Book Review:

One of the benefits of celebrating a conference anniversary is that it provides an obvious opportunity for reviewing the past and perhaps charting the future. In this attractive, spritely volume the authors have provided a wide range of insights into 75 years of the Pacific District Conference. Most accounts provide narrative rather than analysis, although several essays examine important trends and raise probing questions.

In sketching the early days of the conference, Kevin Enns-Rempel outlines some of the hopes and difficulties that accompanied this development. Distance from churches in the Midwest proved a major factor in the organizing of the new conference. At the same time, the quest for economic opportunity led many families to settle in scattered areas, often with eventual loss of Mennonite identity. The Martensdale fiasco rather dramatically illustrated the complexity of issues that sometimes lay behind the founding of new settlements and churches.

Readers may be surprised to read of the number of new churches that failed to attract a sufficiently large number of members. Some of the accounts suggest that economic prosperity often seemed to be at least as compelling a drive as the maintenance of MB ties. Church loyalty evidently was not to be taken for granted.

In his examination of theological trends, Edmund Janzen concludes that the conference has emphasized the Confession of Faith. Apparently, basic views have changed little during the 75 years, although culturally-conditioned practices have been modified frequently. As part of the General Conference of the MB Church, the Pacific District Conference has accepted doctrinal positions enunciated by the former.

Janzen suggests that eschatology has not figured prominently in sessions of the PDC. It might be noted, however, that a quarter century ago the conference adopted a dispensational view at variance with the official Confession. It has never been rescinded. Janzen goes on to note the various efforts the PDC has made to bring the Gospel to bear on issues such as materialism and secularism. He also comments on the significance of the peace witness, although he might have examined the unease occasioned by the Vietnam war. During one session of the PDC, remarks critical of the United States policy were expunged from the record by conference decision.

This volume demonstrates that, from its earliest days, the PDC has placed considerable emphasis upon evangelism. Henry Schmidt and John Unger have sketched the vital role of “Home Missions.” Several accounts refer to work among the Japanese; the reader is left wondering what happened to these efforts. Did relocation of the Japanese during the war stop such work permanently? Church-planting efforts among the Hispanics, as Juan Martinez relates, have had considerable success. For this, Arnold and Ann Schlichting are especially recognized. Martinez raises some probing questions about how the PDC might recognize the cultural distinctives of the Hispanic community.

Education has been another strong emphasis in the PDC. Paul Toews has presented an overview of how, from its earliest days, the conference has supported various forms of religious education. After several groups tried unsuccessfully to establish such schools, the Reedley congregation built its own “Bible School.” Later, other churches joined, and the institution became known as Immanuel High School. Elsewhere, several other Bible schools and academies arose, although they were usually short-lived. In 1944 a major effort culminated in the founding of the Pacific Bible Institute, which later became Fresno Pacific College. The building of the new school reflected uneasiness about perceived inadequate biblical fidelity in some other MB schools. Evangelism and pietism figured prominently in the distinctives of the new school; controlled, directed education was seen as a safeguard against suspect theological and cultural trends.

The PDC has also endeavored to express its social conscience. The Gospel cannot be held in a vacuum, but must inform the believer in responding to a wide array of social needs. Agencies such as the Mennonite Central Committee, the Committee of Welfare and Public Relations, Civilian Public Service, Christian Service, Kings View Hospital, Mennonite Disaster Service and others have provided an avenue for expressing Christian belief and concern. Arthur Jost has highlighted some of the PDC’s achievements in this area.

Few aspects of life in the PDC have undergone so dramatic a change as has the role of women. Marilyn Peters demonstrates that women in the PDC have always been prominent in missions, church education, etc., but only in the last two decades has the conference recognized leadership qualities in women. Today, increasingly large numbers are being elected to positions of leadership; some have been appointed to pastoral positions.

In his survey of music in the PDC, Larry Warkentin provides a glimpse of the kind of singing and instrumental music that expressed the faith of the church. It would be interesting to see how changes in hymnals reflected changes in theology. Youth ministries are portrayed by Dan Neufeld and David Wiebe.

The editorial committee is to be congratulated for having compiled this informative overview. Articles present a good summary of many important events that have given meaning to the past 75 years. There is, however, an evident desire to highlight achievements; failures, tensions, problems are kept in the background. But then, anniversaries are designed for celebration. Most of us prefer to be reminded of victories, not defeats.

—Peter J. Klassen

This book is available for purchase through the Historical Society. See the response form in this issue for further information.