

A SINGING CHURCH: MUSIC IN THE PACIFIC DISTRICT CONFERENCE

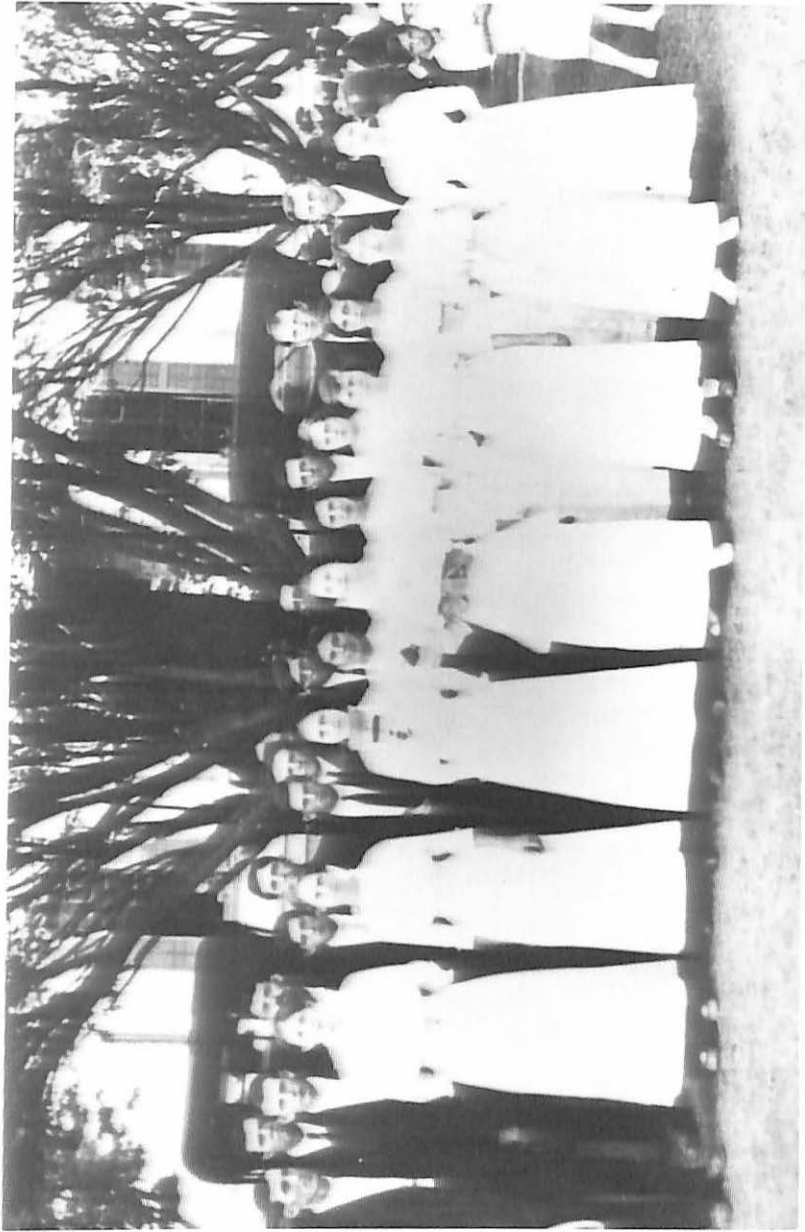
Larry Warkentin

Music has held an important place in the Pacific District Conference (PDC) throughout the past seventy-five years. When the delegates gathered in Reedley for the 1912 conference one of the greatest concerns of the planning committee was "that it might not be possible for the churches to send their singers to the *Saengerfest*" (song festival). They were not disappointed, however. "When at 2 o'clock in the afternoon the song program commenced, all churches, except one, were represented. Not all singers were present, but enough so that the program could be followed. It was very good and inspired us to work even harder for perfection in the future." The choir members were primarily young people, and it was not possible for all of them to attend the session. In some cases older members helped to fill the vacant positions.

On Tuesday, October 15, 1912 the delegates appointed Johann Berg and Peter Richert of Reedley, D.L. Schellenberg of Escondido and Heinrich Kohfeld of Rosedale to plan the program for the *Saengerfest* and Sunday School Convention. The tradition of a *Saengerfest* was not new to the Mennonite Brethren (MB). It had been started years earlier in Russia, according to Wesley Berg in *From Russia With Music*. Building on this tradition the committee established a pattern which has served many subsequent committees. The Saturday of the conference weekend was devoted to a Sunday School Convention that included sermons and instructions to Sunday school workers interspersed with choir and quartet numbers. Sunday afternoon was reserved for the *Saengerfest*. The *Zionsbote* of December 3, 1913 reported the following:

Introduction by the chairman Brother J.J. Hiebert, with song number 47 from *Evangeliums Lieder* ("Der schönste Name") and reading of the first four verses of Psalm 96. He showed that singing is a duty according to God's word, and that often a song brings forth a joyful witness for Jesus.

After he prayed, the different choirs appeared alternately. First the Reedley choir sang the song "*Kroent ihn.*" After that the Rosedale choir sang the song "*Eilet fort.*" A men's quartet from Bakersfield followed this with the song "*Was im Leben der Mensch säet, das wird die Ernte sein.*" Since Wasco was not represented by a choir, Brother Ewert from Wasco gave a short talk, taken from Psalm 96:1. In it he stressed the beauty and the practicality of song, saying he had inherited a love of music from his mother. Whoever doesn't love singing is a grouch, and whoever doesn't at least want to sing won't sing in heaven either. After this was congregational singing of the song "*Ich habe nun den Grund*



Reedley Choir, P. D. Enns, Director (1910-1918) Front Row: L-R, 1

gefunden." The Reedley choir sang next the beautiful song "Dir, Jehova, will ich singen." The Bakersfield choir followed with "Halleluja, rühmt das kreuz."

A quartet from Reedley provided "Der Heilsruf vom Kreuz." Brother Bernhard Friesen from Bakersfield gave a short talk entitled "Wahren Fortschritt im Gesang." He showed first what singing really is, namely, the deepest feelings found in our soul, expressed in a raised voice. Then he showed that true achievement in singing comes when one praises God more and more through song, and is raised nearer and nearer to God so that we don't look only at what is outward, but at our true heart attitudes before God.

A women's quartet from Bakersfield provided "One Sweetly Solemn Thought" in the English language. The Reedley choir followed with "Wie köstlich zu danken dem Herrn." The Bakersfield choir sang the English song "Oh That I Had Wings." A duet from Reedley followed, "Gott ist Weisheit, Lieb, und Macht." Last on the program was a song from the Reedley choir "S'ist ein freund im Heimatland so fern." Brother H.S. Voth made short closing remarks in which he brought out his belief that the singers had done their best and had surely grown through it. The meeting was closed with song 11 from *Evangeliums Lieder* ("Mein Jesu, gabst du denn") and prayer by Dr. John Enns of Dallas, Oregon.

(Translation by Rhonda Warkentin)

By 1920 the Sunday school convention and *Sängerfest* were separated from the business sessions of the annual conference. There were several reasons for this separation. First, the conference sometimes was held in locations distant from the majority of the churches, making it difficult to get all the choirs to participate. In 1914 the minutes suggest that not all the churches were represented by a choir and "there was room for progress." Consequently the Sunday school convention and the *Sängerfest* were moved to a spring date.

PROGRAMME	
SÄNGERFEST	
Sonntag, den 7. Mai 1933, 2 Uhr nachmittags	
Allgemeiner Gesang	geleitet von Prof. Henry W. Berg
Eroöffnung	Ben Wall
Gesang—2 Lieder	Shafter
Gesang—2 Lieder	Fairmead
Gesang—2 Lieder	S. Reedley
Gesang—2 Lieder	Los Angeles
Gesang—2 Lieder	Lodi
Gesang—2 Lieder	Orland
Gesang—2 Lieder	Rosedale
Gesang—2 Lieder	Winton
Solo	Prof. H. W. Berg
Gesang—2 Lieder	Dinuba
Gesang—2 Lieder	Bakersfield
Gesang—2 Lieder	Men's Chorus F. M. Church, Reedley
Gesang—2 Lieder	M. B. Church, Reedley
Gesang von alle Chor—Leiter und	
Gehilfs Chor—Leiter	geleitet von P. D. Enns
Gesang	Massen Chor—geleitet von Arnold Bergen

Sängerfest Program (1933)

At the 1938 convention in Bakersfield the delegates considered the question "whether we want to have a combined Sunday school convention and song festival, as usual, or if we want to separate the Sunday school convention to have more time." It was decided to separate the two activities on a trial basis and to elect new officers for the song festival. The new officers were selected from the choir directors of the district and under their leadership the *Sängerfest* continued. Although the two activities were separated in organization they continued to meet on the same weekend. The *Sängerfest* grew in size and quality with experiments in various formats. On some occasions only combined choirs performed in an attempt to avoid competitive comparisons. In 1954 Dietrich Friesen, professor of music at Pacific Bible Institute, conducted the combined choirs in a program completely devoted to performance of selections from Handel's *Messiah*. On other occasions each church choir sang one or two numbers with a group of combined anthems at the end. During the 1940s and 1950s these events were often held in the Fresno Memorial Auditorium. As the number of churches in the conference increased, it became more difficult to plan programs that included all of the choirs. Beginning in 1956 and for several years thereafter the churches in the Lodi area held their own song festival. In the early 1960s a male chorus festival was held every other year, alternating with the mixed choir festival. In the late 1970s the annual choir festival was discontinued, but the male chorus concept continued in the Mennonite Men's Chorus which performs annually on the weekend of the MCC Relief Auction. The mixed choir concept is reflected in local church choir gatherings such as the annual church choir festival at Fresno Pacific College.

Even after the *Sängerfest* was separated from the annual fall meetings, music continued to be important in the PDC. Choirs and smaller groups from the host church and neighboring churches provided music between sessions, particularly at the Sunday afternoon mission services. Congregational hymns and small groups of singers provided musical inspiration during breaks in the business sessions. The conference sessions thus provided an important setting in which new musical ideas could be tested and where churches could learn from each other. At the 1922 conference, for example, the Fisherman's Quartet, which had been very active in evangelism, sang at the conference. The question was raised as to whether these singers should be paid just as the evangelistic preachers were paid. This is the first documented discussion in the PDC of possible payment for musicians. The question was referred to the budget committee. Apparently the quartet was not paid, since no such item appears in the budget report.

Another early example of music's role in the conference can be seen in the report of the 1926 conference in Shafter. The host pastor, Herman Janzen, was an amateur musician who played several instruments, and he may have encouraged the expanded musical activities evident at this gathering. The men's choir of the host church sang a newly written text that welcomed each of the conference churches by name. It was such a success that it had to be repeated later in the day. At the same conference an orchestra from the Reedley church played several numbers. Also on the program was a number by A.G. Sawatzky, a Canadian composer who had recently

moved to the district.

Conference sessions also provided a forum for the discussion of new musical materials. It is clear from the minutes of the first conference that the hymn book most familiar to the churches was *Evangeliums-Lieder*, edited by theologian Walter



Evangeliums Leader widely used hymnal in the PDC

Rauschenbusch and musician Ira D. Sankey. This hymn book was primarily a collection of German translations of American gospel songs. It had been published for use by all German speaking Christians in America. Its use in MB churches was so pervasive that it almost was thought of as a denominational book. In many churches it replaced the older *Dreiband*. This was a unique book made up of three



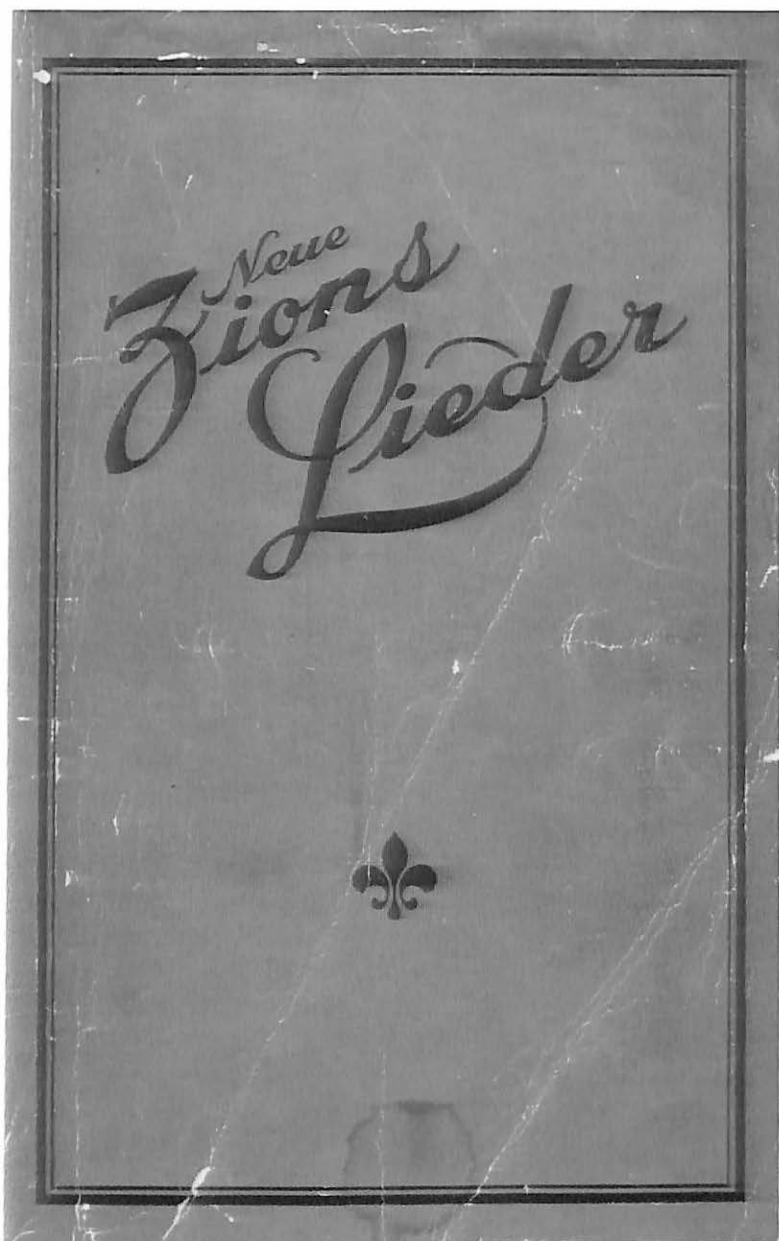
Dreiband, early hymnal in the PDC

popular German-American booklets, *Jubeltöne, Hosianna*, both of 1896, and *Halleluja*, of 1894. This collection introduced to MBs a favorite “*Nun ist sie erschienen*” (“The Sun Has Arisen in Heavenly Glory”). Even as late as 1943, when the question of creating an English hymn book was first raised, the old *Dreiband* still was referred to affectionately. Members of the Dinuba church asked the conference in Lodi that year: “Would the Conference have a way that songs in the German language out of the book called the *Dreiband*, and other songs that are near and dear to many of us and that have been a real blessing in the past years, be translated into the American language and put in book form with notes, so that they can be used in our meetings?” There is a tone of resignation in this question from Dinuba. This church, one of the more conservative in the conference, was bowing to the inevitable change from the German to the English language.

The “American” language had been encroaching on the PDC since the earliest conference. Several musical numbers by the Bakersfield church at the 1912 conference were in English. By 1943 many of the sermons, most of the choral numbers, and nearly all of the minutes of the conference were presented in English. The war against Germany, and a new generation of leaders less comfortable than their forebears with the German language, added to the need of an English hymnal.

At the Lodi conference in 1943 a committee including Albert J. Enns of Dinuba, John R. Janzen of San Jose, and Frank Wiens of Reedley, was appointed to confer with Herbert Richert, Professor of Music at Tabor College, concerning a new hymnal. By 1944 the committee had mailed a questionnaire to all PDC churches. Although nearly everyone agreed that an English hymnal was needed, there was not strong support for the project. Some were content with their new editions of *Tabernacle Hymns*, which included most of the gospel songs they wanted. Others felt that in translation “hymns often lose their original meaning; words can be translated but to translate thoughts is quite another thing.” Faced with these objections the committee recommended that the project should be assumed by the General Conference. The book should include not only songs from the *Dreiband*, but also other older German songs, and “gospel songs and hymns found in hymn books used by our various churches as well as some of the older choral numbers, which although not used as frequently today, have genuine value and should be translated and preserved for this and future generations.” The committee gave impetus to the General Conference project, which in 1953 under the direction of Herbert Richert became the first MB hymn book in the English language, the *Church Hymnal*. It was used in our churches until superseded in 1971 by the present *Worship Hymnal*.

Along with the main hymn books congregations generally have used supplemental books. *Sing Alleluia* is the latest in a long series of these books. During the German speaking era, *Neue Zions-lieder*, edited by J.J. Franz and D.B. Towner, was a popular soft cover hymnal. Though not published by the conference, some editions of the book included a title page which advertised that the book was available from the MB Publishing House in Hillsboro, Kansas. This book and others like it, including *Evangeliums Klänge*, *Silberklänge*, and *Jubel-Klänge*, were used primarily for Sunday evening services and other informal meetings.



Neue Zions-Lieder, popular songbook in the PDC

Music for choirs and men's choruses were often taken from publications like the monthly *Sänger Bote* edited by A.G. Sawatzky. When this publication ceased, some churches turned to the *Kirchenchor* published monthly by the Lorenz music company. With the move to the English language a great variety of choral material became available and no single source can be identified.

Mennonite Brethren traditionally have considered music to be a powerful vehi-

cle for the expression of their faith. Hymns were selected carefully to set the mood and to amplify the theme of meetings. The Missions Festival Sunday service on November 17, 1940 began with "*Tragt's hinaus in alle Land*" ("Tell It Out In All the World"), and "*Über dem blauen Meer*" ("Over the Ocean Wave"). In 1943 amidst conference discussions of pacifism and Civilian Public Service camps the delegates in Lodi stood and sang "America." And in a dramatic moment of reconciliation between the Reedley and Dinuba churches at the 1937 conference, during which witnesses say not a single eye was dry, the hymn "Let All Hearts be United" was sung as Pastors J.H. Richert of Dinuba and G.B. Huebert of Reedley exchanged the brotherly kiss. This event publicly ended the strife that had begun twelve years earlier when the South Reedley (later Dinuba) congregation withdrew from the Reedley church over issues of theology and church discipline.

Music was considered an important part of nurturing youth. Almost every PDC church had a monthly *Jugendverein* (Youth Fellowship) on Sunday evenings. These evenings were devoted to music, readings and testimony and seldom included a sermon. Young people were encouraged to share their abilities in a kind of "talent show" format. Music also played an important role in conference-sponsored education. In addition to Sunday school, Wednesday evening Bible study and vacation Bible school, all of which included singing, several churches began formal Bible schools. These schools always included music in their curricula. The Reedley Bible School in 1940 included theory and interpretation of music and glee club. By 1941 this school had combined with the Dinuba Bible School to form Immanuel Bible School, later known as Immanuel High School. Music theory, choirs, band and small ensembles have continued through the years under the leadership of teachers including Paul Ratzlaff, Ben Horch, Jacob Hamm, Larry Martens, David Johnson and Dan Bishop.

The concern for educating young people in Christian faith led to the founding of Pacific Bible Institute (PBI). Here too, music played a vital role. At the 1944 conference in West Salem, Oregon, PBI gave its first report. Included was a statement that the administration planned to "contact certain brethren for the music department." The music position temporarily was filled by Erwin Hofer who had studied at San Jose State College. Even though money was in short supply the administration reported the purchase of two pianos. The articles of incorporation announced that the aim of the Music Diploma course "is to train men and women to instruct and direct music so that the gospel ministry of the church may be enriched and to be made more effective in the salvation of souls. A diploma is granted upon the completion of the three-year course, for which 90 hours of credit are required."

At the 1946 conference in Fresno PBI reported an enrollment of 85 students, of whom 18 were enrolled in the special music course. In 1947 the PBI choir sang at the conference in Dinuba. The choir and other music ensembles from PBI provided music at the conferences on a regular basis. Early in the 1960s PBI became known as Pacific College and later as Fresno Pacific College. Throughout all of these changes the music department continued to serve the churches of the Pacific District with music groups and church music conferences. In addition, the choir

performed on television, with the Fresno Philharmonic Orchestra and in schools throughout California. In 1969, under the direction of Larry Warkentin, the choir gave its first concert tour of Europe. Since, they have presented concert tours in Europe on six occasions, most recently under the direction of Roy Klassen. With recent addition of the Moore Memorial pipe organ and the Walcker tracker action chamber organ, a valuable new aspect of church music instruction has been made available. Under leaders including Victor Wiens, Dietrich Friesen, Larry Warkentin, Curtis Funk and Roy Klassen the music department has grown and continues to serve the churches of the Pacific District.

Music also has been a part of the conference radio ministry. In 1948 the college began a thirty-minute broadcast that was heard on KRDU in Dinuba every Sunday evening. This program featured inspiration, information, and music, but continued for only a few years. In 1965, at a conference held in Santa Cruz, a newly formed Radio Committee announced the beginning of "Words of the Gospel" broadcasts. On May 8, 1965 the program of music and spoken word was heard on seven stations, and by 1966 Executive Director Al Kroeker announced that the program could be heard on seventeen stations. The Words of the Gospel choir and the Men of Melody under the direction of Al Lepp, became well known in area churches as they complemented the preaching ministry of this evangelistic outreach. The scope of the broadcast continued to broaden, and in 1968 it became a project of the US Conference.

The history of the Music Committee in the Pacific District conference has an interesting pattern. When there has been a specific task for the committee to perform, such as the planning of song festivals, it has worked effectively. When no clear task was given to it the committee ceased to function. From 1912 until 1920 music planning was carried on by the program committee of the conference. Between 1920 and 1938 the song festival was planned by the Sunday School Convention Committee. From 1938 until 1947 a separate committee made up of choir directors planned the song festival and reported regularly to the conference. In 1947 the Choir Directors Committee suggested to the conference that the committee not only should plan the song festival, but that it also should assume a guiding role for music in the conference. In 1950 Paul Ratzlaff proposed that a Music Committee be established. This idea was accepted and for the next seven years this committee reported on their work, which was primarily the song festival. In 1958 there was no Music Committee report, and in 1959 there was a request from the conference that "the idea of a district conference song festival . . . not be forgotten." In 1960 there was a major song festival in Reedley that included ten choirs and a mass male choir all directed by guest conductor Paul Wohlgemuth, Professor of Music at Tabor College. In the years that followed there were neither music committee reports nor song festival reports.

In 1964 another music committee, with Larry Martens as chairman, was formed by the conference. Because the traditional song festivals had been discontinued, the committee assisted in planning church music workshops in various churches and at Fresno Pacific College. These workshops continued for the next ten years,

and guest clinicians included Don Hustad, Jester Hairston, and Lynn Whitten. The committee was enlarged from three to five members and the chairman of the music department of the college was added as a member. However, with the demise of the song festivals, the committee lost its primary function. In 1972 committee chairman Kenneth Gerbrandt reported some frustration with the work of the committee and with the lack of response from the church music directors; in 1974 the committee recommended its own dissolution.

Music continues to be a central activity of the churches in the PDC. Youth choirs, church choirs, oratorio performances, special Christmas and Easter pageants, bell choirs, orchestras, talent programs, singspirations at church camp, hymn sings and numerous other musical activities display a love for music. The strength of the church often is shown in the vitality of its music. Our challenge for the future might come from a statement in the 1943 conference minutes: "We still believe that a singing church is a conquering church."

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