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A NEW LIFE IN THE WEST:
SETTLEMENT AND COLONIZATION
ON THE PACIFIC COAST

Kevin Enns-Rempel

Though the Pacific District Conference (PDC) was established formally in 1912 its story actually began much earlier. During the two decades previous to that first conference, the Mennonite Brethren (MB) population in North America was fluid and unstable, as individuals moved about the western half of the continent seeking homes in new areas. Out of this unorchestrated and often confusing movement of people arose the first congregations that eventually would become the Pacific District Conference.

Mennonite Brethren from Russia first arrived in North America in the 1870s, settling on what was then the western frontier: Kansas, Nebraska, Dakota, Minnesota and Manitoba. These settlers soon overcame the initial hardships of pioneering and established thriving towns and congregations in their new homeland. Success, however, bred discontent. Within twenty years of the first Mennonite settlement, much of the available land had either been bought or priced out of the market, causing some MBs to strike out for new frontiers. North Dakota, Oklahoma and Colorado attracted most of these first land seekers, and soon MB churches were established in small towns across these areas.

While most MBs limited their migrations to this midwestern region, others ventured further afield, some moving as far as the West Coast. The earliest and most significant of these settlements took place in Oregon. In 1890 several MB families from Manitoba settled north of Dallas, in an area already occupied by some General Conference Mennonites. Though it is not clear, it appears that the Elias Bergen and Peter Hiebert families were the first MBs to settle in this area. Word of this settlement soon travelled back east, where elder Heinrich S. Voth learned of the small group in Oregon who were struggling without a church. He journeyed from Mountain Lake, Minnesota to Dallas in the spring of 1891, at which time he organized these settlers rather loosely as an MB congregation. Early reports indicate that there were approximately 12 members in the church when it was organized. Apparently Voth was of the opinion that this settlement would not last long, which may explain why he chose to organize them in such an informal way. The fact that the group evidently consisted of members from the General Conference Mennonites and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren as well as the MB probably also explains why it was not organized more formally by Voth.

The little congregation at Dallas struggled against isolation and a sheer lack of numbers. Though it did send the West Coast's first three delegates (Isbrand Peters,

Heinrich Bergen and Elias Bergen) to the 1892 MB General Conference in Kansas, the congregation had difficulty maintaining a viable existence. Conference-sponsored evangelistic visits by J.J. Regier (1894) and Peter Wedel (1895) provided some assistance, but not enough to guarantee the congregation's survival. When German Baptist preacher Gustav Schunke began services in the area, several Dallas MBs invited him to minister to them. On July 19, 1896 the Salt Creek Baptist Church was organized with seven MBs, three Baptists and two unaffiliated persons whose names (Peters and Buhler) indicate they were of Mennonite background if not membership. This event signalled the end of a formal MB presence in Dallas for almost a decade.

Dallas was not the only MB settlement in Oregon. By 1891 a small group of MBs had settled in Portland as well. Heinrich Hölzer, an ordained MB minister, arrived in Portland in March 1891, where he found a small group of MBs already meeting. By 1892 the congregation consisted of 22 members; in 1895 they reported 38 members. Though this congregation grew larger and survived much longer than the Dallas congregation, it never achieved a significant status in the conference and generally was viewed as a home mission outpost. The Portland MB Church finally closed in the late 1930s.

Washington, too, received a small number of MB settlers. In 1896 a report by Johann Stumpf in *Zionsbote* (the German-language MB paper of that time) indicates that Rev. Heinrich Hölzer from Portland spent about two weeks in Walla Walla, during which time he organized the members there into an MB congregation. The group, however, was very small and evidently closed within the year.

Given later developments, it is ironic that California was evidently the least popular state with MB settlers in the 1890s. Only two reports from California, both from the same family, appear in *Zionsbote* during this period. Johann and Justina Ratzlaff reported from Glendora in Los Angeles County that they had moved to the area because of Mrs. Ratzlaff's health. While they found the area good for their physical conditions, they missed the fellowship of other MBs. The Ratzlaffs urged other MBs interested in resettlement to consider moving to Glendora to join them. Unfortunately for the Ratzlaffs it would be some years before any number of MBs would call California their home.

Though MB land seekers were slow to find their way to the West Coast in great numbers, it is not surprising that they eventually did so. The economies of California, Oregon and Washington were transformed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries from an emphasis on mining, large-scale wheat farming or stock raising to one of densely settled farm communities based primarily upon fruit culture. Closely related to this agricultural revolution were developments in the railroad industry. Between 1883 and 1893 Oregon and Washington received three direct transcontinental railroad connections, paving the way for significant migration to those areas. In California, meanwhile, the Southern Pacific Railroad chose to link San Francisco and Los Angeles via the relatively inexpensive land of the San Joaquin Valley, a decision which did much to open the valley for later settlement. The railroads, impressed by the financial promise of a diversified agriculture on the West Coast,

promoted the region, particularly California, through the distribution of pamphlets, newspaper advertisements and a wide-ranging network of land agents. All of these developments resulted in a flood of settlers to the West Coast, including many MBs.

The year 1904 marks the beginning of permanent MB settlement on the West Coast. MBs began arriving in Reedley, California during that year, and within a short time had established a small community of seven families with 38 individuals. On June 12, 1905 they organized themselves as an MB congregation, the first in California. Meanwhile, a revival of MB settlement in Oregon also was taking place. Several families had moved to the Salt Creek area, north of Dallas and near the Salt Creek Baptist congregation where many of the first wave of Dallas MBs now attended. Between May 28 and June 27, 1905 the North Dallas MB Church was organized with 22 charter members, including 15 from the Salt Creek Baptist Church.



Early Day Transportation

Other settlements and congregations followed in rapid succession: By 1915 six more churches: Escondido, Rosedale, Bakersfield, Fairmead, Wasco and Lodi had been established in California; and one, Woodburn (later Donald) in Oregon. The decade 1916-1925 saw the organization of eight more congregations: Shafter, Fairmead (reorganized), Livingston, Orland, Los Angeles and South Reedley (later Dinuba) in California; Aberdeen in Idaho and Dallas in Oregon. Three more congregation were established between 1926-1937: City Terrace (Los Angeles) and Chico, California and Birch Bay, Washington. Though not all these congregations would survive, the MB Conference was established firmly by now on the West Coast.

From a membership of perhaps 80 in 1905, the conference grew by leaps and bounds during the following decades: 250 members in 1909, 343 in 1912, 1180 in 1920, 1779 in 1930, 2850 in 1940.

As a rule, MB migration to the West Coast took place in small groups. Seldom more than a few families travelled together; according to one study more than half of Mennonite settlers in California came as single families. This was a migration of isolated individuals rather than that of a people. Three striking examples stand out as exceptions to this rule: the settlement at Martensdale and the Harbin immigration, the stories of which will be told later in this chapter, and the Kleinsasser colony near Dinuba. Though the latter was actually a Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (KMB) rather than MB migration, the subsequent merger of these two conferences in 1960 makes it part of our story. This migration, consisting of 48 persons representing nine interrelated families, was led by Rev. John Z. Kleinsasser. This group of former Hutterites had joined the KMB in South Dakota and settled on 3200 acres near Dinuba in 1910. The Zion KMB Church was founded there in 1911, one of the few examples of group migration in PDC history.

What motivated these MBs to undertake the long journey to the West Coast? For the most part, they did so out of a natural desire for economic and physical well-being. A 1972 survey of 139 first-generation MB migrants to California revealed that approximately 50% of them came seeking better economic opportunities while about 21% migrated because of the favorable climate or other health-related reasons. The remaining 29% came because of several other motivations. Only a very small percentage of those migrating did so for reasons of religious freedom.

Economic factors for migration are recognizable at many points. A 1909 advertisement for Reedley land agents C.B. Funk and John A. Schmidt in the Hillsboro, Kansas newspaper *Vorwärts* emphasized the potential for successful farming in Reedley's favorable climate. The advertisement also suggested that those who bought early would almost certainly realize a large profit on their land should they choose to sell at a later point. Similar reports are scattered throughout *Zionsbote* and other Mennonite newspapers of that time.

The depression of the 1930s played a major economic role in bringing MBs to the West Coast. The congregation at Birch Bay, Washington was organized almost exclusively by families devastated in the dust bowl of the 1930s. Some established congregations experienced significant growth largely because of depression-induced migration. The Reedley congregation grew from a membership of 530 to 1059 during the 1930s, and only 63 of those persons joined the church through baptism. Rosedale, meanwhile, increased its membership by 134% during the same period.

Most MBs came west intending to establish themselves in agriculture. Others, sensing an economic opportunity in the migration itself, chose to seek their fortune through land speculation. D. Buschmann of Reedley reported in 1909 that there soon would be more land agents than buyers in that town. Mennonite Julius Siemens

advertised 40,000 acres of land near Fairmead, California in 1912, part of which was bought by a small group of MBs who organized a congregation there in 1913. Another Siemens land deal at Los Molinos, California failed to attract many MB settlers after negative reports about it circulated in the Mennonite press.

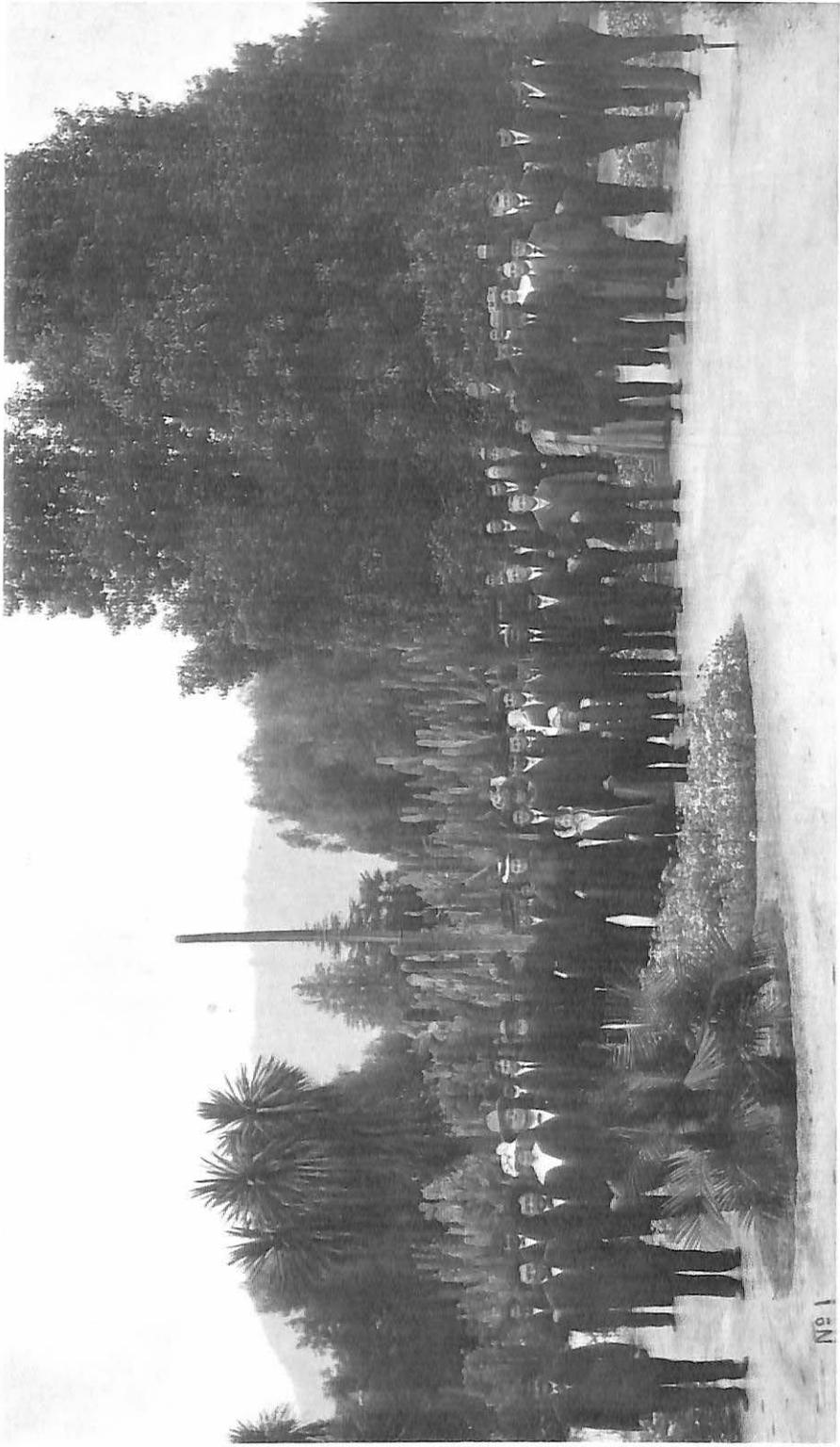
There were many Mennonite land agents, but none rivalled Henry J. Martens of Kansas, either for the scale on which he worked or the reputation he created for himself. The story of Martens and his land deals, though an unfortunate and even tragic chapter in PDC history, reveals much about the "California fever" that gripped MBs during that time.

Though he organized several land deals Martens is best remembered for a venture near Bakersfield, California. In early 1909 Martens inundated the Mennonite press with advertisements and announcements concerning his plan for a settlement in Kern County. In order to stir further interest in his project, Martens sponsored three "excursions" to California, thereby allowing potential buyers to see the land for themselves. The excursions occurred in April, June and August of 1909, and included a total of perhaps 150 persons. The reports that came back from these trips did much to raise enthusiasm among midwestern MBs. Following the second excursion, Georg Jacobsen of Hillsboro submitted a three-part article to Martens' newspaper, *Der Deutsche Westen*, in which his fervor for California is almost unbounded. He related that as the train moved through Los Angeles, workers tossed into the car windows the largest oranges the travellers had ever seen, surely evidence that this was a land of promise. Enthusiasm remained high once the party reached Bakersfield, a "water-rich" region with a "tropical climate." Jacobsen expressed confidence that nothing but German industriousness stood between this prairie and "gardens of paradise and fertile fields."

Land sales in Martensdale, as the new settlement came to be known, were brisk. On the second excursion alone Martens claimed to have realized \$200,000, and reported that Martensdale was now three times larger than Reedley, though no one had yet settled there. So confident were these potential settlers in Martens' claims that with only a handshake they turned over to him the titles to their midwestern farms in exchange for property in California, the title to which would be given them soon after they were settled.

On October 6, 1909 a train with 17 freight cars, two overfilled passenger cars and two sleeping cars rolled west out of Oklahoma carrying the first citizens of Martensdale. Approximately 129 hours later, at 3:00 a.m. on October 12, they reached their new home. Some, who evidently had taken Martens' promotional claims too literally, were surprised upon arrival to find no orchards and fields waiting to be harvested. Nevertheless, work soon was begun to transform this barren land into a thriving Mennonite colony. A Mennonite Brethren church was organized at Martensdale on January 23, 1910 with Jacob Kliever from Fairview, Oklahoma as leader.

Conflicting reports soon began to filter back to the Midwest from Martensdale. While some praised the progress already made and the great potential of the settlement, others suggested that Martensdale was not all it had seemed. George Ebel



Excursion to California led by Henry J. Martens, August 1909. Many of these individuals later bought land at Martensdale.

from Reedley reported that water was not available as Martens had claimed, rendering the land almost useless. Some were so disappointed with conditions there that they soon moved away. Negative reports of a far more serious nature soon followed, becoming fully public in March of 1910. It seems that Martens had not owned the land he so enthusiastically peddled across the Midwest, but merely had taken out a six-month option on it. Unable or unwilling to make payments on the land, Martens allowed the option to expire, leaving the unsuspecting settlers homeless and destitute.

The residents of Martensdale were left with no choice but to look for new homes. On March 9 a strange procession of people, livestock, furniture and buildings on log rollers headed down the road out of Martensdale. So striking was this event that it attracted the attention of the *Los Angeles Examiner*, which gave the story front-page coverage, including two photographs. Some of the displaced settlers relocated to Delano, Reedley or Bakersfield, though the majority moved to an area near Bakersfield known as Rosedale, where a new congregation soon was established.

Not surprisingly, Martens' fortunes began to fall. Several persons brought lawsuits against him, and he lost ownership of his newspaper to MB publisher A.L. Schellenberg in June of 1910. Martens' offer to resettle the displaced colonists on land that he owned in northern California's Butte Valley was rejected. In September the governor of Kansas signed extradition papers requiring him to face criminal charges in Oklahoma. Martens, however, fled before these papers could be served, and was never brought to justice.

Though economic promise brought most MBs west, the potential for other benefits also played a part. A significant number of settlers came with the hope that the region's pleasant climate would improve their health. Many persons found the cold midwestern winters discouraging and even unhealthful, and dreamed of a more comfortable life on the temperate West Coast. Elder Abraham Schellenberg and his wife left Buhler, Kansas in the fall of 1907 and moved to Escondido because of her failing health; Tina Janzen came there three years later for similar reasons. In Janzen's case, the results were striking: less than a month after her arrival, she felt "much better already."

Maria Wall was unable to report such outstanding results. Having settled for health reasons in the Los Angeles area in 1902, she admitted to feeling better, but complained that she was still not rid of her rheumatism. Johann Bese, finally, actually moved west on doctor's orders, choosing to settle in Orland in 1923.

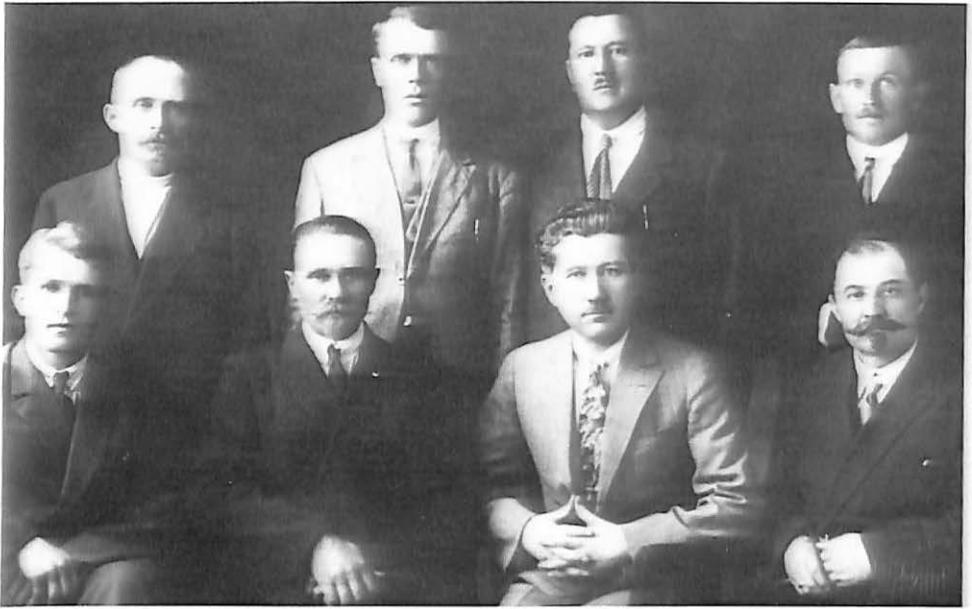
The migration of MBs to the Pacific Coast had little to do with issues of conscience or religious freedom. Most of those who moved west did so out of a desire to improve their lot in life. One small group of immigrants, however, stands as a striking exception to this statement: The "Harbin Mennonites." As early as 1926, Russian Mennonites had begun settling along the Amur River in Siberia, near the Chinese border. By the mid-1920s the situation for Mennonites in Russia had become serious indeed, and many hoped to escape from that country to lands more tolerant of their lifestyle and faith. Given that Russia's eastern borders were less closely guarded than those in the west, a number of these Siberian settlers used their location as an opportunity to flee across the Amur into China, from where they hoped



Elder Abraham Schellenberg

eventually to migrate to North America. These flights commenced as early as 1928, and by 1930 large scale escapes were taking place. Most of these refugees, several hundred in all, found their way to the Chinese city of Harbin. There the Mennonites discovered that neither Canada or the United States planned to accept them as immigrants. It appeared that Harbin might become their permanent home. Word of the exiles' plight reached the Mennonite communities in North America, however, and some individuals began working to bring them across the Pacific. The United States government, despite restrictions against such immigration, yielded to the pleas of American Mennonites and agreed to allow some 250 of these refugees into the U.S. in groups of 12 to 15 persons under a preferred quota as skilled farmers. Some sailed to Seattle from where they settled in eastern Washington, others landed at San Francisco and made their homes in the Reedley/Dinuba area. Those who were denied entry at this time eventually found homes in Paraguay and Brazil.

The first group of Harbin refugees arrived in San Francisco on September 13, 1929, and travelled from there to Reedley that same day. More groups came in the



Russian Brethren via Harbin, China. Front Row, L-R: Jacob J. Isaac, Secretary; H. H. Klassen; Dr. Johann J. Isaak; Johann H. Friesen, Chairman. Second Row, L-R: Gerhard J. Klippenstein, Heinrich Mickelson; Johann P. Funk, Cashier; Aaron Warkentin.



Russian Immigrants Picking Oranges near Orange Cove, California. Front Row, L-R: John H. Friesen, Aaron Rempel, Crew Boss; Henry Kaslowsky; Jake Goertz; Nick Friesen; Aaron Langeman; John Thielman. Second Row L-R: John Bergman. Third Row L-R: George Klassen; Henry Friesen; Henry Bergman. Fourth Row: John Friesen.

following months. Lacking the financial means to buy or even rent their own farms, many of the Harbin Mennonites took farm labor jobs—thinning peaches, cutting grapes or picking cotton. With regard to church affiliation, the immigrants spread throughout the Mennonite congregations in the area. Many chose to attend the large MB church in Reedley, others of non-MB background preferred the Reedley First Mennonite church. A significant number felt more at home in the relatively new South Reedley (later Dinuba) MB church, since it still conducted its services in German while both Reedley churches had switched to English.

In all migrations some settlements flourish while others fail. The origins of the PDC are no exception to this rule. Communities such as Reedley and Shafter grew rapidly and soon became significant MB centers. So successful was Reedley that it early became the standard by which other California Mennonite settlements were measured. It was not uncommon for MB settlers in other areas to compare the beauty or value of their land with that in Reedley. Meanwhile churches in Chico, Donald, Walla Walla and elsewhere were unable to establish themselves and eventually died out. What accounts for the differing fates of these settlements? Why did some blossom and others wither? Though the literature on Mennonite colonization is limited, some studies have been made with regard to this question. These studies have set forth several reasons for the success or failure of a Mennonite community. Three factors appear most relevant to the PDC story: 1) size and concentration of population; 2) economic conditions and 3) leadership.

Clearly, a successful community needs an adequate population located within fairly close proximity in order to survive. In almost every case, churches that failed to attract more than roughly 50 members did not survive, while most of those with larger memberships have persisted.

Two of the three MB congregations founded during the 1890s, Dallas and Walla Walla, died within a few years. Neither of these congregations ever attracted sufficient membership to insure their survival. The story of MBs in Idaho tells a similar tale. Mennonite Brethren settlers first arrived in Idaho around 1908–1910, locating in several small towns in the southeast part of the state: Midvale, Dubois, Camas, Blackfoot and Aberdeen. Reports to *Zionsbote* from all these towns echo a common refrain of loneliness. C. Schwabauer of Midvale reported that they were very alone and requested prayer from fellow church members. J.H. Quiring also lamented his lonely situation, and waited for the day that a Sunday school and church could be established in Camas. Only in Aberdeen was a formal MB congregation established, but it closed its doors only a few years later.

Eastern Washington MB settlements developed in a similar fashion. In addition to Walla Walla, MBs located in Bickleton, Odessa, Hicksville, Farmington, Warden and Wheeler. None of these settlements ever became large enough to support an MB congregation. Peter and Katharina Siemens settled in Hicksville, perhaps the only MBs to do so. They wrote to *Zionsbote* in 1909 that they had no congrega-

tion, no Sunday school, no fellowship. Their neighbors were almost all "Americans," mostly bachelors who played ball on Sundays. Not surprisingly, the Siemens indicated that they soon planned to leave such an inhospitable place. An Oregon congregation organized in the Woodburn/Donald area around 1913 attracted a few more members than Hicksville, but still not enough to survive and closed down only a few years after organization.

Nor was California exempt from this situation. A congregation existed in Wasco from 1912 until 1915, but most of the members of this small group chose to join the much larger congregation in nearby Shafter established in 1918. The story of Fairmead, another California congregation, is an interesting example of the influence of population. First settled in 1913, the earliest arrivals bought large amounts of acreage from land agent Julius Siemens on the assumption that more settlers soon would follow. When these expected latecomers did not arrive, the initial settlers found themselves holding more property than they could afford. Unable to sell off the unwanted land, they were forced to sell out completely and move to other areas. Nevertheless, a congregation was reorganized in 1919, today known as the Madera Avenue MB Church.

In some cases, there may have been enough MBs in a large area to form a stable congregation, but they were simply too scattered to do so. The various settlements in Idaho might be an example of this, as is the MB presence in the Los Angeles area during the early years of this century. One can read *Zionsbote* reports written before 1910 from Glendora, Azusa, Los Angeles, Long Beach, Anaheim, Downey



MB evangelist John Harms with converts in Anaheim, California, ca. 1905

and Hollywood. From these reports one sees that the MBs of this area were concerned to maintain contacts with one another. Many reports concern trips to other parts of the area for fellowship and worship. As early as 1904 the MBs of the Los Angeles area began to gather for quarterly meetings to which some German Baptists were invited as well. Gatherings also took place on special occasions such as Christmas. Despite these efforts at maintaining contact, the distance between families was simply too great. Mennonite Brethren in this area either joined other churches or moved to areas with more fellow church members. Franz C. Penner, for instance, reported that his family moved from Long Beach to Escondido in 1907 precisely because they preferred closer MB fellowship over the scattered situation from which they had come. Not until 1924 would there be a large enough population of MBs in Los Angeles to establish a church.

A settlement's future was not guaranteed simply because it had a large enough population base—the economy also played a significant role. A strong economy, particularly with regard to agriculture, attracted and held MBs in certain areas, while several years of bad crops or other financial difficulty almost invariably would send them in search of greener pastures. The favorable conditions in most of the San Joaquin Valley certainly played a part in the early growth of churches like Reedley, Dinuba and Bakersfield, areas that remain centers of PDC life even today. Less fortunate circumstances, however, led to the demise of several other settlements.

One of the strongest early MB congregations was Escondido, near San Diego. First settled in 1907, the congregation claimed 71 members by 1912—second only to Reedley in size at that time. Soon thereafter, fortunes began to change. F.C. Penner reported in 1913 that they had lost most of their harvest last year and all of it this year; by the end of the year the congregation had shrunk drastically, as members migrated north to MB settlements in the San Joaquin Valley. Eventually the meeting house was sold and by 1924 a formal MB presence in Escondido had disappeared.

In other areas MBs also suffered at the hands of changing economic conditions. Drought and rabbit infestations took their toll on agriculture in Idaho, helping to eliminate MBs from that area. Hard times also affected the MB congregation at Livingston, though in this case the entire congregation relocated itself to nearby Winton in 1924. Thirty-four years later the congregation moved again, this time to Atwater. Sometimes MB settlers were driven out by economic success rather than failure. Skyrocketing land values in Anaheim during the first decade of this century forced the small MB community there to move elsewhere, many of them settling at ill-fated Martensdale.

The third factor affecting the destiny of MB settlements was leadership. If a settlement was fortunate enough to have strong church leaders among its early pioneers, the chances of success increased. Without such authority it became difficult to mold a congregation out of the various families, and more likely than not they would soon disperse in search of a more cohesive community. This was partially the case in Escondido. Already economically ruined by cold winters, the congregation in

1913 lost its influential leader Abraham Schellenberg, who moved back to Buhler, Kansas. No suitable leader took Schellenberg's place, a vacuum that only hastened the congregation's demise. A report in 1922 refers to the Escondido congregation as "sheep without a shepherd." The short-lived MB congregation in Chico, California suffered a similar fate when its pastor, F.F. Janzen, died in 1932 less than one year after the founding of the church. Without a leader, the members of the Chico congregation joined the nearby Orland congregation.

Weak leadership was often as problematic as no leadership at all. The Lodi congregation struggled during the 1920s and 1930s with repeated conflicts involving ministers and other members of the group. In part because of this dissension, the Lodi church shrank from a high membership of 143 to a low of 26 during the period 1921-1935. Not until the 1940s was the congregation able to regain its footing.

In some cases, the arrival of a pastor could renew the fortunes of a previously struggling congregation. This was the situation at Bakersfield, a congregation formed out of the ruins of Martensdale. Lay leadership served the congregation for the first few years in the absence of an ordained minister. When Rev. B.J. Friesen arrived in 1913 this gap was filled, and the congregation soon found itself on a more secure foundation.

By the end of the 1930s the era of MB colonization on the West Coast was more or less at an end. Midwestern migration into the region did not cease, but took on a different appearance. Greater efficiency in transportation and communication lessened the hardships of migration and strengthened contacts between congregations. Most PDC congregations had become institutionally stabilized by this time, and therefore demanded less from later settlers than had been the case for their predecessors. Evidence of this stabilization can be seen in the fact that no PDC congregations closed between the years 1937 and 1957, the longest period without a church closure in conference history. While it is true that West Coast MBs began migrating into urban areas during the 1940s, that development has more to do with the general urbanization of American society than with settlement and colonization. The story of these later churches belongs to another chapter of PDC history.