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A CONFERENCE IS BORN: THE ORIGINS OF THE PACIFIC DISTRICT CONFERENCE

Kevin Enns-Rempel

The members of the Reedley Mennonite Brethren (MB) 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 (PDC). Anxiety, because no one was sure how many people would be willing to bear the cost and difficulty of such a trip. The MB 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 remained as to how many delegates and visitors would actually come.

It soon became clear that such fears were unfounded. Some 50 guests had 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 & 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 1000 persons attended the event, the largest gathering ever of MBs on the West Coast.

John H. Thiessen and Abraham Buhler of Reedley opened the conference with the 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. First the delegates were registered: ten from Escondido, three from Bakersfield, seven from Rosedale, twenty-one from Reedley, one from Fairmead and two 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 (Wasco) 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 PDC came to a close.



Johann Berg



Abraham Buhler

This first session of the PDC represents one of a long series of organizational decisions made by the MB Church during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the General Conference grew larger and spread out over a greater geographical area, it became evident that more complex structures were needed to carry out the mission of the conference. The initial step in this process took place in 1878, when the MB churches in North America first met as a body in Hamilton County, Nebraska. The 1878 meeting was considered an unofficial conference, however, and not until the following year did the first actual General Conference sessions take place in York County, Nebraska. The General Conference continued to assemble on an annual basis until 1909, since which time they have met triennially.

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, in part because of the potential for bad weather. They also pointed out that the distance between the northern and southern ends of the conference made annual conferences prohibitive.

This issue 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. 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.

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. This resolution received the approval of the delegates, and the General Conference adjourned until 1912.

It became evident soon thereafter 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 presented a letter to the 1911 Southern District 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.

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 that conference.

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 PDC. From the report in *Zionsbote*, 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. The conference itself counts 1912 as the first official conference.

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 MB 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 its own way. Before we turn to these later developments, however, we must first look back to the years that preceded the birth of the conference in 1912.

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