



FRESNO PACIFIC  
UNIVERSITY

# FPUScholarWorks

---

**The Life of the Congregation.**

Author(s): Rempel, Valerie.

Source: Toews, Paul & Kevin Enns-Rempel, eds. *For Everything a Season: Mennonite Brethren in North America, 1874-2002, An Informal History*, pp. 136-149.

Published by: Kindred Productions (2002).

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/1308>

---

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the [Fresno Pacific University](#) community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the web and assures their preservation for the future.



# The Life of the Congregation

Valerie Rempel

Faith is nurtured and expressed through the life of local congregations and Mennonite Brethren churches have had a rich congregational life. In the early immigrant days the local congregation served as the primary community for both social and religious activities. Because of that, congregations and the events of the church community often assumed a central role in the life of individuals and families. Even as early immigrants assimilated into the wider North American society and other people joined to become part of the Mennonite Brethren church, local congregations continued to assume the central importance of a wide range of activities designed to nurture faith and community life. The shared rituals of these local congregations helped form identity both within particular congregations but also between the like-minded congregations of the Mennonite Brethren Conference.

Immigrants arriving on the high plains of Kansas, Nebraska, Dakota and Minnesota in the 1870s and 1880s regularly gathered in homes for fellowship and prayer, as did later immigrants who moved into the Canadian provinces. As immigrants settled and became established, they organized into local congregations. They continued meeting in homes, or even hay barns, and then in school buildings until enough money could be gathered to build a meeting house. The first buildings were simple sod or wood frame construction, often with double entrance ways, one for the men and one for the women. They were called “meeting houses,” a term deliberately chosen as a reminder that the church was made up of people and was not simply a building. As congregations became financially stable and grew numerically, these early buildings were replaced with solid white frame church buildings, still with double entrance-ways but now with towers and more imposing facades.

In Russia, Mennonite Brethren had frequently gathered in homes for fellowship, and their worship services were characterized by exuberant singing and a warm piety that found expression in the frequent use of the Low German dialect rather than the more formal High German. Low German lent itself to a more informal atmosphere and allowed for greater participation in the service, thus shaping the way worship services developed. Early worship services, like those today, frequently included times of congregational sharing and praying together. Members called each other “sister” and “brother”—terms of endearment that continued for a century and reflected the believers’ understanding of themselves as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

The first immigrants from Russia brought these habits with them, as well as the regular practice of foot washing and communion, and, in some communities, the continuing custom of the fellowship kiss. That kiss, a simple form of greeting taken from a literal reading of the Apostle Paul’s frequent instruction to the New Testament believers “to greet one another with a holy kiss,” proved contentious. In most congregations this ritual greeting took place between men or between women, but in a few congregations it was deemed appropriate for both men and women

*Members of the Reedley (California) MB Church gather for a congregational photo during the dedication of their new sanctuary on 13 September 1919.*

(CMBS Fresno)



to exchange the kiss of fellowship. Not wanting to be accused of any impropriety, the “sister kiss” as it was often called, was strongly discouraged by the Conference and eventually fell from practice, and even the more circumspect fellowship kiss was eventually replaced by warm handshakes. The communion service itself was a time of great solemnity as members examined themselves for unconfessed sin before partaking of the bread and wine.

During the early years of the Conference, ministers were regularly called out from the congregations they served and were self-supporting. Together with elders and deacons, they served to guide the church through preaching and pastoral care. Though referred to as lay ministers, they were often men who had extensive biblical and even in some cases formal theological training. They served as local leaders and were ordained to the ministry but they were not granted sole authority over the congregation. Local congregations took seriously their responsibility for the ordering of their fellowships and for decision making.

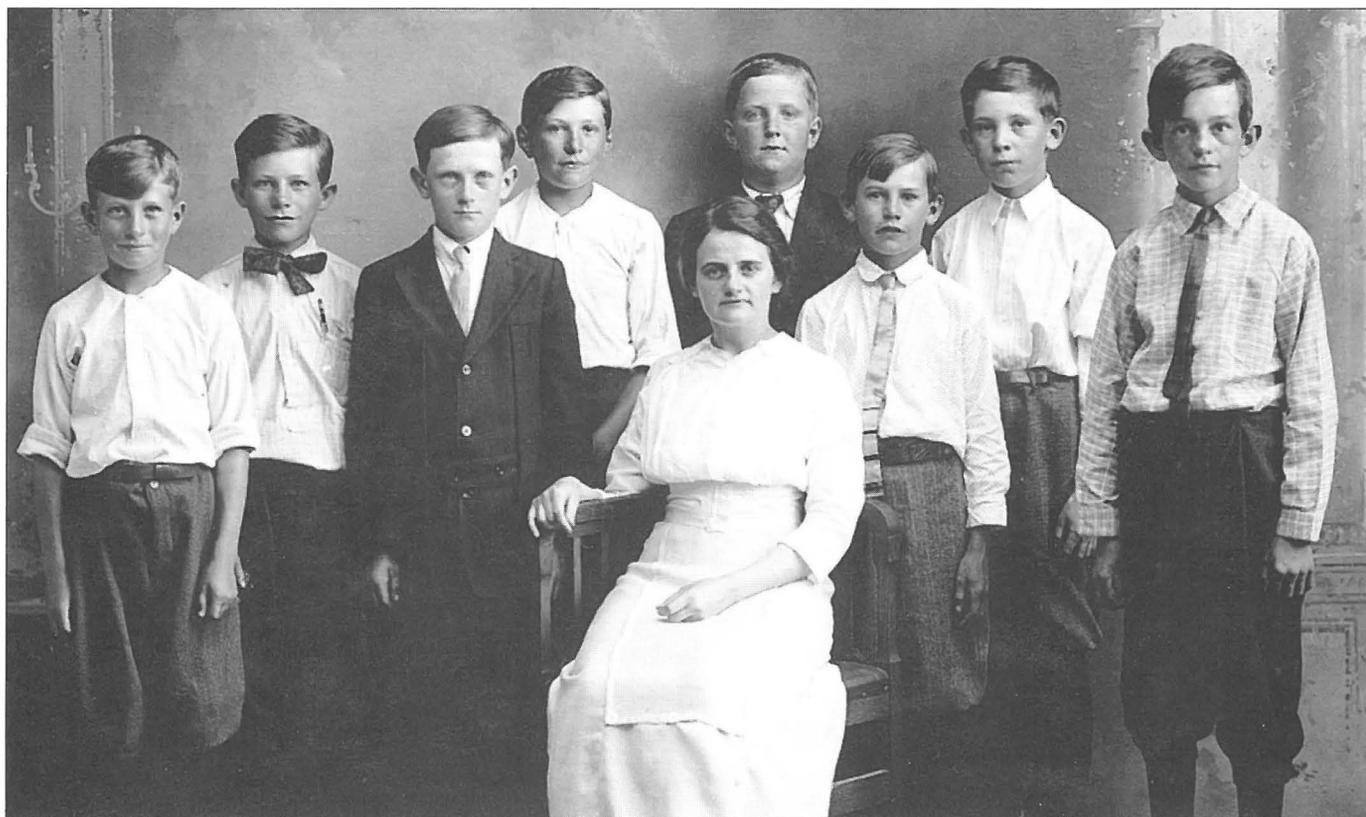
The role of the elder in early Mennonite Brethren church life was somewhat unique in that it required an ordination beyond that of the ministry. Elders, while considered part of the multiple ministry of a congregation, were often strong leaders whose authority reached beyond any particular local congregation, especially as they were the ones who officiated over the ordination of teaching ministers. Over the years, this became a point of tension within the Conference. Some understood the role of elder to be separate from that of minister and wanted the elder to function as a sort of bishop; others read the Bible to mean that elder, teacher and shepherd were interchangeable names for the same role. Eventually, it was agreed that any minister called out by the congregation was to be viewed as an elder and after 1935, the Conference no longer ordained special elders.

Though there was debate about the precise nature of these various ministerial roles, there was widespread agreement on the importance of a shared ministry and of shared leadership.

*Many Mennonite Brethren churches participated in inter-denominational revival meetings. Pictured here is the audience for a George R. Brunk revival meeting in Chilliwack, British Columbia, in 1958.*  
*(CMBS Fresno)*

Mennonite Brethren congregations thought of themselves as brotherhoods, and while recognizing the need for good leaders, they were convinced that the Bible was the sole authority for faith and practice within the church. “What does the Word say?” was the question most frequently posed when issues arose within the congregation. A model of shared leadership was understood to protect the congregation from the singular influence of any one leader. Gradually, a system of church organization developed that relied on an elected church council that met and gave leadership to the congregation, made decisions on matters of church discipline, and addressed theological concerns. Congregations met in regular business sessions to hear reports, elect deacons and council members, and also to discuss issues related to church governance, discipline, theological direction and mission. As a reminder that congregations were dependent on God for their well-being, they regularly set aside the first week in January as a special time of prayer.

The vast open territories of the Canadian and American West, and the diversity of those who were settling there, were a challenge to people used to living in tightly-knit ethnic and family



*A Sunday school class in Mountain Lake, Minnesota, date unknown. The teacher is Anna Hiebert.*

*(CMBS Fresno)*

groups. Some from Mennonite Brethren backgrounds chose to join other denominational groups such as the Baptists or Seventh-day Adventists. Others formed small house fellowships and looked to the day when they could establish a formal congregation. The Conference frequently sponsored preaching tours by established ministers for those living at considerable distance from the main Mennonite Brethren settlements. A visit from these teams of traveling ministers were occasions for weddings and baptisms, as well as the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Over time, the practice of special preaching services spread to all the congregations. A gifted minister or a Bible teacher from one of the Conference schools would be invited to give a series of sermons and congregations would gather together in meetings that were part Bible study and part revival service. Meetings such as these were occasions to see the Holy Spirit at work convicting sinners of their need for salvation, or feuding church members of their need for reconciliation. In addition, the



practice of inviting teachers or ministers from within the Conference helped to nurture theological identity and unity, a particularly important issue given the far-flung nature of the churches and the diversity of theological emphases to be found in Canada and the United States.

From the beginning, Mennonite Brethren church members have had a passion for mission and evangelism, and the support of mission activity has been the impetus for many gatherings within the congregation. As an alternative to the celebration of Independence Day on July 4 in the United States, congregations were encouraged to hold mission festivals, thereby celebrating the freedom offered to all through belief in Christ Jesus. More than just preaching services, some of these early festivals quickly grew to include picnics and mission sales which auctioned off the handiwork of women in the church. The celebratory aspect of these events with their fellowship meals, missionary preaching and the good-natured competition of the auction, proved an attractive alternative to traditional Fourth of July celebrations. The practice of holding a church picnic on that date lasted for many years in some locations. Mission sales also became an annual event in many congregations, though not all of them were held on July 4. The tradition of auctioning off homemade goods as a way to raise money for missions dates back at least to the 1880s and lasted as late as the 1970s in some congregations. A few church leaders were unsure of the wisdom of these sales, fearing that the competitive nature of the auction was not suitable for mission fundraising, but these voices were generally drowned out by the determination of women to participate in the work of the Conference, the enjoyment of those participating in the events and the success of the events in raising considerable monies for missions!

*Sunday school class at  
Swift Current,  
Saskatchewan, ca. 1950s.  
(CMBS Winnipeg)*



*Quilting groups, such as this one in Harvey, North Dakota, have provided Mennonite Brethren women an opportunity to express their creativity while also raising funds for mission and relief projects.*

*(CMBS Hillsboro)*

with its bountiful menu (a menu which might vary from congregation to congregation but was always the same from year to year), the harvest-theme decorations, the exotic displays of goods brought back from the mission field, all lent an air of excitement to the festival. Ritual celebrations such as these nurtured an ongoing interest in missions and spurred the joint work of the Conference mission agency. They also served to gather the local congregation together in

Nearly all congregations held an annual thanksgiving festival in the fall and these became mission events, too. The Harvest Thanksgiving Mission Festival, as it came to be known in many churches, was another occasion to combine fellowship, inspiration and giving for missions. Missionaries home on furlough were in great demand for these occasions, and their stories of work among the peoples of Africa, India and China held their audiences enthralled, particularly once electricity made possible the use of pictures and slide projectors.

The shared thanksgiving meal



*Baptism at Borden, Saskatchewan, ca. 1950s. Nick Willms is the officiating minister. (CMBS Winnipeg)*



*Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church, Hillsboro, Kansas, Sunday school class, ca. 1917.*  
(CMBS Hillsboro)

celebration of God's physical provisions and reminded people of their responsibility to share with others in need.

Mission interest and support were also a motivating factor in the development of local mission societies. The earliest societies provided occasions for fellowship for both men and women who gathered together at someone's farmstead. While the women sewed, the men would meet for Bible study and prayer. As cars replaced horses and buggies these meetings were increasingly made up of women only and gradually became formally organized. From the beginning, these mission societies were influential in both the nurturing of mission awareness and support, and in the provision of goods and monies for support of missionaries. Donations from women's missionary societies appear in Conference minutes as early as 1881 and throughout the life of the Conference it has been rare for any congregation to be without a women's society of some kind. Often referred to as simply the Sewing Circle, or the Ladies Aid, or in many congregations as the Women's Missionary Service, these societies were an integral part of congregational life. Many congregations had several; as younger

## Low German

Even before adopting the English language in the twentieth century, Mennonite Brethren were a "bilingual" people. While the language of church and school was German (often called "High German"), their language of everyday life was *Plautdietsch*, or "Low German."

*Plautdietsch* was the language generally spoken in the Vistula Delta region of Poland where Mennonites first migrated from the Netherlands in the 1530s. Because *Plautdietsch* was very similar to Dutch, it was fairly easy for these first migrants to adopt this new language. As other Mennonites came to Poland from other parts of Europe, they generally also adopted *Plautdietsch* as their daily language.

Though once an official language of politics and commerce, *Plautdietsch* had already ceased to be a written language by the time Mennonites adopted it. When Mennonites spoke among themselves, they did so in *Plautdietsch*; but when they wrote, read or worshiped, they did so in "High German."

*Plautdietsch* thus tended to be a "common" and even "earthy" language, concerned mainly with the stuff of everyday life. It did not generally have words for abstract concepts and theology, which were most often expressed in German.

From Poland, Mennonites carried *Plautdietsch* with them to South Russia and later to new homes in North and South America. Today, the dialect is still heard in many Mennonite Brethren communities. In the United States it is limited mostly to older community members, and is close to dying out there. It remains more common in Canada and South America, where the influx of *Plautdietsch* speakers from Russia in the 1940s has kept the language alive. There also has been a renewed effort to document and preserve the language, particularly in Canada. *Plautdietsch* today can more easily be found in written form than was formerly the case. The creation of *Plautdietsch* dictionaries and published collections of stories, sayings and poems offer hope that this unique language will survive in some form even as the number of people who speak it declines.

women began to be active in church work, they would often start a new group. Their projects ranged widely; they helped furnish new church buildings, outfitted missionary families, aided city mission projects, helped provide for those involved in alternative service during times of war, and engaged in numerous fund-raising projects in order to contribute money to missions. But beyond the money raised for projects, these women's organizations served as places to gather and share the concerns of the members' lives, a particularly important aspect when Mennonite Brethren congregations were primarily rural and women often lived at some distance from each other. Meetings fostered a sense of community and shared purpose and provided ways for women to engage in the work of the church. Societies helped women develop leadership skills as they organized and ran their meetings, managed budgets, studied the Bible together, and participated in prayer services.

Women's missionary societies were not the only specialized groups that developed within congregations. Young people's associations also became widely popular throughout the Conference. The earliest groups appear to have been modeled after the Christian Endeavor societies that were popular in North America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They seem to have sprung up under private sponsorship but gradually moved to church sponsorship. Often meeting on Sunday afternoon before the evening service, these young people's societies encouraged Bible verse memorization, devotional study of the Bible, singing and Christian fellowship. They provided opportunities to address the special concerns of young people, though "young" was a designation with wide boundaries and often included both single and married adults from their late teens to late thirties. Gradually, these meetings were incorporated into the regular program of Sunday evening

*Church picnic,  
Springfield KMB  
Church, Marion  
County, Kansas, ca.  
1918. (CMBS Fresno)*



## The Christmas Program



*Participants in the children's Christmas program at Butler Avenue MB Church, Fresno, California, ca. 1980s.*  
*(CMBS Fresno)*

The evening of December 24 was an important event in the life of every Mennonite Brethren congregation. This was the night of the children's Christmas program, in which all children from pre-school through the elementary grades participated by re-enacting the nativity story, singing songs, or individually reciting a "piece." The event usually began with the youngest children, proceeding through the grade levels until the oldest children concluded the program.

The evening always ended with the distribution of the *Weihnacht's Tüte*, or "Christmas bags," to each child who participated in the program. The tradition of distributing brown paper bags full of Christmas treats was already practiced by Mennonite Brethren churches in Russia, and continues in many congregations even today. The contents of these bags has remained remarkably consistent over the years—an orange or perhaps an apple, hard candy, and peanuts still in their shells. Though children were typically instructed not to open their *Tüte* until they got home, many church custodians over the decades likely found themselves sweeping up peanut shells from the church floor in the days following Christmas.

worship services and given the name “Christian Endeavor.” One or two Sundays a month the evening service would be given over to the Christian Endeavor meeting. These popular services were a bit like a variety show—someone might read or recite a poem or a passage of scripture, there would be small musical groups such as trios or quartets, church members who played musical instruments might favor the congregation with a special song, and the congregational singing often included popular gospel songs and choruses.

Strongly conversionist groups such as the Mennonite Brethren have taken seriously their responsibility to nurture and pass on an active faith in Jesus Christ, and young people’s societies were places where this could happen. Like the women’s groups, these young peoples’ societies were an important part of leadership development within the local congregation and helped assimilate young people into adult roles within the church. Christian Endeavor meetings provided places for a young person to practice preaching or praying aloud, and to polish and display musical skills. In addition to concerns for the spiritual well-being of their young people, congregations were eager



*Sunday School picnic on the Ewert farm near Coaldale, Alberta, ca. 1930s. (CMBS Winnipeg)*

to have young people marry within the church and these early societies provided opportunities for young men and women to meet each other and socialize.

As Christian Endeavor meetings gradually evolved into a regular Sunday evening service some congregations began to look for new ways to minister to their youth, particularly since many young people felt more at home with the English language than the German and, until World War II, most services were still conducted primarily in German. In the 1930s and 1940s, many began to establish more narrowly defined Youth Fellowships with programs geared specifically for teens and young adults. Focusing on Christian fellowship, Bible study and prayer, these groups were the forerunners of today’s MBY (Mennonite Brethren Youth) groups. During the next decades, the increasing mobility of American and Canadian youth, as well as the growing youth culture in the wider society, frequently challenged congregations to provide creative ways of reaching and keeping their young people.

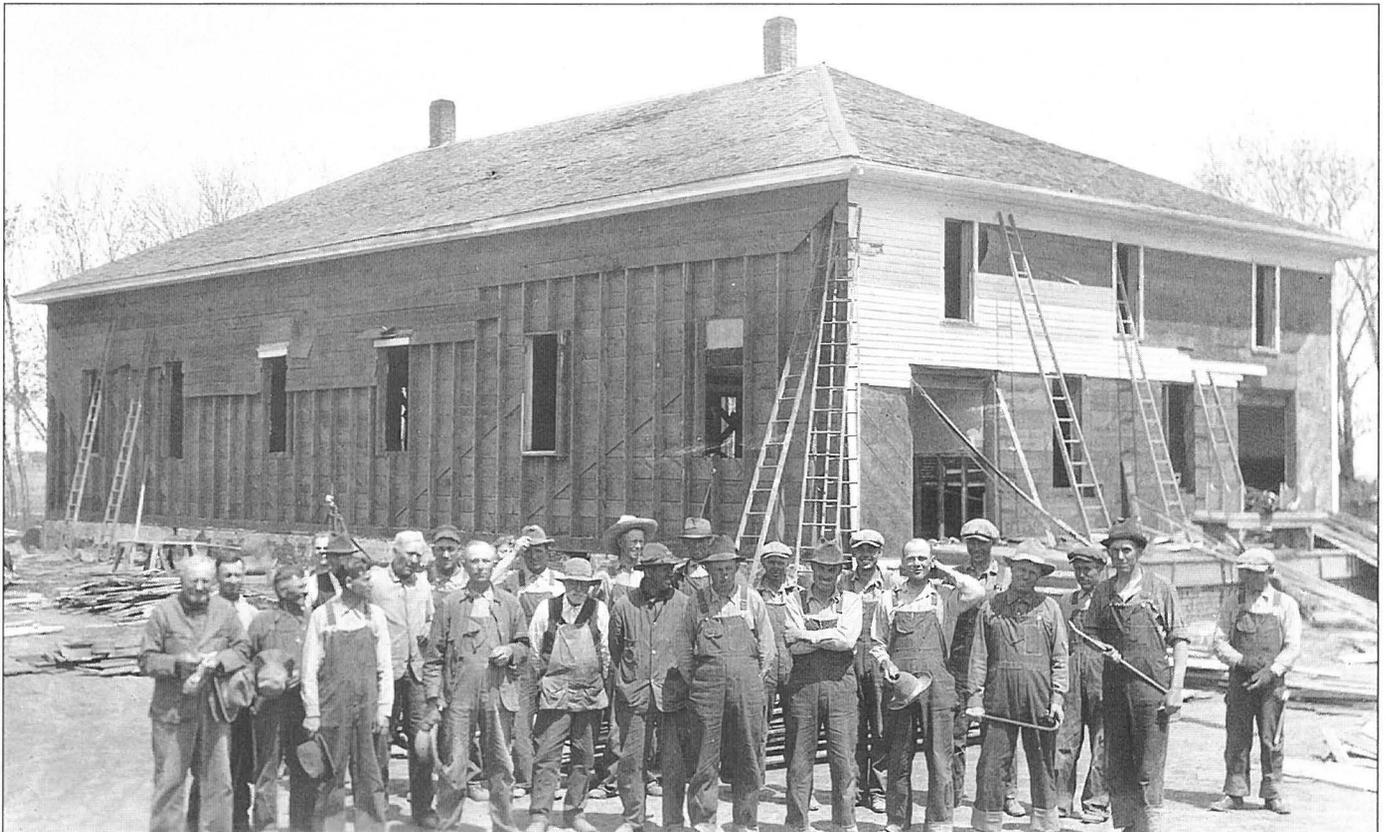
From the beginning, Christian education was an important part of congregational life. The importance of knowing what the Bible says, and believing it, spurred the development of Sunday



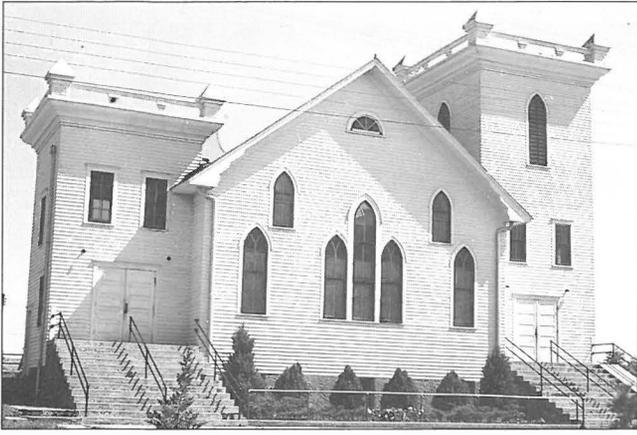
*Representatives of the Pacific District Conference Women's Missionary Service present a donation to Mennonite Brethren Board of Foreign Missions Secretary-Treasurer A.E. Janzen in 1955. Left to right: Maria Litke, Sophie Enns, A.E. Janzen, Lydia Martens, Marie Leppke. (CMBS Fresno)*

school classes for all ages as a wide range of biblical and topical studies were developed for adults as well as children. Adult classes, in particular, became a significant way to nurture a sense of community among church members. Many classes met together for years, sharing and praying together, as well as socializing outside of the classroom. An annual Christmas program put on by the children's Sunday school department also became a tradition in many Mennonite Brethren congregations. Often held on Christmas Eve, the programs were a mix of songs, recitations and a retelling of the Christmas story. The packed sanctuary full of proud parents and grandparents, the anticipation of Christmas packages waiting at home and the nervousness of having to say a Christmas piece were all a part of the excitement of the evening. In the late spring or summer many congregations celebrated the activi-

ties of the Sunday school department with an annual picnic where the three-legged race, relays, softball and volleyball games provided activities for all ages.



*Volunteers dismantling the old country church at Henderson, Nebraska, 1926. (CMBS Fresno)*



*Many Mennonite congregations during the early 20th century built meeting houses with imposing, squared towers. Variations on this theme can be seen in the buildings at Buhler, Kansas (upper left); East Chilliwack, B.C. (upper right); Bingham Lake, Minnesota (middle); and Elm Creek, Manitoba (bottom). (CMBS Fresno)*



For many years, Wednesday nights had been the other church night. Wednesdays had traditionally been set aside for congregational prayer meetings, and so it was natural to add choir practice and special club programs for children on this night. Boy's Brigade, Pioneer Girl's and AWANA programs, and MBY meetings meant something for everyone and many congregations found their facilities stretched to maximum capacity on Wednesday evenings. The increasing segmentation of ages and interests required a host of volunteers, and increasingly, specialized staff. During the later part of the twentieth century, some congregations found themselves returning to a multiple ministry model, though on a paid, professional basis as youth pastors, music ministers, children's ministers and pastoral care staff were added. Large programs often meant more space needs, and many congregations built gyms or family life centers. Facilities and specialized programs were seen as necessary in order to effectively minister to congregations whose members were increasingly involved in the activities of the wider society. At the same time, this move toward multiple ministries directed at all ages and stages of life continued to be informed by an understanding of the local congregation as the central institution for both the social and religious life of its members.

As Mennonite Brethren congregations became increasingly urban, they found themselves having to become more intentional about nurturing the community aspect of the congregational life. Small fellowship groups, Sunday potlucks and even Wednesday night suppers were initiated as ways to encourage fellowship among members. With more women entering the workforce, many sewing circles struggled to stay active. New ministries with more specialized focus on the needs of women were begun. Programs for stay-at-home moms and Bible study groups often replaced the traditional mission-focused sewing circles. Many congregations also began to focus on the needs of senior members and began to sponsor special activities for this age group. Men's breakfast and Bible study groups, family activity nights, church retreats and camp-outs were other ways of gathering church members for fellowship and inspiration.

The mission emphasis that has been so present among Mennonite Brethren has also expressed itself in the outreach ministries of local congregations. Early on some congregations began specialized mission work to other minority ethnic groups, establishing small satellite congregations or Sunday school programs. During the 1940s and 1950s, some congregations used their choirs and music groups to advantage by establishing radio ministries while those in urban areas often participated in city evangelism crusades. A variety of evangelism programs were undertaken. Vacation Bible Schools became popular summer ministries aimed at children, while more elaborate Christmas productions and winter sweetheart banquets were aimed at adults. In more recent years, many congregations have found the Alpha program to be a helpful format for introducing friends and neighbors to the gospel and for incorporating them into the local church.

The tightly-knit community life of the congregation has often proven to be both the strength and weakness of Mennonite Brethren congregations. Its strength has been found in the strong sense of identity and belonging, the support and pastoral care for those within its circle, and the joy of shared vision and mission. At the same time, that strong sense of identity has sometimes

## The Feet-washing Ceremony

When feet-washing was observed in the Mennonite Brethren Church in Henderson [Nebraska], it was always a part of the regular communion service. It occurred about twice a year.

This was the order of its observance: Because our communion services always ended with the exchange of the kiss of fellowship, the men and women were segregated for the service. It was appropriate, then, that they remained so for the washing of feet. After the observance of the Lord's Supper, the deacons who were serving brought in a number of towels and large basins of water, placing them on the floor by the front pew. In the meantime, the participants prepared for the washing. Neighbor asked neighbor for the privilege of washing his feet, each bared both feet, and in his turn walked down to the front of the church, where each washed the other's feet, dried them with the towel, and kissed him on his cheek. If there had been any hard feelings or differences between the two before, they were privately confessed at this time, and fellowship and love were restored. After each participant had taken his turn, the minister closed the service with a brief word bearing on the occasion, and the congregation sang the hymn, "Blest be the Tie that Binds," with joined hands.

—*Ferne Hiebert*

served as a barrier to those trying to break into the circle, or has seemed too confining to those most assimilated into North American society. Questions of church discipline during the early years of the conference often focused on issues of separation from the surrounding culture, even when that separation was from others who called themselves Christians. Both world wars forced congregations to struggle with questions of national loyalty, language and ethnic culture, as well as what it means to continue as a witness to peace. In mid-century, Canadian churches were faced with the challenge of assimilating another wave of Mennonite Brethren immigrants from South America and Russia just when the language transition from German to English was almost accomplished. Throughout Canada and the United States, congregations have struggled to make the transition from ethnic enclaves to more inclusive and diverse congregations and the question of what it means to be Mennonite Brethren has taken on new importance with the incorporation of other language groups such as the French, Chinese, Spanish, Koreans and Slavs, into the larger Conference. Congregations have struggled to separate theological identity from ethnic identity even as they tried to welcome and incorporate newcomers. Many congregations are engaged in a new transition as traditional worship formats give way to more contemporary styles of music and practice. Yet the mission emphasis that lies at the center of Mennonite Brethren congregations has given strong motivation to succeed at these challenges. In addition, the commitment to live together as a community of faith and to follow after our Lord in a life of obedient discipleship, continues to provide vision for Mennonite Brethren congregations.