"A SHELTER IN A TIME OF STORM":
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SCHOOLS IN THE
PACIFIC DISTRICT CONFERENCE

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J.D. Hofer, Chairman of the Pacific District Conference (PDC), opened the 1941
convention meeting in Rosedale with the song "A Shelter in a Time of Storm." The two opening prayers were followed by "powerful amens." October 20, 1941
did indeed seem like a time of storm. In less than two months the Pearl Harbor
attack would change the face of the country. The signs of the impending war already
were apparent everywhere. The fall of 1941, with its portent of change, was a fear­
ful time for most people in the Western world. It was doubly uncertain for a Ger­
man pacifist people. The memories of World War I had dimmed but left Mennonite
people uneasy about the meaning of the next war.

This conference meeting in 1941 consisted of 14 churches with a membership
of 3185. The Reedley congregation of 1048 members was nearly a third of the district.
The convention, meeting in its customary district tent, was like many that had pre­
ceded it and some that would follow. The generosity of various individuals and
firms contributed to the amenities of the event. The Coca Cola Company provided
the loud speakers; Hayward Lumber Company the planks and lumber; Bakersfield
Hardware Company the two refrigerators; Henry Ratzlaff the grapes; and J.P. Nord
the milk. The conference was conducted largely in German. It was the first one
to require all of the motions before the house to be made in both English and Ger­
man. The 1942 conference was conducted entirely in English. Nothing was said
at the outset of that session but everyone knew why. The war already had required
one important change. Mennonite Brethren in the West were not going to be caught
again as German speaking citizens in a war with Germany.

The 1941 delegates received a report from a committee established a year earlier
whose task was to promote Christian education. The committee consisting of P.E.
Nickel, Klaas Willems, J.J. Toews and J.P. Rogalsky had conducted a survey dur­
ing the intervening year to determine if the district should establish its own school.
While the response was mixed with four churches responding favorably, two uncen­
tain, and eight uncommitted, the committee's recommendation to establish a per­
manent school committee was accepted. The work of this permanent committee
resulted in the opening of Pacific Bible Institute (PBI) in September of 1944.

The activities of the early 1940s culminated years of effort by the Pacific District
to establish its own school. The story is intimately tied to the nature of the Men­
onite experience on the West Coast. The Mennonite Brethren in the West have
been subject to novel strains, to divergent influences and to a history layered with
different meanings. The fostering of religious education and establishing schools contains a succession of events that permits an angle of vision for understanding this experience.

The MB commitment to the schooling of the next generation dates back to the origin of the conference in 1860. Among the elements present in the formation of the new group were people yearning for greater educational and cultural freedom than was practiced within the authoritarian structure of Russian colony life. A disproportionate number of young teachers eager to explore how Western European learning and culture might reinvigorate the Russian Mennonite religious life were part of the Brethren movement. The subsequent history of MB migrations to North America includes the founding of schools almost immediately after settlement in new territories. Numerous midwestern schools emerged in the 1870s and 1880s. The ill-fated Martensdale community is illustrative of this phenomenon among the new California migrants. Before securing the land and establishing their agricultural productivity, they built a large one-room building for worship services and a day school. There were no schools on the barren land and part of establishing a new colony required the immediate attention to schooling and the preservation of the inherited religious and cultural values. In the Reedley area K.G. Neufeld and William Neufeld as early as 1910 organized home Bible school classes. In other western communities Sunday schools, winter Bible schools, Saturday German schools and summer Bible classes emerged within the first years of settlement.

The first PDC meeting in 1912 reflected this commitment to education. The delegates gladly acknowledged their support of Tabor College as the school of the district and requested each local church to elect someone to “collect money for our school in Hillsboro.” The second conference meeting in 1913 includes the record that “several brethren expressed their appreciation . . . (of) the importance of schools and recommended that the school be supported more.” Reports from Tabor College, motions for support and strong affirmation of the school are part of the litany of virtually every PDC during the many years in which Tabor was the only conference school. Yet the distance made it virtually inevitable that the West Coast would seek to establish its own school.

The 1916 conference evidenced both these commitments. The possibility of establishing a “theological department” at Tabor elicited strong support as well as the proposal to build a Mennonite high school in Reedley. The western school was to be organized on the basis of a $5.00 subscription to a School Society. K.G. Neufeld was authorized to solicit members in the entire district, and congregations were encouraged to participate. The demands of the World War I, however, intervened in the establishment of this school on a district basis. The 1916 conference, beyond attempting to create its own school, requested all churches to “conduct German summer schools, evening and Saturday schools.”

District discussion of a school was renewed at the 1921 conference. Reports by N.N. Hiebert of Mountain Lake, Minnesota and H.H. Flaming of Corn, Oklahoma about church schools in their communities resulted in a motion to establish a school committee representative of as many churches as was feasible. That committee,
under the leadership of people from Reedley, was organized in February 1922 as a school society patterned after the Tabor College Corporation. Its aims were not the high school earlier discussed but the creation of “Bethany College.” It was to be privately sponsored through the sale of $100. certificates of membership. The society reported to the 1922 conference that they hoped to give every student “an opportunity to receive a religious as well as a scientific education.” The venture was not strictly under district sponsorship, but the leadership hoped for a conference committee to work with the society in the development of the school. The conference gladly obliged with a motion affirming that “we realize to do justice to our children we must give them religious education,” and selected a committee of P.P. Rempel, Reedley; B.J. Friesen, Bakersfield; and D.D. Bartel, Dallas.

The importance of the proposed school was suggested by the composition of the committee. Both Friesen and Bartel were ordained ministers. Rempel was the only ordained elder in the district. He was one of the central figures in the early history of the district. Born in Russia, he was educated in the Zentralschule in Halbstadt, received Seminary training at St. Chrischona in Basel, Switzerland, pastored in Poland and then came to North America in 1900. Ordained as an elder in 1910, he moved west in 1914. With the exception of the few years that Elder Abraham Schellenberg was affiliated with the Escondido congregation, Rempel was the singular elder of the district. Between 1914 and 1932 he organized or pastored the Lodi, Rosedale, Shafter, and Los Angeles congregations.

By the 1920s there were developments among the Brethren which augured more clearly for the need of institutions that might theologically center and unify the fledgling conference. Many of the MBs on the West Coast were immigrants twice over. They had come from Russia in the late nineteenth century to the midwestern states and for the most part moved further west in the early twentieth century. They came west as refugees not from religious persecution but for economic opportunity. Most came not in village units but as detached individuals or families to seek their fortunes in the West. The migration from Russia to the plains states carried with it the hope for a continuation of Russian village life. That dream was partially realizable because of the availability of land in the midwestern states. While the Privilegium (Czar’s special concessions) was past, the protective barrier of the village was reinstated in varying forms. Language barriers, ethnic seclusion and Russian traditionalism all created a cultural barrier which retarded the assimilation of Mennonites for the first 50 years of sojourn in the new land. Mennonite lands, Mennonite institutions, Mennonite peoples in numbers sufficient to create a distinctive way of life could more readily maintain the ethics of peacemaking, economic sharing, mutuality and submissiveness. The midwestern MB communities, with their population base, more easily retained those distinctive ways than their West Coast cousins. The move west offered greater opportunities for individualism. European based religious traditions generally have undergone greater transformation in the West than in other parts of the country.

The report of the Bethany Society to the 1923 conference reflected these realities. P.P. Rempel reported that “Christian schools promote spiritual well-being in the
churches.” He noted that the PDC was the only district in the General Conference without a school. Furthermore there was a large group of young people who were interested in attending such a school. He further reminded the delegates that “in the higher public educational centers the young people are exposed to many dangers.” That statement was an almost constant refrain in conference discussions about the need to establish their own schools. Church schools do shelter a people from the corrosive impact of alien ways. Yet the Society reported little progress had been made. Financial problems, a lack of unity and the inability to secure acceptable teachers were the reasons given. The Society had hoped that Professor H.F. Toews of Tabor would assume leadership of the new school. His eleven years at Tabor had established him as one of the foremost teachers in the denomination. He had been sufficiently interested to travel west and investigate. He declined with the simple explanation that “a house divided cannot stand.”

Toews’ description was strong, but not entirely inaccurate. The comment referred specifically to the tensions in the Reedley congregation that eventuated in the 1925 establishment of the South Reedley (Dinuba) church, but it also reflected patterns elsewhere in the District. Beginning with the war years, differing theological streams filtered more easily into MB congregations. Los Angeles, with its diverse religious menu, offered varying conservative attractions. Some MBs were increasingly drawn to the Bible Institute of Los Angeles with its brand of aggressive American fundamentalism. Others found a new freedom and expressiveness in the Pentecostal-Holiness movement. Aimee Semple McPherson and her $1.5 million Angelus Temple offered enticements to a people whose piety was restrained, codified and always cautious. The 1922 conference, the same one that birthed the Bethany College Society, also expressed strong concerns about the growing theological “irregularity” of the conference. The Lodi Church brought to the conference floor questions about “false doctrine or false teachings.” The delegates responded with a motion to “consider such teachings as Russelism, Adventism, Christian Science, the so called Pentecost movement and others . . . as false teachings . . . (and that) we do not allow our members to seek devotions there or to represent them in our churches.” The motion was general but the specific issue was the growing attraction of Pentecostalism. During the 1920s and into the 1940s the Lodi, Bethany, Rosedale and Reedley churches were all touched in some fashion by Pentecostalism.

The district, in the face of growing theological pluralism, did what many traditions do. Beyond accelerating the efforts to establish a school there was an attempt to centralize authority. The 1922 conference noted that P.P. Rempel was the only elder in the district. It wondered if it would be advisable to ordain several more. But by the 1920s the “elder” system as the form of church organization was fading, and the suggestion was deferred to the General Conference.

The inability to establish Bethany College in the 1920s and the subsequent depression of the 1930s postponed the creation of a District wide school for two decades. Responsibility for education of the young remained with individual congregations or clusters of proximate churches. During the PDC conventions of the 1930s the congregational reporting process included comment on the differing kinds of school
programs being conducted. At the 1931 conference Bakersfield, Rosedale, Reedley, South Reedley, Dallas and Shafter all reported evening school, summer school or concentrated weeks of instruction during the winter. The courses were a combination of biblical exposition, biblical history and German. These offerings were clearly supplemental to public education. They reflected an uneasiness with the nature of public schooling but were now couched in more threatening and militant language. The 1932 delegates agreed that it was "important to use all our strength to instruct our youth with the Word, particularly since in so many of the public schools, colleges and universities atheistic teachers are employed." The Tabor College report to the same convention included uncharacteristically strong language: "Never before was the influence away from the Bible and the ancient faith in the schools of our land as strong as it is right now. With Satanic zeal efforts are made to implant unbelief in the hearts of our youth, and not only in the colleges and universities but also in the elementary and high schools." Mennonite Brethren were not attending universities in sufficient numbers during the 1930s to warrant a more threatened feeling. Yet the threats seemed more real. These were the years in which American protestantism was polarized around the fundamentalist-modernist debate. Mennonite Brethren, during the thirties, were hardly drawn into those discussions, but in a religious milieu which sharply segregated people, they instinctively leaned into the conservative camp. It was easy to pick up the more militant language of fundamentalism.
The Reedley, Dinuba and Dallas communities moved, after the failure of Bethany, to establish their own local schools. In the Reedley church the earlier Bible school classes conducted by K.G. Neufeld and William Neufeld were suspended with the coming of World War I. In 1925 the Reedley congregation constructed a four room school building calling it the “Reedley Bible School.” It began classes in 1927 with Rev. David Wiebe and Martha Wiebe from Tabor College as instructors. In 1928 they were joined by J.P. Rogalsky who came to be the central figure in the development of the central San Joaquin Valley schools. A recent immigrant from Russia, he taught at the Reedley School (1928–32), the Dinuba Bible School (1932–41), and then became the principal after the 1941 unification of these two schools as Immanuel Bible School. He knew little English and so committed both these Bible schools to a strong German curriculum.

J. P. Rogalsky (1886-1960) Influential Educator

The Reedley school was clearly under the sponsorship of the local congregation, yet there was continuing district interest. The 1928 conference, after hearing a report about the school, moved to invite the directors to both solicit members for the supporting society and students from the churches of the conference. At the 1929 conference the Directors could report that all of the churches in the district with the exception of Winton and Orland in California and the Oregon congregations had paid membership in the sponsoring society. The 1930 Conference recommended that the churches of the entire district support the school in “prayer, gifts and students.” The widespread interest of the district is suggested by the school’s
1931 report. It included the reminder that the “Reedley Bible School does not look upon itself as a conference school.” When the Reedley school temporarily ceased in 1932, Rogalsky moved over to begin the Dinuba Bible School. While its curriculum and student size in the next six years rivaled that of the Reedley school, it never reported to the district conference nor was granted any quasi-district status.

In Dallas, Oregon, between 1930 and 1938, joint Bible classes were held by the area Mennonite churches (MB, General Conference, and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren). Winter classes of varying duration were taught by N.N. Hiebert, H.H. Dick, Herman D. Wiebe, and William Bestvater. In 1938 the Beacon Bible School was organized by the three Dallas Mennonite churches. Cooperation with the Salem churches resulted in the 1945 beginning of Salem Academy.

These local efforts notwithstanding, the district, beginning in the mid-thirties, repeatedly expressed the need for a more formal district wide program of Christian education. It was part of a quickening concern and pace of activity for youth. The Christian Leader began as a youth publication in April of 1937. Youth meetings flourished during the 1930s. An item of discussion at the 1938 PDC assembly was the possibility of a combined youth convention with the Southern District or with other denominational groups in the region. The continuing cultural transitions of an immigrant people as well as the emergence of youth as a recognizable and distinct sector in the population required differing kinds of church programs. The district's concrete response to these new stirrings was the 1935 formation of a School and Education Committee. Elected to its membership were some of the most trusted and recognized leaders: N.N. Hiebert, long time mission board secretary; J.P. Rogalsky; J.H. Richert, leader of the Dinuba Church and former minister at Reedley and Lodi; J.S. Dick, recently returned missionary from China; P.N. Hiebert, previously an instructor at Freeman Academy and College in South Dakota, and pastor of the Bakersfield church; William Bestvater, previously minister in the Central District, the Northern District, principal of Herbert (Saskatchewan) Bible School, 1921–30, and pastor at Shafter since 1931.

The membership of this committee was linked to the founding generation of the MBs. They were predominantly trained in Russia and at McPherson College before Tabor opened in 1908. They had grown up within the boundaries of the MB world and deeply shared in its sense of particularity. They had come to maturity in the Midwest. They began the movement that would lead specifically to the founding of Pacific Bible Institute. But before that would happen in 1944, the leadership of the school movement would pass to people with differing religious sensibilities.

This new committee systematized the reporting of the congregational educational programs. Official encouragement for various forms of instruction was given at each convention of the late 1930s. The committee in 1936 called for more study of the “problems of young people” and more systematic planning. The 1937 convention noted further progress towards the reestablishment of the Reedley Bible School (which reopened in 1938) and hoped that it might become the district school. The 1940 report asked congregations without a Bible school to work towards establishing one. By 1941 the Reedley and Dinuba schools, now unified as Im-
manuel Bible School, received a motion requiring all churches “both morally and financially to assist students coming from outside points.”

This support, however, would be short lived. The 1941 conference, by establishing a permanent school committee of H.D. Wiebe, J.J. Toews and P.N. Hiebert, was setting a different course. This committee moved aggressively toward the establishment of a baccalaureate level Bible school. The committee came to the 1942 convention with four resolutions: that the Bible school be located in Fresno; that the committee be authorized to solicit financial support with individual churches; that the school would begin with elementary Bible course but the objective was “a fully accredited course”; and that the committee be authorized to call a special meeting of the district pastors when they were ready to open the school in Fresno. The ensuing discussion was lengthy. The large Reedley church urged that the matter be “dropped for the duration.” Others noted that the current Civilian Public Service (CPS) Camps and the continuing responsibility for Tabor were large projects, and the district could not entertain more. The recommendations were, however, adopted with the proviso that the “committee not be too hasty in carrying out these recommendations.”

The restraint was not only a product of the financial requirements of the CPS system and the continuing costs of Tabor. The caution was rooted in a series of theological and social changes that were affecting the church. These changes both retarded and accelerated the momentum towards the opening of Pacific Bible Institute in 1944. Schools can help to maintain denominational distinctives. The impulse to build a school was rooted in the need to insure that the youth would receive appropriate denominational understandings. Schools are designed precisely to mediate the tradition to the next generation. But the question of what is to be mediated sometimes can become unclear. The 1940s, like the 1920s, were such a time of uncertainty for West Coast MBs.

The CPS system did impose heavy financial and moral obligations on all Mennonite groups. But the war with its special pressures on nonresistant people created other tensions. There were differences between those who identified with the patriotic cause and those who did not; between those who went into various forms of military service and those who chose the church sponsored CPS system; between those who thought church disciplinary action appropriate for persons selecting military service and those advocating full acceptance of them. Some supported the proposed school as a way of revitalizing the conscientious objector position that grew more vulnerable among MBs as the war continued. Others were wary of any reinforcement of the doctrines segregating Mennonites from other American Protestants.

There was, to be sure, a strong contingent of the West Coast membership with loyalties to Tabor. Those loyalties remained through the 1940s, 1950s and beyond. These people feared that developing a second school would inevitably result in the withdrawal of much needed support for what was then the General Conference school in Hillsboro. Others perceived the theological drift of Tabor College as part of the necessity for establishing a western school that would be safe from corrosive theological currents. Beginning in 1942, with the ascension of P.E. Schellenberg
to the presidency, there appeared suspicions that the college was weakening its resolve against liberal theologies. At the MB General Conference in 1943 the new president was requested to testify publicly to his own religious experience. He was the first president of any MB school with a Ph.D. degree. His training in the social sciences was warily regarded by some unfamiliar with what to MBs was a new form of intellectual discourse. G.B. Huebert, pastor of the Reedley church and influential figure in the PDC, was one of those concerned that there was a conflict between the “Bible department” and the “intellectual department.” In the end it was recognized that the fears about P.E. Schellenberg had been misplaced. He had become the symbolic target in a larger, more bewildering set of theological movements and transitions. The 1944 beginnings of both Pacific Bible Institute and the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, Manitoba were, however, at least partially a response to these concerns about Tabor.

During the 1940s there were important changes in the emphasis of theology and piety among the MBs generally, but particularly on the West Coast. Some were cautious in giving support to the school movement because of this theological shifting. The MBs since 1860 have been flavored by at least three differing theological streams: Anabaptism, Pietism and Evangelicalism. The three have worked together in varying degrees of complimentarity and conflict. It is the presence of these strands that historically has made the MBs pluralist and at points even contradictory.

The people who assumed the leadership of the school movement in the early 1940s had been nurtured significantly by the more pietistic and evangelical streams. H.D. Wiebe, J.D. Hofer, G.B. Huebert and J.J. Toews provided the theological profile of the new leadership. Hofer and Huebert were trained at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles in the early 1920s. Toews came to the district via Western Baptist Seminary in Portland. Wiebe's early training was in education with a theological degree during the 1940s from the Los Angeles Baptist Seminary. All felt comfortable with the expressive and more personal forms of piety. The pietist faith emphasized the warm, emotional, subjective side of Christian faith rather than the social; personal disciplines rather than collective discipleship. There was in this pietism a preoccupation with the inward experiences of faith. Those embracing this pietistic emphasis also shared a inclination towards greater precision in theological formulation than traditionally had been the case among MBs.

While these emphases historically have been part of the Mennonite Brethren, they were now highlighted as being more equally true than previously. Some in the district were uneasy about the shift. One observer wrote “many of the old standbys are not at all in sympathy with what these men are trying to feed us . . . They constantly speak of having a school in which we instruct our young people in the ways and beliefs of our fathers, but if our fathers would arise from the dead and observe, I am sure they would not recognize some of our ways.” A group of respected leaders whose theological moorings were in the more historic patterns of Anabaptism, like P.N. Hiebert, J.N.C. Hiebert, John H. Richert, F.F. Wall, while supportive of the need for a school were also concerned.

Pietism frequently emerges during periods of cultural transition. As Mennonite
isolation, both in Russia and North America, broke apart and set people into greater contact with the larger world, the emphasis on personal piety was an appropriate hedge against the seductions of this world. When societies are in transition, personal ethics can replace communitarian standards as the norm for equipping individuals.

The November 1943 PDC meeting in Lodi removed the cautions expressed the previous year. The Bible School Committee was given full approval to proceed. "Pacific Bible Institute" was selected as the name of the new school. The committee worked energetically in the succeeding months. by January, 1944, a general plan for the school's curriculum and standards was circulated to the churches, and twelve of the fifteen responded favorably. In the coming months financial support was secured; a faculty appointed; a building purchased, renovated and furnished; a curriculum designed and students recruited.

September 18, 1944 was opening day. It culminated a discussion that began in 1916. The PDC had a school. A full time faculty of Rev. S.W. Goossen, the acting president, Rev. Sam Wiens and Rev. J.J. Toews, together with part time instructors and a student body of 28 began the new school. The 1944 PDC assembly celebrated the long desired achievement.

First Building of Pacific Bible Institute (1944-1945)

The early PBI reflected the prevailing pietistic concerns. The initial years are best revealed in the mission work, the Sunday schools, the jail work, the prayer meetings. All evidenced a high degree of spirituality defined largely in personal terms—personal piety and personal witnessing. Training was essentially for the "spiritual vocations" of missionary and pastoral ministries.

If during the 1940s one current in the church yearned for the insulation that a pietistic education brought, another equally strong current felt a growing comfortableness with American society. Mennonite Brethren coming into the western states
during their early years of development had become participants in the central institutions of the society. They were prosperous and respected farmers. Mennonite Brethren in the San Joaquin Valley, with their population base, had acquired sufficient investment and status to become important partners in the political process.

By the 1940s the valley towns with substantial Mennonite populations were full of Mennonite merchants. The brethren increasingly felt comfortable in places other than the farm and church. Religiously it was easy to identify with the Christian Business Men's Club and the newly organized National Association of Evangelicals. In the middle of the 1950s this growing ease in larger circles spelled trouble for PBI, and by the end of the decade a new educational ideal was necessary. Students increasingly needed training for vocations other than religious ones. The Bible Institute ideal was replaced by the Liberal Arts ideal.
Groundbreaking for Sattler Hall on the present Fresno Pacific College Campus (1959)
The change was only a forecast of subsequent changes in the nature of the district's school. The school that emerged in 1944 has experienced more fundamental shifts than many schools with a longer history: from a Bible institute to a junior college, to a senior college, to a graduate school; from ownership by the PDC to ownership by the United States Conference back to ownership a second time by the district; from training primarily for church vocations to training primarily for vocations in the larger world; from a school designed to nurture MB pietism to one that focused Anabaptist theology to one that is increasingly ecumenical.

There is in the West a high degree of cultural and institutional ferment. The repeated efforts to begin a school between 1916 and 1944 and the subsequent changes of the school reflect the uncertainty. The story of schooling among western MBs is the story of the search for both intellectual and institutional coherence. It is the story of the church's enduring quest to center and identify itself. It is the search for shelter in a world of strong cross currents.

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PDC embraces Fresno Pacific College in 1979