epp) Mierau  
Leonard Reimer  
Gus F. Schmidt  
Elizabeth (Quiring) Schmidt  
Orlando Schmidt  
Lynda (Enns) Schmidt  
Otto P. Schmidt  
Luella Elizabeth (Nickel) Schmidt  
Elfrieda Siemens  
Jonas Soldner*



*Mennonite Community congregation, 1954*

with respect to a unified sense of identity. Due to this collective accomplishment, however, Ediger was tapped on the back—in 1961—to take the position of field secretary for the Home Mission Committee of the GC Mennonite Church.

### **The Sixties at Mennonite Community**

After Ediger left there was a brief interlude between full-time ministers. During this period members discussed whether it was time to build a new facility. In late 1961 it was decided that “the next phase of our building program be a sanctuary” and the Building Committee began to analyze different options. The congregation also continued to work on ways to increase attendance. In April 1962, for example, an “extension visitation” effort “to contact people for Christ and the Church” led to

conversations with families in 85 different homes.

In spring 1962, Mennonite Community found its second full-time minister, Ron Ropp. Once again it chose a young man right out of AMBS.

Ron and Martha Jo (Jo) Ropp moved to Fresno in September 1962. They did so with the same kind of youthful enthusiasm which propelled Peter and Marge Ediger eight years previously. Ropp’s first sermon, “The Fog has Lifted,” referenced the foggy condition of the central San Joaquin Valley at the time they first flew into the city. He indicated that for him the fog had disappeared; he was sure that the decision to come to Fresno was the right one.

Under Ropp’s leadership the church continued to grow slowly in membership and attendance. Membership figures moved from 106 in 1962 to 151 in 1968; average Sunday morning attendance, from

91 to 113. This occurred in the midst of a constant movement of people in and out of the congregation.

Like Peter Ediger, Ron Ropp also tried to develop relationships with people who lived in the church neighborhood. Instead of starting a formal Bible study, however, he simply let people know who he was while taking regular walks (with Jo) around the neighborhood.

This effort did not lead to many new adult church attenders—at least not for more than a few Sundays. But Ropp’s informal visits did lead to unscheduled counseling sessions, as people from the neighborhood began showing up at the church office during the week, sharing their problems and concerns, seeking Ropp’s advice on emotional and spiritual matters. Mennonite Community (through its pastor) thus left a strong mark on those who lived nearby, even if

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they never sat in the pews on Sunday morning.

The irony is that one of the reasons Ropp ultimately left the ministry in 1968 (Mennonite Community was his only full-time pastorate) was the aforementioned counseling sessions. According to Ropp, he slowly came to the realization that he was not professionally equipped to deal with the kinds of problems that people were bringing to him. The issues included serious marital crises, suicidal inclinations, depression and even schizophrenia. As a result Ropp began to suffer psychosomatic illnesses, one of the ways in which he believes God was speaking to him.

The Ropps say that although there was a strong family atmosphere at Mennonite Community, there were also a number of social groups within the congregation. Ron and Jo do not recall any stratification based upon ideological differences; more important was the region from which particular members had come. By the mid-1960s the church comprised four major groups: Swiss MCs from the eastern United States, Dutch Low German Mennonites from Kansas and Nebraska, Dutch Low German Mennonites from Oklahoma

(whom the Ropps recall as the most conservative group) and a large assembly of Reedley natives. The membership was thus a “hodgepodge” of people, who might appear to be very similar to a non-ethnic Mennonite but who in fact viewed the Christian witness in a variety of different ways.

The Ropps agree that women were heavily involved, at least behind the scenes, in all aspects of the church’s operation, providing leadership on most of the important church committees and in the Sunday School program. From the early 1960s, spouses of church deacons were involved in all deacons meetings, even though it was their husbands who held the title.

Ron Ropp served as president of the Fresno Ministerial Association and delivered radio and television devotionals. In early 1964, he recognized “Race Relations Sunday.” Then Ropp went out on the streets, marching in favor of Proposition 14, an open housing initiative backed by Martin Luther King, Jr. In the process Ropp was called a “nigger-lover.” The Women’s Missionary Society also discussed the “race” problem at a regular meeting in March 1965. Ropp established personal relations with African-American Mennonite church planter James Lark, who moved to Fresno in the mid-1960s and for a few years promoted the development of a variety of social programs on the city’s west side.

With regard to the decision to “build a sanctuary next” made prior to his arrival, Ropp recalls that there were always two opposing groups in the church. Those who wanted to build saw a new sanctuary as a positive symbol that would promote

church growth. The opposing group was uninterested in erecting a sanctuary, seeing the present building as sufficient and viewing it primarily as a “meeting house.”

Ropp was a pusher and a doer and members of the congregation found this to be invigorating. He was especially fired up in the fall of 1965 after returning from a “church renewal” conference in Colorado. A letter sent to members put it succinctly: “The time has come when we can no longer take or leave the ‘call of Christ’ without paying the full price of acceptance or rejection.” Ropp wanted action in all areas of the work of the church.

But Ropp himself was being pulled in a different direction. In 1968, he decided that God was calling him to pursue a doctorate in counseling at Claremont.

### **The Church in Conflict, 1968-1974**

During Ropp’s ministry Mennonite Community reached new heights of membership and attendance. The calling of its next pastor, the experienced George Stoneback, was an attempt to build upon this important foundation. Born in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, Stoneback was a Bluffton College graduate with a degree in theology from Hartford Theological Seminary.

Stoneback arrived in Fresno with spouse Kathryn (Kulp) and a son. Here was an opportunity, it was thought, to push the membership to new heights, build a new sanctuary and move to the next level of God’s calling. The Building Committee went to work immediately on a number of options, following a familiar pattern in Mennonite Community’s history. At the

onset of nearly every pastor's tenure the building issue raised its controversial head. An Expansion Study Committee recommendation in June 1969 called for the construction of a sanctuary that would seat 300 people.

The committee also discovered that members of a Missionary Baptist congregation near Fresno and Bullard Avenues wanted to sell or exchange their property. The real estate included a ten-year-old sanctuary that seated 250 plus a small Sunday School wing. George Stoneback supported the purchase. In June 1969, however, the congregation rejected the idea. Members who resided near Mennonite Community strongly opposed any move north as were most of the congregation's charter members. Realtor Hank Janzen recalls one person looking at the property exclaiming, "What would we do with this baptistry?"

Under Stoneback's leadership membership figures did rise initially, peaking at 157 people in 1969. The church caught the attention, for example, of local artist and former Presbyterian Margaret Hudson, who felt "extremely welcomed" and started attending regularly with her husband and four sons. Membership totals, however, can be misleading and things did not really go as planned. The period 1968-1973 saw one of the most dramatic drops in attendance in the history of the congregation, from an average of 113 in 1968—to 71 in 1973 (Stoneback's last year). The latter was the lowest average attendance figure since 1955.

During the first fourteen years of its existence, the congregation had not faced any destabilizing internal conflict. Frances Ewy noted that although there were

differences of opinion on many social and theological issues, the all-embracing GC Mennonite emphasis on the "individual conscience" tended to temper these differences. Things held together in the spirit of GC tolerance even as the congregation faced a continuous flow of people in and out of the church.

As George Stoneback put it in 1952, "A city church has a heavy turn-over—far greater than most rural churches. Therefore, to off-set the loss by population movement, we must have a much

*"[Stoneback] liked to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson and Greek philosophers..."*

stronger program of recruiting new members."

Perhaps a lot of what happened is tied to the social and political climate of that time period, an age of cultural revolution when many in the Baby Boom generation questioned the value of virtually everything their parents had believed in and achieved. As a result the Stoneback era saw a congregation-wide aging process. Young members left and did not return; few new couples replaced them. The youth program suffered greatly, creating a catch-22 situation where it was hard to attract new families because there were few children around—and vice-versa. The congregation's problems had many causes, but some were tied specifically to George Stoneback; his personality, his approach to ministry, his ideas and his general modus operandi.

With regard to worship, for

example, Stoneback preferred a more formal, ceremonious, high church service than had been the experience at Mennonite Community. A banner made of silk was placed over the communion table in front of the church along with ornate brass candles. Two large formal chairs were placed on the stage and, to finish things off, Helen Huebert offered to donate an American flag and a Christian flag to place on each side of the sanctuary. Stoneback was accustomed to these accoutrements in other churches, but the flag idea was too much for many members. After hearing dissension at a congregational meeting the deacons deferred the decision and Huebert withdrew her offer.

Stoneback himself delivered carefully-prepared homilies that often included stories from church history. He liked to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson and Greek philosophers and his church bulletins contained full page historical commentary on hymn selections.

Stoneback was an intellectual, yet he offered practical suggestions throughout his sermons. This pleased many members, who were impressed and blessed by them. Still, Stoneback's sermons were "different than any kind of sermons we had had previously," notes one supporter. These exhortations did not fit the spirit of the times. When younger members suggested that services be less formal and include the singing of folk hymns, they did not receive a favorable response.

Congregational leaders could sense which way the wind was blowing. In his 1972 Annual Report Chairman Ervin Wiens noted that "the organized



*Peter and Marjorie Ediger, with Irene, 1955*

structure of the rural church will not meet the needs of today's effective city church." Wiens continued, "Unless we face the reality of the situation, our church will die."

An additional problem that accentuated every other difficulty was Stoneback's personal health, which was not good during his five-plus years in Fresno. It is noteworthy—and perhaps explains much of what happened—that during his time at Mennonite Community, Stoneback suffered two heart attacks and had prostate surgery. Illness might explain why things did not proceed smoothly and why people

had a hard time understanding him.

Stoneback later felt the need to explain what he thought had gone wrong. He did this, among many other things, in a two-volume autobiography entitled *I Remember When...or You Don't Talk That Way to Stoneback*. Beyond the intriguing title lies a thoughtful analysis that suggests that many of the congregation's problems stemmed from the existence of three "factions" within the church.

The first group was comprised of those whom Stoneback called "60s types," members who wanted major changes in worship and church operations,

i.e. less formality and greater congregational participation. According to Stoneback these critics wanted to replace the Sunday morning sermon with a "rap session." They proceeded to do this one Sunday morning, re-arranging the pews into a semi-circle and convening a more-inclusive worship service with open sharing and the singing of folk hymns, accompanied by a guitar.

The second group identified by Stoneback were people he called "evangelistic types," those who believed that the church was not giving sufficient attention to evangelism that might lead non-Christians to "personal conversion experiences." According to Stoneback, members of this group wanted "Billy Graham services." Being a traditional GC Mennonite, he believed that individuals grew into the Christian faith through the nurturing support of the church, not by altar calls and/or highly individualistic salvation experiences.

*"The conflict  
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Community."*

The third group identified by Stoneback included those he called "supportive types." These were mainstream GC Mennonites who appreciated a formal, well-designed worship service with carefully prepared sermons and four-part hymn-singing. The latter were the members who most admired Stoneback.

*“We almost closed  
the place down.”*

Unfortunately, he could not find a successful way to bring the three groups together. As Stoneback put it, “The pressure of trying to run a church with three such divergent views was a bit hard on my tired heart...”

At first glance it appears strange that the “60s” group was so opposed to Stoneback, who had a strong record of social activism. During World War II, for example, Stoneback’s outspokenness got him into trouble at the Eighth Street Mennonite congregation in Goshen, Indiana, where he was accused of “preaching against war.” In 1967, Stoneback had attended a meeting of “Clergy Against the War” in Washington D.C.

Stoneback was also no fundamentalist. In June 1981, many years after leaving Fresno, he wrote a letter to the *Mennonite* dealing with the issue of scriptural infallibility. As Stoneback put it, “Paul, good man though he was, was only a good man—and he must have been wrong once or twice. No self-respecting Christian can accept Paul’s actions regarding slavery.”

Some of Mennonite Community’s oldest members believe that younger activists “never gave Stoneback a chance.” In the view of the “60s” group, however, Stoneback’s political and theological progressivism was overshadowed by his authoritarian character. The congregation’s evangelical group on the other hand did not like Stoneback’s “liberal” theology.

The conflict which emerged was not unique to Mennonite

Community. It was replicated in churches across the country. Religious historian Mark Noll writes: “The legacy of these contentious times was a pervasive division between liberal and conservative approaches to both public issues and the life of faith.... In the churches, efforts to respond to the crises of the times led to deep intramural divisions.”

Constant physical problems, conflicts within the congregation and dwindling attendance caused the Rev. Stoneback himself to become extremely frustrated. As early as spring 1971, twelve members voted against a contract extension (with 53 in favor). By fall 1973 attendance was in the 55-65 range and the church was hit hard financially as giving levels decreased.

**A Reflective Interlude,  
1974-1975**

George Stoneback resigned in December 1973 and Mennonite Community operated without a full-time pastor for a period of 18 long months, a time of intense soul-searching—perhaps the most intense internal reflection in the group’s history. Particularly important was the period between November 1973 and June 1974, a season of collective self-analysis and re-visioning, a time when the past was critiqued; the future dreamed about.

Things did not look good in early 1974. Attendance had dwindled to about 40 people on Sunday mornings. On February 10 the bulletin announced that eight more people were asking for letters of transfer or withdrawal of membership. Even a number of long-time members left the church. It was difficult to be part of an assembly that had no pastor,

almost no youth group and few families with young children. It was also difficult to keep the church afloat financially.

Congregational meetings beginning in fall 1973 involved serious discussions about refashioning the church in a number of different ways. One suggestion was to break the congregation into a number of fellowships or “cluster churches.” Another was to disband. “We almost closed the place down,” recalls Harold Fast.

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live on.”*

Most of the members had small town or rural backgrounds, the membership was small and there was a tendency for people to relate primarily to those who had Mennonite ethnicity or prior denominational affiliation. One of the major reasons that persons of Mennonite background did not—and do not—stay Mennonite, is that they marry outside the ethnic or religious group; spouses who have strong commitments to other denominations and/or feel like outsiders in the Mennonite world.

To sort through future options, those who remained at Mennonite Community sought help from an outsider, David Whitermore, the General Conference Secretary of Church Planting. He came to Fresno in March 1974 and his final report indicated that the congregation was “spiritually

hopeful but emotionally exhausted.”

Like Stoneback, Whitermore found differences of opinion between the more evangelical and “radical” wings of the church and he noted the importance of working through these differences while simultaneously searching for a new pastor.

In any case, there was eventually overwhelming agreement that the church should live on and seek a full-time pastor. Many believed that God was at work in the congregation—that, as one person put it, “the concern not to quit is (evidence) of the work

*“...the congregation was ‘spiritually hopeful but emotionally exhausted’.”*

of the Holy Spirit.” Still for an 18-month period there was no formal pastoral leadership. Instead the deacons planned worship services and took on the various administrative responsibilities. Speakers came from within the congregation as well as from other churches and the MB Seminary.

The interlude between ministers led to a number of innovations in worship. On April 21, 1974, for example, the congregation was introduced to the phenomenon of “sacred dance.” On another Sunday, in June, the sermon was delivered by Merlin Snider an intern with the charismatic and semi-communal God’s Army organization in Kerman. At other services there was considerable opportunity for sharing. As Jerry Wiens put it at

the time, “...There is a difference in the ages of people and the way they communicate. Our age asks questions. We don’t accept on faith alone. We like more than just listening to a sermon.”

### **A Fresh Start and New Problems, 1975-1981**

In spring 1975 the Church Council recommended the calling of California native Floyd Quenzer as Mennonite Community’s new minister. Quenzer was originally from Paso Robles and he knew the Fresno area well, having studied at Pacific Bible Institute in the 1950s. Floyd’s spouse, Ruth (Hiebert) was from nearby Dinuba.

The Quenzers arrived in Fresno in June 1975. They moved into the house that had always been the church parsonage but which they were now buying. Quenzer’s selection was especially pleasing to that group within the congregation Stoneback called “60s types.” Quenzer emphasized the importance of Anabaptist theology and history as well as the social dimension of the Christian faith. He was open to new styles of music and worship.

The middle to late 1970s was thus a period of conceptual and practical experimentation in the life of the congregation. For the first time a songbook with modern, youthful songs was purchased (Sing And Rejoice) and on occasion members sang scripture hymns from lyrics projected onto a large screen. Pews and/or chairs were now and again re-positioned in a circle with guitars accompanying congregational singing. During each worship service, time was set aside for open sharing, a practice that continues. Quenzer added

*“For the first time a songbook with modern, youthful songs was purchased.”*

weekly children’s stories, which also abide as an integral part of the Sunday morning service.

It is generally agreed that Quenzer was good at interpersonal relations and particularly strong at visitation and counseling. Although the evangelical group did not resonate with Quenzer’s theology, his strong personal skills overcame many concerns and kept many, though not all, in the church. Still this was a time in the congregation’s history when the activist group became an increasingly dominant force.

Church attendance during Quenzer’s ministry (1975-1981) held steady at about 65-70 people per Sunday (with the exception of 1977, when the average figure was 80). Quenzer’s warm relational style and openness to new ideas attracted a number of families with young children, an especially important development. Adolescents as well resonated with his style of leadership. The church also attracted a number of persons of non-ethnic Mennonite background and there was an attempt to get as many people as possible involved in small groups.

Frances Ewy, who served for two years as the first female chair of the congregation, implored church members to become more actively involved. In her 1977 Annual Report, she asked, “Is each person doing his or her bit to help members and build the



*Mennonite Community Church, 1956*

congregation or are we more concerned with what we expect the church to do for us?" Quenzer agrees that a big problem was getting people to show "real commitment" to the church.

Floyd Quenzer's approach to the church neighborhood was to conduct a door-to-door survey of 200 homes to ascertain community needs. The result of this 1976 inquiry showed that adults were not interested in attending services or other church events but they were concerned about their children and wondered if the church could provide something for them to do after school. The most important result of the 1976 survey was the development of a Boys and Girls Club center at the church (the fourth program in Fresno). Ken Quenzer has been the president of the Fresno-area Boys and Girls Clubs since 1982. With this program, the church facilities were now being used every day of the week. It was, of course, disappointing that the church was once again unable to convince neighborhood adults to attend

*"The church also attracted a number of persons of non-ethnic Mennonite background..."*

services. But, as noted, Mennonite Community was not alone in this inability.

Due to experiences with both GC and Mennonite Church (MC) conferences, Floyd Quenzer also advocated dual conference affiliation for Mennonite Community, following a national trend which eventually led to the creation of Mennonite Church USA (in 2001). After much discussion, members of the congregation voted unanimously in November 1979 to apply for affiliation in the Southwest Conference of the MC. It already belonged to the Pacific District Conference of the GC.

Immediately prior to Quenzer's arrival, Mennonite

Community had also been given oversight of a GC Voluntary Service (VS) unit. From this point on the congregation saw a constant stream of individuals dedicating one or two years of their lives to local humanitarian organizations, including the Boys and Girls Clubs, Tree Fresno, Habitat for Humanity and others.

Sadly, however, the good spirits that accompanied Floyd Quenzer in his first years of ministry did not continue into the late 1970s. This was directly related to his divorce from Ruth Quenzer in December, 1979. After the divorce was announced, Quenzer approached the Board of Deacons and asked if he should resign. Their initial response was "no"—they wanted to continue to support Floyd, Ruth and their family. But the divorce, combined with a new relationship, changed the perceptions of many congregants. Other complaints surfaced as well. Over the years Rev. Quenzer had been criticized by some for informality in worship and dress. Now he was

*“It was agreed that religious heritage needed to be distinguished from ethnicity in such a way that the culture was maintained and celebrated, while not creating a barrier for those from non-Mennonite backgrounds.”*

reproved for lack of regular office hours and even for taking flying lessons. Pretty soon members were taking sides leading to a good deal of internecine strife.

The decision to end the relationship was not reached quickly. The congregation inaugurated a pre-scheduled pastoral evaluation that was completed in July 1980. The evaluation indicated that a “substantial majority” of members had “lost confidence and trust in Floyd as a pastor.” It was on this basis that one month later (in August) the Board of Deacons voted to terminate Quenzer’s services. At an August 31 congregational meeting the deacon’s recommendation was then approved by a 39-16 vote, showing that there were still a number of people (about 30%) who wanted to continue to work with Quenzer. The divorce

itself was not included in the termination statement.

### **The “Cottage Groups” and New Structures, 1981-1983**

Mennonite Community Church now embarked on its third between-regular-pastors epoch. This time the congregation hired two quarter-time “team ministers,” Ken Berg, a Mennonite Brethren pastor and Ron Claassen, a professor at Pacific College, who had just completed a Masters degree from AMBS. While Berg was placed in charge of worship, Claassen coordinated pastoral care responsibilities and administration.

Between the time that Quenzer left and Claassen and Berg began, a number of small group “cottage” meetings established new goals for the church. One aim was to create a balance between “casualness” and “rituals” in worship. Another person noted, “We are a city church and need to be open to creativity and innovation.”

It was agreed that religious heritage needed to be distinguished from ethnicity in such a way that the culture was maintained and celebrated, while not creating a barrier for those from non-Mennonite backgrounds. Cottage meeting participants also celebrated the fact that the church had “h[u]ng in under difficulty” and made “a large contribution to the community for our size.”

Following the advice of the Cottage Groups, worship services under Ken Berg showed a mix of the traditional and the modern, with guitars sometimes accompanying congregational singing and

dramatic presentations added to some meetings, while participants also sang from the hymnal and the church continued to feature a choir. Newly introduced was a peace, missions and/or social justice report each Sunday morning.

Another significant development was the creation of a ‘Structural Review Committee’ that made recommendations acted upon in late 1982. Members did not just talk about structure; they created a very different configuration that encouraged greater participation in all aspects of church governance. Claassen, in a thought piece entitled “Congregational Decision-making,” advocated the acceptance of “consensus attitudes,” as opposed to adversarial ways of dealing with issues.

What Claassen suggested in terms of structure was a reduction in the size of the Church Council and the establishment of monthly congregational meetings. These meetings were ultimately split into two sections; a partially unplanned assembly of the whole followed by separate gatherings of ministry groups (these included worship, education, local service, administration and outreach). The reason for the change was a majority perception that too much information processing and decision-making was being done at the Church Council level. The plan was to create a de-centralized structure that was neither too loosely-organized nor too hierarchical. The new organizational framework was based on the philosophical assumption that structure in and of itself impacts the quality of relationships and decision-making patterns.

In summer 1982 Claassen helped start a Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) in Fresno following restorative justice principles. Claassen also drafted a paper (presented to the congregation) that analyzed the conflict between Floyd Quenzer and members of the congregation. Claassen suggested that varying conflict management styles were at the root of the problem. In his view, there had been a good deal of discontent even before the divorce but members kept quiet believing that the congregation was not strong enough to handle conflict. The divorce then “pushed the false cooperativeness and false agreement beyond the tolerable limits...” and the simmering conflicts were “displaced onto the pastor” instead of being dealt with face-to-face.

Claassen’s main point was that with the right structures in place, relationships between Floyd Quenzer and the congregation—as well as between members themselves—would have been different and may have forestalled Quenzer’s dismissal and the defection of disgruntled people.

Ken Berg recalls preaching a number of sermons early on that dealt with the issue of “how to get along” while doing the work of God, homilies that were tied to the whole “new structures” conversation. Berg also notes that although there were still people in the church representing the old “activist” and “evangelical” groups, he saw a good deal of “overlap” and not many “fixed positions.”

During this period of intense self-reflection and re-organization, there was also regenerated interest in putting up a building. Already in the late 1970s a number of young families had recommended

improvements to the church’s facilities. They were dissatisfied with the lack of Sunday School classroom space and the general look of the church, for example the worn linoleum tile and old paint. Members agreed and with volunteer labor the church soon received a new coat of paint and for the first time, the floor was carpeted.

But even greater changes were in the works. In September 1981, for example, the Outreach Committee proposed that a “simple, attractive sanctuary” was needed in order to attract more members. Ken Fransen, who chaired the Building Committee, says that it made most sense to him not to make any final decisions without first consulting a well-known architect. The church thus hired Leroy Troyer, who had designed a number of Mennonite worship structures, to conduct a needs analysis. In fall 1981 Troyer spent a weekend in Fresno where he conducted a brainstorming and fact-finding workshop for members of the congregation. On the basis of his findings Troyer designed a chapel that seated 200 people, added additional meeting spaces (including an education wing) and completely transformed and beautified the church site.

At a meeting with the congregation in early 1982 Troyer talked about circular arrangements and attractive entrances. A year later, after numerous deliberations, a master plan for a new worship/administration center was presented to and approved by the congregation (in January 1983). Seventy-five percent of those present voted for the plan, which called for a first-phase construction of a church office/

Sunday School room/restroom structure.

Even though this may not have seemed like an auspicious time to engage in such a project, Ken Fransen is convinced that it was exactly what was needed in order

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to build collective congregational morale. The failure to build anything since 1955 had become symbolic for many members of the “non-accomplishment of the original plan.” Even though the project was driven by a need for classrooms, it held out the possibility that a sanctuary (part of the master plan) would be built in the future.

(Continued in the Spring Bulletin: *Mennonite Community Church: 1983-Present*)

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rod Janzen teaches history at Fresno Pacific University, where he holds the position of Distinguished Scholar. Recent books include *The Prairie People: Forgotten Anabaptists* (University of New England Press, 1999) and *The Rise and Fall of Synanon: A California Utopia* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).