During the decades of the 1920s through the 1940s, one of the more popular evangelists in the Pacific District Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (PDC) was Jacob D. Hofer. But Hofer, who went by the initials “J.D.,” played a much larger role in conference and congregational leadership during these years. He was also a pioneer in urban church planting in the Los Angeles area, assumed pastoral responsibilities at the Reedley, Rosedale and Fresno (today Bethany) congregations, and held important conference offices. Hofer was also a major force behind the establishment of Pacific Bible Institute in Fresno.

Yet Hofer’s ministry in the PDC was at times a difficult one. The personal idiosyncrasies of his confident yet confrontational style of leadership, accusations of Pentecostalism, and the unusual circumstances confronting him in Fresno in the mid-1940s, all served to trouble him. These problems reached a climax in 1947 when the Fresno Mennonite Brethren Church dismissed him as pastor and removed him from membership there. Hofer became a shepherd without a flock.

Jacob D. Hofer brings together in one life the offices of evangelist and minister, educator, urban church planter and conference leader. Hofer’s life story shows the impact of increasing professionalization on MB pastors and congregations, and the way in which Pentecostalism affected many congregations. His life exhibits contemporary relevance by revealing the potential volatility of worship style innovations.

Jacob D. Hofer was born in 1889 near Freeman, South Dakota to Paul P. and Margaretha Hofer. After his father’s death in 1891, his mother married John L. Hofer. In South Dakota Jacob D. Hofer grew up among the non-communal Prairielev Hutterites. The Prairielev, or “Hutters,” were those Hutterites who decided to live “on the prairie,” on privately-owned homesteads instead of establishing agricultural collectives like their communal relatives.

When the Hutterites moved from Ukrainian Russia to Dakota Territory in the 1870s only one-third of the members decided to live communally. The other two-thirds (some 822 individuals according to the 1880 census) had no interest in reviving Christian communism. Instead they settled on individual farms like other Dakota immigrants. Among these non-communal settlers was the family of which J.D. Hofer was a part.

The Hutterites established independent churches to maintain their unique understanding of Hutterian teaching. They continued to read the seventeenth-century Lehren (recognized as divinely inspired interpretations of the Bible), sing traditional hymns, dress simply and converse in the Austrian Hutterisch dialect.

Though J.D. Hofer’s primary circle of early acquaintances were Hutters, he attended high school at Freeman Academy. There one found an ethnic mixture that included many Low German and Swiss Mennonite students. He then worked on the “home place” until 1910 when his father moved the entire family to California along with the John Z. Kleinsasser clan. Most of these settlers formed the nucleus of the Zion Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (KMB) Church near Dinuba, a congregation that became part of the Mennonite Brethren Conference in 1960.

Unlike other members of the “Kleinsasser Colony” group, all forty-eight of whom were interrelated, John L. Hofer had a unique background. He was born in South Dakota, had a family background of Hutterites and was a part of the Krimmer Hutterites. He also had a strong German background, which influenced his later ministry. He was a member of the KMB Church and a part of the Hutterite community, which was a significant part of his life. He was also a part of the Krimmer Hutterites, which was a unique background for an Mennonite umpire. He was a part of the Krimmer Hutterites, which was a unique background for an Mennonite umpire.
Hofer did not accept the evangelical traditions of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, with their emphasis on dramatic salvation experiences and baptism by forward immersion. The KMB Hutters tended to believe their relatives were not “saved,” a view that seemed both ridiculous and arrogant to most Hutters who remained in the traditional congregations. The Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, nonetheless, succeeded in convincing many Hutters to leave the independent churches that still maintained customary forms of belief and worship. Many Hutter families split apart in the process.

John L. Hofer refused to accept the fact that he would have to be rebaptized to join the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren. He took his family instead to Reedley’s First Mennonite Church, a congregation affiliated with the General Conference Mennonite Church.

Jacob D. Hofer did not stay at First Mennonite very long, however. In 1911, while attending a Salvation Army street meeting in the area, he was struck by the fact that he had not experienced the same kind of Christianity “from the heart” proclaimed in that setting. The churches Hofer was raised in had not emphasized this aspect of Christianity. He asked himself, “what have those people got that I haven’t got?” Later he went forward at a revival service at the Zion KMB Church. On March 19, 1911, J.D. Hofer was baptized and formally joined the Zion Church. Hofer now worshipped with several relatives who had experienced similar forms of “salvation.” After the death of his father, J.D.’s mother, Margaretha, was also rebaptized and joined the Zion congregation.

In late 1911 Hofer’s life was transformed in a different way through marriage to Agnes Fast, a sister of John Z. Klein-sasser’s second wife, Lena. Agnes was ethnically Low German and inter-ethnic marriages such as this were not common at the time. Agnes thus had some difficulty relating to the Hutterisch relatives as did J.D. with his Low German kin.

Neither the Low German Mennonite nor the Hutterite communities initially found this intermix of cultures smooth, though they became increasingly widespread in the Reedley-Dinuba area as the century progressed. Analysis of Zion Church records concerning the name “Hofer” showed that, from 1911 to 1990, about one-third of the Hoffers married other Hutters. Another one-third married Low German Mennonites. The final third married outside these ethnic communities. It is noteworthy, however, that all of the Hutter/Hutter marriages took place before the year 1940.

Jacob and Agnes Hofer established a household on a farm near Dinuba and began actively seeking God’s direction concerning their collective futures. Jacob transferred his membership to the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church, Agnes’ home congregation, though he was apparently the only Hutterite in that assemblage. In 1921, after operating a family farm for ten years, Hofer decided to continue his education at the interdenomina
tional and evangelical Bible Institute of Los Angeles (Biola), which many Mennonite Brethren were attending during the 1920s and 1930s. Some say that although he wanted to succeed as a farmer, he was not very good at it. Hofer’s mind was evidently more focused on supernatural matters. One individual noted that he once even ran a tractor into a ditch because he was so deep in thought. Friends and relatives often told Hofer that occurrences such as that might be signs from God that he should go into full-time ministry. Perhaps God was calling him to do something else.

The Hoffers therefore moved to the sunny climate of the Los Angeles basin. Hofer completed a two year course at Biola and became actively involved at the Los Angeles MB Church and its Lynwood Sunday School extension. He later also worked at the newly-established City Terrace Mission. Those involved in the church planting ministries encountered many unforeseen difficulties. Hofer reported, for example, that “the first rented location (in Lynwood) was too noisy because of the many trolley cars.” He also noted that baptisms took place in the ocean, in the salty waters of “Anaheim Bay.” But since it was “the Lord’s work,” these were exciting and purposeful experiences.

Hofer was ordained to the ministry in 1927 and soon became recognized as a conference evangelist. He also spent a considerable amount of time doing carpentry work to help supplement the small love offerings provided by the congregations and conference he served.

At this time West Coast Mennonite Brethren were in transition regarding ministerial selection processes and payment arrangements, moving from an unpaid, multiple lay ministry, in which church leaders were selected from within congregations, to an educated, salaried ministry, in which pastors generally were chosen from outside the congregation. Mennonite Brethren progressives insisted that it was better to have ministers who had...
They, their five sons and two daughters represent the ancestors of all later Hofers within the Hutterite-Mennonite fold. Reverend Jacob D. Hofer, for example, is a great-great-great-grandson of this progenitor, Johann Hofer. Interestingly, all of the intervening generations involved five consecutive Paul Hofers. Johann Hofer had a son Paul, born in 1751, who had a son Paul, born in 1779. He, in turn, had a son Paul, born in 1801, who had a son Paul, born in 1841. This Paul then had a son Paul, born in 1865, who was the father of Jacob D. Hofer.

In a similar fashion, all of the Hutterite descendants can be traced back to the original families who escaped to Russia. The Kleinsassers are all descended from four brothers: Johannes, Stephanus, Matthias and Joseph Kleinsasser. The Waldners find their progenitor in Joerg (born 1712) and Anna Waldner, who came to Russia with their three children. The comprehensive church records enable each family to be precisely traced to its original ancestors.

The fact that so few Hutterites survived and became the founding families of a new Hutterite community adds an additional twist to Hutterite family history. This has caused most persons with Hutterite ancestry to be descended many times from each of the “founding” families. Since only sixty-seven persons in the original families are the ancestors of many thousands of people in later generations, modern-day descendants find themselves descended over and over again from the same ancestral couple.

Since such intermarriage continues to this day among those in Hutterite colonies, they keep very careful records to avoid genetic difficulties to the extent possible. It is almost a given fact that any two people of Hutterite ancestry who marry are related to each other perhaps dozens of times. This limited “gene pool” creates definite concern and potential hazard!

Since persons of Hutterite ancestry are now commonplace within the larger Mennonite community, the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry (“GRANDMA”) maintained by the California Mennonite Historical Society already contains most information regarding Hutterite families and their history. This computerized family resource is available for public use at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in the Hiebert Library of Fresno Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary.

Alan Peters

(“Jacob D. Hofer,” continued from page 2)

not grown up in the congregations they served.

According to this line of reasoning, if a church knew a pastor too well, members might have difficulty accepting his teaching and admonition. Memories of small indiscretions from the past, family problems and youthful mistakes might all serve to limit his effectiveness. This was, however, the very reason Mennonites traditionally wanted spiritual leaders whom they really “knew,” from their own communities. It kept the leadership humble and expectations perhaps more realistic.

It is true that the traditional multiple ministry was necessary because of the unsalaried condition of each pastor. But it also represented a different, more communal, view of ecclesiastical involvement. Now a monopoly on scriptural interpretation began to pass from a variety of people in the traditional multiple ministry, to a single individual. That person was no longer expected to work full-time alongside members of the church so as to, theoretically, better understand them while securing supplemental income. The administration of church affairs became a profession and ministers were no longer ministered to, at least not from the pulpit.

Throughout his ministry, Hofer had to face the contemporary reality of this transition. He received a salary, generally served congregations in communities he did not grow up in, but still had to secure outside employment so as to provide adequately for his family since ministerial salaries were quite low.

In 1929 Hofer moved his family back to Dimuba where he temporarily returned to farming and eventually joined the Reedley MB Church ministerial team. He also conductedrevival meetings up and down the West Coast. In 1932, Hofer was called to help in a revival at the Reedley MB church that had continued into its third week, as decisions for Jesus were still being made. The nature of his deep spiritual commitment is shown by the fact that on the morning before services began Hofer went out alone into the vineyard. When he came back to the house at the end of the day he told his family that he had “conversed with God” and “humbled himself.” He was ready to preach that evening.

In 1933 J.D. was selected, via a seventy to twenty vote, as a minister in the Reedley MB Church. His assignment was to work specifically with the English preaching services, newly established “for the sake of the youth.” He also began the practice, followed throughout much of his ministerial career, of asking the church he served for two free months in his annual contract to conduct evangelistic services.

Mennonite Brethren churches of this era placed major emphasis on yearly revival services where unsaved persons were confronted with their sinful condition, “backshiders” were brought back into the fold, and all members of the church were urged to recommit their lives to the service of Jesus. Instead of calling upon their own ministers to preach at such services, congregations generally called persons designated as “evangelists” by the conference. Since these revivals sometimes went on for two weeks at a time, “until the spirit was no longer convicting people,” evangelists like J.D. Hofer had a significant amount of work to do.

These evangelistic meetings were major events in the lives of the MB Church; they were the most important social-religious occasions on the church calendar. Though some young people used these events to explore dating possibilities and other social issues, the major focus of the meetings was to convince members of the audience to fix their hearts on spiritual matters.

Evangelists possessed the ability to convince people to change their lives, to alter the way in which they related both to God and to other people. Effective evangelists brought forth radical individual transformations through hard-hitting, emotion-laden preaching. Mennonite Brethren evangelists also played an important role in establishing and maintaining connection between the scattered groups of believers in the various district conferences. Evangelists provided contact between newly-established MB congregations and the more established assemblies.
It appears that evangelists had an even more difficult time “making ends meet” than did local pastors. The work was costly. It limited the amount of time one could give to one’s family and reduced income significantly. Until Hofer made some favorable land investments in Fresno later in life, he continually struggled to eke out a living.

In 1933 Daniel C. Eitzen retired as minister of the Reedley MB Church. Hofer received significant support from some church members to replace Eitzen. In the actual congregational vote, Hofer (with 110 votes) came in second to George B. Huebert (who received 144 votes). With humility, Hofer eventually asked all members to give their full support to the Rev. Huebert. Hofer then continued to serve the congregation as a “regular preacher” until he was invited to take a senior pastoral position at the Rosedale MB Church, near Bakersfield, in 1934.

Hofer had caught the attention of the Rosedale congregation through successful revival services held several months earlier. The terms of Hofer’s annual contract included a two month leave of absence for evangelistic work, a provision that later led some members to question Hofer concerning the fulfillment of home visitation obligations.

In 1935 J.D. Hofer was receiving an annual salary of only $660. To make ends meet he thus continued in his chosen occupation of carpentry. As Hofer later put it, “I fear that to be fair to God and to myself it is necessary that I go almost every day to do carpentry work to provide for the rent, doctor, etc.”

In 1937 the Rosedale congregation did give Hofer an automobile. But personal resources were so scarce that two years later Hofer instructed the congregation that his salary and side jobs were not adequately providing for his family. The congregation responded to Hofer’s situation with an offer of $765 and Hofer stayed.

During Hofer’s tenure at Rosedale the membership of the congregation grew from fifty-five persons to 115. Hofer also became significantly involved in the work of the Pacific District Conference, holding many influential positions, including three terms as Conference Chairman. Hofer was a member of the PDC’s Executive Committee from 1932-1937 and again from 1939-1943. He served on the PDC board of Trustees from 1936-1948. Hofer also continued to lead evangelistic crusades and once commented to relatives, after returning from a trip to Oklahoma, that he could not understand why Christians in that state tolerated racial segregation.

Occasionally Rosedale records suggest occurrences of tension between Hofer and certain members of the congregation, but the social and spiritual climate seems to have been mostly positive. One individual noted that a common saying of Hofer’s was that “we are not of those who will depart from the faith.”

In 1941 Hofer resigned, feeling that he had completed his work in Rosedale. He attended classes for one semester at Portland Baptist Seminary, lived briefly in San Jose and even, at one point, moved back to Los Angeles, where he thought he had been invited to work on the construction of the new City Terrace Mennonite Brethren Church building. This job, for reasons difficult to determine, did not materialize.

During the following year Hofer crossed paths with members of an urban house church in Fresno. This group had been meeting for two years and was planning to establish a new MB congregation. In January 1942, members called Hofer to be their first evangelist. These meetings were successful enough that Hofer later received three times as many votes for the position of senior pastor as any other candidate. He accepted the pastorate of the new Fresno congregation (today known as the Bethany Mennonite Brethren Church) in April 1942.

At this same time Hofer became extensively involved in the founding of Pacific Bible Institute. Since his experience at Biola in the early 1920s, Hofer and others had expressed serious interest in establishing a Bible school in the San Joaquin Valley. Beginning in 1942 he became actively involved in fundraising and organizational work for the “Proposed Bible School Committee.” Hofer’s vision called for the creation of a two-year Bible school where high school graduates could receive formal evangelistic training. They would then be prepared to go forward as witnesses to students at secular colleges and universities where Hofer anticipated they would continue their educational experience. As Hofer noted, “we believe the mission of the school to be building churches and feeding them.”

There is much difference of opinion concerning Hofer’s specific influence on the creation and operation of PBI. Some say that he had promoted the school idea years before it became a reality. According to David L. Hofer, “That idea (for a Bible college) was in his mind years before anything was ever started.” Some MB Hutters today believe that historians have slighted Hofer’s involvement with PBI because of his subsequent difficulties in the Fresno MB Church. Others feel he has not received major recognition due to the school’s eventual movement away from the Bible Institute model he favored. It is impossible to deny, however, that Hofer spent much time working on the early PBI project.

Ironically, it was some PBI students, influenced by Pentecostalism, who stirred up trouble for Hofer at the Fresno MB Church. Despite the opposition of the PBI faculty to Pentecostal ideas, a group of students pushed for major ecclesiastical and theological changes along those lines within the congregation. These students advocated, for example, the recognition of speaking in tongues and being “slain in the spirit” as signs of the Holy Spirit’s presence and personal infusion. They wanted to worship with greater emotion and less formality. Ed Kopper, one of the leaders of this group, was Hofer’s son-in-law.

Kopper—who later became a minister with the Assemblies of God—and other radical students did not stay at the Fresno MB Church very long. Even after they left, however, some persons reported that at one young people’s meeting the youth who remained had “gone wild” and had “danced it up,” which greatly upset some members of the congregation. Hofer, who sometimes raised his hands upward in praise to God, received the blame for these unacceptable excesses.

His supporters and detractors interpret differently Hofer’s response to Pentecostal-type emphases and activities. Though Hofer insisted, throughout his life, that he had never personally advocated Pentecostalism, he was popular with many young people and refused to come down hard on their enthusiastic religiosity. This caused some members to accuse Hofer himself of exposing “the children” of the church to “Pentecostal practices.”
Hofer himself had delivered an occasional “Amen” when something of particular spiritual benefit occurred during a church service. Though accusations of “speaking in tongues” were raised frequently against Hofer, his son Erwin insists that his father never participated in that experience. Hofer did annoint the sick with oil and once told a colleague that he thus never went anywhere without “a bottle of oil” in his coat pocket.28

In other ecclesiastical and theological arenas, however, Hofer upheld Mennonite Brethren theological principles. He served, for example, as the PDC liason with young men in Civilian Public Service camps during World War II, visiting young camp members and actively supporting the alternative service option. Hofer also continued to be in demand as a conference evangelist. Perhaps Hofer’s problems at the time were exacerbated because he was involved in so many different activities, from conference work (which involved much travel) to administrative responsibilities at PBI, to his financially-necessitated carpentry duties. These diverse activities must have made it difficult to get a good reading of a congregation that he did not know well at the outset. Yet older Bethany members, many of whom eventually found themselves associated with the opposition, noted that Hofer was generally “enjoyed” as a “powerful” public speaker.29 They insisted that the church simply needed a change after five years with the same minister.

Generally humble and self-effacing in private conversation, Hofer at times became quite animated when disagreed with in public.30 Some persons, both Hutters and non-Hutters, stereotypically attribute Hofer’s direct way of dealing with controversial issues at the Fresno MB Church to his Hutter ancestry. They point to the tendency of persons of Hutterisch background to be forthrightly honest, in an uncalculated, unhypocritical manner. As one Low German Mennonite (with a Hutter spouse) put it: “You’d think they were mad at each other, but that’s just the way they talk.” Still one wonders how many MB ministers at the time would have responded to personal attacks any differently.

Hofer eventually was accused of refusing to discipline an individual who stated at a Bethany youth group gathering that the “Lord is not with them,” referring to members of the Mennonite Brethren Church as a whole.31 There were other reasons for members’ displeasure with Hofer, including continued conflict between Hofer and certain members of the Fresno MB Church Council.32 As John Goertzen, a charter member at Bethany put it, “some very strong-willed individuals wanted to run things their own way.”33

On March 25, 1947, in his absence, the Bethany congregation voted 73-20 to ask Hofer to resign. On April 14 they received a letter of resignation (as choir director) from Hofer’s son, Erwin.34 Two weeks later, Hofer was excommunicated. How did all of this come about?

In January of 1947, Hofer, realizing the serious nature of the criticism against him, called upon the PDC Board of Reference and Counsel to assist in mediation. During February of 1947, BORAC met with representatives of the Fresno MB Church on six separate occasions. In those meetings Hofer often referred back to a December 1946 congregational meeting where he had received a vote of confidence. In his annual report to the congregation, dated December 16, 1946, Hofer had noted, furthermore, that he was deeply conscious “of my imperfection as an undershepherd of the little flock that God has entrusted to me.”35 Still some Fresno MB Church members noted that “complaints given to the Council went unheeded or were ignored and no action taken.”36

John Goertzen, in his history of the Fresno congregation suggests that the central issue was “MB policies” and that the “larger part” of the congregation had “upheld” these in opposition to Hofer.37 Another charter member ascribed many of Hofer’s problems to generational differences, since his adversaries generally were persons of Hofer’s age and above.38 Whatever the case may be, the Church Council, in January 1947, asked for a new ballot vote to give members of the congregation the opportunity to overturn their December 1946 vote of confidence.

Reference and Counsel heard many conflicting reports. On February 14, for example, one group forcefully defended Hofer.39 At others, the board heard many complaints about Hofer’s theology and leadership capabilities. Several PBI faculty members were outspoken Hofer antagonists. They openly disagreed with Hofer’s vision for PBI. Opponents also stated that Hofer had responded with a resounding “Amen” when A.B. Goossen, the Pentecostal-leaning pastor of the Rosedale MB Church, had at one point said that he would “go to the Pentecost-
tals" if "he could not get it (Pentecostal emphases) to our people."40

On March 25 BORAC submitted its final report, which noted that charges against Hofer were "unfounded" with much "falsifying." The report also called for the following: repentance by those participating in the petition process, which BORAC members did not feel was scriptural; repentance for disrespect shown to BORAC representatives themselves; and agreement from the congregation that no vote would be taken until things had calmed down, until at least June, 1947.41

It is a supreme irony, given the conclusions of this report, that the BORAC chairman then was Rev. John H. Richert, minister at the Dinuba MB Church. Richert himself had led a large group of conservatives out of the Reedley Church in 1925. One of the main reasons for that departure was what dissenters called Pentecostal tendencies supported—or at least condoned—by Reedley pastor D.C. Eitzen.42 Whereas Richert had earlier unsuccessfully demanded the excommunication of Reedley MB Church Pentecostals in 1925, he now found himself in the position of sympathizing with a person who himself faced that prospect.

The petitioners, representing the majority, rejected the March 25 report. The Board of Reference and Counsel, seriously disturbed but trying to improve a bad situation, agreed to oversee the March vote of confidence (which they had recommended against) noting for the record, however, that "all charges against the person of the pastor were found to be baseless."43 After the results of the vote were in and Hofer was excommunicated BORAC then appealed to all PDC churches to pray that "Satan should not succeed to cause division in the church in the name of Christ."44

In the fall of 1947 J.D. Hofer made a public appeal for understanding and support at the MB Pacific District Conference annual meeting in Dinuba. At that same conference Hofer ironically found himself introducing a report of the PDC’s Home Missions Committee that he chaired. As treasurer of Pacific Bible Institute’s Board of Directors, Hofer also presented PBI’s financial report.

At a later point in the conference, Hofer made his emotional plea for understanding, called a "report" in the conference yearbook.45 This "report" included a defense of Hofer’s ministry in Fresno and a warning about "liberal" trends in MB congregations.46 Immediately after he spoke, however, the records show that an anonymous figure stood up and moved to strike from the record everything Hofer had said. This motion was then seconded, a vote called for and the motion carried.47 Never again, in any official way, would the Mennonite Brethren Church (at least on the West Coast) hear from its once prominent evangelist.

The 1948 PDC conference proceedings did not mention Hofer but the BORAC report for that year did note that the committee had urged the Fresno MB church “not to act hastily” with its decision to “dismiss members not appearing to clarify positions before the church.” It encouraged the church to “wait at least one year” before taking any action, a recommendation again not followed. Members of the Board of Reference and Counsel thus concluded: “We were unable to bring about a satisfactory reconciliation whereby true church fellowship would be retained.”48

After his excommunication Hofer continued to receive invitations to hold evangelistic services, though he spent most of his time in MB and KMB churches in Oklahoma, Kansas and South Dakota.49 At the Salem KMB Church (Bridgewater, South Dakota) Hofer and California Hutter Clarence Hofer (described by one person as “alive on the stage”) held what were portrayed as “very successful” revival meetings.50 During the 1950s Hofer also occasionally attended services at the Reedley MB Church. J.B. Toews recalls that Hofer was not “snubbed” by the MB Conference as a whole.51

Hofer was dismissed from the Fresno Mennonite Brethren Church for refusing to appear before the Church Council to present his case. Hofer evidently did not think such discussions would be fruitful. Instead he started a non-aligned mission church, called the Chapel of the Open Bible, along with a few Fresno MB defectors. Son, Erwin, and daughter-in-law, Doris, were also excommunicated for refusing to appear before the Church Council after receiving what both described as a “summons.”52

Formal dismissal from membership hurt J.D. deeply. After giving his entire life to MB ministerial assignments he was now treated by many as an outsider. Still, Hofer’s primary focus at this point continued to be “reaching people for Christ.”53 He used his own resources, therefore, to help construct a meeting place on Clinton Avenue, one block west of Fresno Street. He received assistance in this effort by prominent Mennonite Brethren such as wealthy Reedley farmer and philanthropist, P.K. Warkentin, who served on the congregation’s Board of Directors.54 At the Chapel, Erwin and Doris Hofer (who worked at the mission for the duration of its existence) insist that, contrary to past and present opinion, there was never a case of speaking in tongues.55

In MB circles, however, the Chapel of the Open Bible was often considered a Pentecostal church. This probable myth continues to be believed though the accuracy of that portrayal depends largely on how one defines Pentecostalism. Perhaps this perception developed due to comments made by Fresno MB Church opponents, or from misinterpretations or distortions of those comments, based perhaps on the informality of worship services at the Chapel.

The myth received credence because Hofer’s son-in-law, Ed Kopper, had become a Pentecostal minister. In addition, several Mennonite families of Pentecostal persuasion had tried unsuccessfully to move the Chapel in more charismatic directions during the 1950s. It is also significant that Hofer eventually donated the church building to a Pentecostal group after his health would not let him continue the ministry. The fact that he donated, rather than sold, the building said a lot to many observers.

While serving at the Chapel of the Open Bible Hofer continued to do carpentry work. He purchased twenty acres of land near Cedar and Dakota Avenues, for example, and constructed several apartment buildings. A heart attack in 1957, at age sixty-eight, however, and subsequent health problems, eventually caused him to end the mission effort. The Hofers subsequently moved to Arvin, California to be close to their daughter, Margaret. Both were able to find suitable employment, acting as receptionists at a local mortuary that provided living quarters as
part of the salary package.

No reconciliation ever took place between Hofer and the Fresno MB Church though son, Erwin, recalled that just before his death the church invited his father to speak there in order to bring about propitiation. Hofer was too ill, however, to accept this offer. Agnes Hofer died in 1962. The Rev. Hofer followed one year later, suffering a heart attack in his car while waiting at a stop sign.

Jacob D. Hofer worked within the MB conference during a time when congregations were undergoing change from German to English, from a traditional Anabaptist-Pietist theology to evangelical fundamentalism and during a period when the Pentecostal movement was having major impact on members of the church. Congregations were also moving toward a less rigid position on church discipline. Hofer entered this milieu as a convert to a mixed fundamentalist/Anabaptist Mennonite Brethrenism and he did it with great evangelistic fervor, a commitment to work with youth and with openness to new forms of religious expression though, in many ways, he was very much a traditionalist.

Many members of the excited convert’s congregations found Hofer’s enthusiasm infectious. He experienced many successes and became a prominent and influential leader in the Pacific District Conference. Hofer’s insistence on pushing forward according to his beliefs, however, led to conflict with many of his Fresno congregants.

In addition, Hofer’s way of approaching people, sometimes without consideration for the expected indirectness he perhaps considered hypocritical, caused him to clash with individuals who eventually forced him out of the conference. Nonetheless, Jacob D. Hofer pushed on to the end, following the call of Jesus wherever that might take him.

Rod Janzen

Notes

3. Membership record book and card file, Zion Mennonite Brethren Church Records, CMBS.
4. Church Business Meeting, 6 August 1912, Reedley MB Church Records, CMBS; Membership record book, Reedley MB Church Records, CMBS.
5. David L. Hofer, interview with author, June 1993. J.D.’s son, Erwin, noted that his father occasionally would get lost in thought while doing carpentry work as well. Many stories about J.D. Hofer have come from sources who have requested anonymity. I have only included those narratives told often so that one may anticipate (based on the respect with which those who told the stories are held in the general community) that they are true.
New and noteworthy books in Mennonite History

Leo Driedger and Donald B. Krabyll, Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism (Scottdale, P.A.: Herald Press, 1994).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Mennonite church is its emphasis on peacemaking. The meaning and implication of that idea, however, has not always been clear. Mennonites not only have differed among themselves in defining peacemaking, but the entire concept has undergone dramatic changes in the second half of the twentieth century. Driedger and Krabyll suggest that “Mennonite theological thinking . . . [has] shifted from passive nonresistance to activist peacemaking” (p. 213).


For many Mennonites of Russian background today, the Low German language is a source of amusement—and sometimes even embarrassment. They tend to think of Low German as a “language of the barnyard,” hardly suitable for respectable people. Reuben Epp in this book tries to dismiss these ideas about the Low German language. He argues that Low German is not merely a corruption of “real” German, but a language of its own with a long and honorable history. While the use of Low German in the larger society declined in the sixteenth century, it persisted among the Mennonites, who have since carried it around the globe. This is an excellent study of the historical content of Low German and its persistence among Mennonites. (Please see the special offer for this book on page 11).

Delbert Plett, ed., Leaders of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia, 1812 to 1874, the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde Historical Series, vol. 6 (Steinbach, Man.: Crossway Publications, 1993).

With this massive (932 pp.) volume, Delbert Plett continues his remarkable project on the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde. This volume examines the lives and writings of fifteen prominent Kleine Gemeinde leaders in Russia and North America. It includes many previously unpublished sources in Kleine Gemeinde history.