

Origins of the Pacific District Conference

The members of the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church looked forward to Sunday, October 13, 1912 with a sense of both anticipation and anxiety. Anticipation, because this was to be the opening day of the first meeting of delegates from all California Mennonite Brethren churches, the new Pacific District Conference.¹ Anxiety, because no one was entirely sure how many people would be willing to bear the cost and difficulty of such a trip. The Mennonite Brethren fellowship in 1912 stretched from Lodi in the Sacramento Valley all the way to Escondido, just north of San Diego—a distance of almost 500 miles. Reedley, located roughly in the center for this area, was an ideal location for such a gathering, but some doubt still remained as to how many delegates and visitors would actually come.

It soon became clear that any such fears were unfounded. Some 50 guests had already arrived by early Sunday, and more continued to arrive after them. As the participants gathered for the opening Festival Sunday meeting, the church building at 14th and L streets soon filled to overflowing—so full that the children were asked to go outside in order to make room for the guests. It was estimated that around 1,000 persons attended the event, the largest gathering ever of Mennonite Brethren on the west coast.²

John H. Thiessen and Rev. Abraham Buhler of Reedley opened the conference with scripture readings and prayers. Two guests, Abraham Richert of Corn, Oklahoma and H.S. Voth of Dallas, Oregon, then preached the opening sermons of the conference. Following an offering (\$189.04) and a choir number, the congregation retired for the noon meal. An afternoon *sängerfest* (song festival) and an evening young people's meeting completed the first day of the conference.

The next morning the actual business sessions of the conference began. The delegates were first registered: 10 from Escondido, 3 from Bakersfield, 7 from Rosedale, 21 from Reedley, 1 from Fairmead and 2 from Lodi. This was followed by the election of officers. Johann Berg (Reedley) was elected chairman, Abraham Buhler (Reedley) chosen as vice-chairman, Peter Richert (Reedley) became the conference secretary, and W.F. Ewert (Escondido) was elected assistant secretary.

The morning session was completed by a discussion of home missions, followed by an afternoon *sängerfest* and two evening sermons. Home missions discussion was continued Tuesday morning. Business concerning foreign missions, publication and education completed the business sessions Tuesday afternoon. As is still often the case today, the delegates found themselves short on time and so Abraham

Buhler's devotional during the Tuesday afternoon session was omitted. Despite the lateness of the hour, a communion service followed the business sessions. After the evening meal, Johann Berg presented the closing sermon, H.S. Voth offered the benediction, and the first meeting of the Pacific District Conference came to a close.

This first session of the PDC represents one of a long series of organizational decisions made by the Mennonite Brethren Church during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the conference grew larger and spread out over a larger geographical area, it became evident that more complex structures were needed to carry out the mission of the conference.

The MB churches in North America first met as a conference in September 1878 at Hamilton County, Nebraska. This was considered an unofficial conference, however, and it was not until the following year that the first actual General Conference sessions took place in York County, Nebraska. The General Conference continued to meet on an annual basis until 1909, when they voted to meet only triennially.

Johann Berg: Chairman of the PDC, 1912





Abraham Buhler: Vice-Chairman of the PDC, 1912

At the General Conference sessions of 1902, held at Washita County, Oklahoma, the first discussion took place concerning the possibility of dividing the General Conference into smaller units and meeting on a less regular basis. Several delegates from the Canadian churches noted that November was an inappropriate time of year for them to attend annual conferences, presumably because of the potential for bad weather. They also pointed out that the distance between the northern and southern ends of the conference was too great for annual trips.

This question was not resolved at the 1902 conference; in fact it would occupy the delegates' attention for the next seven annual conferences before a workable agreement could be reached. Most delegates agreed that the general conference should become a triennial event, with district conferences meeting on an annual basis. But how should these districts be arranged? One proposal, put forth at the 1903 conference in Hamilton County, Nebraska, called for the creation of two district conferences. The first would consist of all United States churches except those in North Dakota; the second would be comprised of all Canadian churches plus North Dakota.³ A more elaborate scheme was presented to the 1905 conference at the Ebenfeld Church in Hillsboro, Kansas. Under this proposal, the conference would be divided into five districts: 1) Oklahoma; 2) Kansas; 3) Nebraska and Colorado; 4) Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota; 5) Canada. The churches in Oregon and California were given the option of joining whichever conference they chose.⁴

Finally, in 1909 at Henderson, Nebraska, an agreement

was reached. A.L. Schellenberg, prominent newspaper editor from Kansas, moved that three district conferences be established. The Southern District would consist of Oklahoma, Kansas and Escondido, California; the Middle District would be comprised of Nebraska, Colorado, North and South Dakota, Minnesota, Oregon and Michigan; the Northern District would include Canada and Rosehill, North Dakota. The other churches in California were given the option of choosing either the Southern or Middle Districts.⁵ This resolution received the approval of the delegates, and the General Conference adjourned until 1912.

It quickly became evident that while this arrangement might satisfy the needs of the churches in the heartland, it was not suitable for those few small congregations on the west coast. Only one delegate from California (Peter Richert of Bakersfield) was present at the first Southern District Conference at Buhler, Kansas in 1910, and no Oregon delegates were able to make the long journey to attend the first Middle District Conference at Bingham Lake, Minnesota that same year. In response to this situation, the Reedley Church drafted a letter to the Southern District Conference, which was presented at the 1911 conference in Corn, Oklahoma. It read in part:

"Since we here in the West stand alone, and since it is almost impossible to attend conferences, and since the conference is not very well acquainted with our situation, we here at Reedley have wondered whether it would not be... better if we would organize all the little churches such as Reedley, Bakersfield, Rosedale and Escondido in California, and Dallas and Portland in Oregon, into a district conference.... The churches here are so alone and without contact from the eastern churches and among themselves that we fear our fellowship may be lost. We fear especially for our young people who hardly know a conference."⁶

New Books of Historical & Contemporary Interest...

- *Three Mennonite Poets*, Jean Janzen, Yorifumi Yaguchi, and David Waltner-Toews; \$13.95 cloth, \$8.95 paper
- *The Story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church*, C. F. Plett; \$12.00 paper

Available from:

PACIFIC BOOKSHOP

1717 S. Chestnut Ave., Fresno, CA 93702

Add 10% for tax and shipping.

LOOK FOR OUR DISPLAY TABLE
AT THE ANNUAL MEETING IN MAY.

The *Bulletin* is an occasional publication of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast, 4824 E. Butler, Fresno, CA 93727-5097. Editor: Kevin Enns-Rempel

The Southern District regretfully accepted this petition, noting that while they would like to share a district conference with the western churches, they understood that the work of the conference could better be carried out in this new way, and wished them God's blessing. The Oregon churches, since they were part of the Middle District, were not included in this arrangement, but planned to raise the same issue with their own conference.⁷

On November 19 and 20, 1911, a few weeks after receiving approval for their new undertaking, members from several California MB churches gathered together at the Rosedale church for an informal first session of the Pacific District Conference. From the report in *Zionsbote*,⁸ it appears that little if any actual conference business was conducted at these meetings, though several sermons on various topics were presented to those gathered there. J.H. Lohrenz asserts that officers were elected at these meetings: Abraham Schellenberg of Escondido (Chairman), Abraham Buhler of Reedley (Vice-Chairman), and Heinrich Kohfeld of Rosedale (Secretary).⁹ Lohrenz considers this meeting to have been the first Pacific District Conference session, though the conference itself counts 1912 as the first official conference.¹⁰

Many things have changed in the 75 years since those first delegates crowded into the Reedley MB Church. The conference is no longer small and isolated—today it is the largest Mennonite Brethren district conference in the United States, with 43 churches spread across Washington, Oregon, California and Arizona. A great number of institutions and programs have been created and sustained by the conference, each helping to advance the work of God's kingdom in their own way. Yet all of these developments owe their existence in part to that small group of people who gathered in 1912. It is fitting that we gather this November to remember and celebrate the work they began.

—Kevin Enns-Rempel

¹ Dallas and Portland, Oregon did not join the Pacific District until 1913.

² Pacific District Conference (hereafter PDC) minutes, Reedley, California, October 14-15, 1912, p. 54.

³ General Conference minutes, October 26-28, 1903, Hamilton County, Nebraska, pp. 8-9.

⁴ General Conference minutes, Ebenfeld Church, Hillsboro, Kansas, November 13-15, 1905, pp. 15-16.

⁵ General Conference minutes, November 22-24, 1909, Henderson, Nebraska, p. 10. All California congregations chose to join the Southern District.

⁶ Southern District Conference minutes, Corn, Oklahoma, November 6-7, 1911, p. 16.

⁷ No documentation of a discussion concerning the Oregon churches' relationship to the new Pacific District Conference is to be found in the yearbooks of the Middle District Conference. However, by 1913 the Oregon churches had become a part of the new conference.

⁸ *Zionsbote* XXVII (December 13, 1911), p. 2.

⁹ John H. Lohrenz, *The Mennonite Brethren Church*. (Hillsboro: Board of Foreign Missions, 1950), p. 166.

¹⁰ The minutes of the Pacific District Conferences, 1912-1914, are numbered 2-4, indicating that 1911 was the first conference. In 1915, however, the numbering was readjusted to indicate that 1912 was actually the first conference.

Why Join the Society?

Time races by so quickly. Every day some of the history that we should save is lost. Part of our job as an Historical Society is to save as much as we can for future generations. The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies also plays an important role in this task, but its funds and resources are limited.

Over the years our Society has helped in various ways to increase the effectiveness of the Center and the availability of materials there. We have bound over 70 years worth of the periodical *Zionsbote*. We have purchased binding equipment. We have restored a valuable Russian Mennonite map. We have purchased copies of Prussian Mennonite documents. We have published a newsletter to help keep you informed of these and other activities. And this year we will present a very special and unusual gift to the Center at our annual dinner. The Society is an organization worthy of your support.

We want to continue our efforts, but we can do this only as we all work together. Without your support, these projects cannot be continued. A single issue of the newsletter alone requires the financial support of 25 family memberships. Won't you join this year? Mail your membership check today or sign up at the annual dinner. Our fees are still the same: \$25.00 for a family; \$12.50 for an individual; and \$7.50 for a full-time student. We look forward to hearing from you.

Book Review

My Harp Has Turned to Mourning

by Al Reimer

This sweeping historical novel unveils the crucial years of 1905 to 1924 in the Mennonite colonies of central Ukraine. The facts many of us have heard and read about come alive in this excellently written novel. They come alive and then brand themselves into the memory to stay.

The story centers around Wilhelm Fast, a Mennonite farmer's son, who dreams of becoming an artist, but whose studies are interrupted by war. He falls in love with Clara Bock, daughter of wealthy Mennonite industrialists. Wilhelm's brother, unlike Wilhelm who does noncombative service, joins the army and finally aids Mahkno, the evil anarchist leader, in his ravages against the Mennonites.

Threaded throughout the narrative are the actions and memories of two church leaders, Eerdman Lepp, an itinerant preacher, and Daniel Fast, who longs for the pure church.

Reimer not only sears our hearts with the terrors and sufferings of our people as he tells and tells, he also puts our own faces to the mirror as he asks the basic questions of what it means to be a follower of Christ. What about material progress? What about church purity? What does it mean to be separated from the world? What is required?

Reimer does not answer the painful questions, but he states them through characters and plot in such a way that we find ourselves seeing and hearing the questions with a bell-ringing clarity.

This is a novel for everyone interested in our story, the Mennonite Brethren story, as well as the broader telling of the revolutionary times in Russia. It is also a novel for everyone because it is art—superb storytelling that reaches into the deep waters of joy and sorrow which connect us to all humans of all time.

—Jean Janzen