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Sewing Peace:

Women's Missionary Societies, Churches, and the California Mennonite Civilian Public Service, 1940-1947

by Brian Froese

During World War II, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) ran three Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps in California.¹ Mennonite churches in California were supportive of their CPS men. In return, men from the CPS camps would, subject to time-off and gasoline availability, visit local Mennonite churches, sing songs and participate in communion. Underlying the CPS movement was an expression of love and duty toward country demonstrated in a manner congruent with the collective conscience of these churches.²

World War II certainly affected the lives of these men, their families and communities. The world of war involved the work of many, including organized support from Mennonite women's societies. What can be understood from the wartime efforts of Mennonite women was that involvement with CPS was only a portion of their activity. California



The MB Missionary Society of Reedley Mennonite Brethren church was one of numerous Mennonite women's sewing circles that supported Civilian Public Service camps, Red Cross, and other organizations during World War II. (Photo courtesy of Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies)

Mennonite women extended their involvement beyond the CPS to embrace various social and evangelical causes and organizations. As CPS did not represent a monolith of Mennonite pacifism, it alone did not represent the work of Mennonite women in

the turbulence of the 1940s.

The experiences of World War II and CPS drew Mennonites into a wider world. For CPS men that wider world often meant contact with diverse Mennonite groups from across the United States. For the women's sewing circles,

it often meant navigating and balancing the needs of the local Mennonite community and the broader American society. In 1944, for example, the Minister-at-Large for the Pacific District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church reported on his visits with CPS men in California, Oregon and Idaho at the annual conference. The CPSers he met in these camps found themselves in contact with different forms of Mennonite practice and belief. One Mennonite Brethren (MB)

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CPSer, for example, dealt with this pluralism by thinking of his religion as a family with God as the “heavenly Parent” and humans as the children. In this manner, he kept his beliefs intact in the face of competing Mennonite ideas and values.³

In reality, this expansive

understanding of pluralism was, however, more difficult to create. Privately, some CPS men said they preferred church services among their own group. In one diary account of life at Three Rivers Camp, Harold Gaede, a Mennonite Brethren man, wrote, “The Mennonite Brethren and the (Old) Mennonites tended to argue.”⁴ Such self-definition among Mennonite groups was also described in terms of spiritual care: “We appreciate the spiritual care and the ministry of our own conference brethren as they come to us...”⁵

Churches tied CPS, at times, into their own meetings. The Kern County Christian Fellowship, a group formed from the Bakersfield, Rosedale and Shafter Mennonite Brethren churches, was one such organization. It incorporated the message of the CPS into some of their meetings. At the Annual Kern County Christian Fellowship Conference, held September 5-7, 1942, the main message was that, “Christian youth need not despair, resort to Epicureanism or Stoicism, as does the world but rather it can use the crisis [of war]...to improve spirituality by repentance and going deeper.” Youth, therefore, were to “[Prepare] for the peace and the great missionary era,

which will follow, [as it] demands the best physical, intellectual and spiritual equipment.”⁶ At the same conference, a singing group from the North Fork CPS camp sang songs and a speaker described camp life. Following the conference, the church discussed where to send the offering money and the suggestions included CPS or war bonds. They did not record their decision.⁷

In 1943, the First Mennonite Church in Upland, near Los Angeles, observed Memorial Day by honoring all those who made America strong, a list that included soldiers who died in past wars and honest,

“For the women’s sewing circles, it often meant navigating and balancing the needs of the local Mennonite community and the broader American society.”

Footnotes

¹ Treatments of CPS in a broader historical context include, Melvin Gingerich, *Service for Peace: A History of Mennonite Civilian Public Service* (Akron, PA: The Mennonite Central Committee, 1949); Guy Franklin Hershberger, *The Mennonite Church in the Second World War* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1951), 34-108; Paul Frank Webb, “Mennonite Conscientious Objectors and the Civilian Public Service Camps of World War II,” M.A. thesis, California State University,

Fresno, 1988; and, Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1946), 233-267.

² Correspondence, *Gospel Herald*, June 2, 1944, Winton; and, P. C. Hiebert, et. al., Committee for General Welfare and Public Relations, “Providing for our Brethren Drafted into the Service of Our Country,” *Year Book of the 34th Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America*, November 26-27, 1943 (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1943), 43.

³ “Report of the Minister-at-Large, October 1, 1943 to June 2, 1944,” *Program of the Forty-Fifth Session of the Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite church of North America*, June 1944, p. 10-11.

⁴ P. C. Hiebert, et. al., Committee for General Welfare and Public Relations, “Civilian Public Service,” *Year Book of the 34th Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America*, November 26-27, 1943 (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1943), 33; and, Harold Gaede, “CPS Diary 1944,” April 6,

hardworking Americans from all lines of work. Specifically, this church supported CPS by canning

“Throughout the 1940s women’s groups provided support, not only to CPS but also to such humanitarian organizations as the Red Cross.”

food for the camps, a gesture that was designed not only to feed the young men in alternative service, but also to provide a way of “binding the camps and churches” together.⁸

The women’s sewing circles in many churches also bound camps and churches together. Throughout the 1940s, women’s groups provided support, not only to the CPS, but also to such humanitarian organizations as the Red Cross. Women’s groups also sent food, clothing, and letters to Mennonites in both CPS and the armed forces.

Mennonite churchwomen



While the sewing circle at the Dinuba Mennonite Brethren Church spent time making items such as aprons for the CPS camp at Three Rivers, California,¹¹ Clara Vogt Roth (left) of First Mennonite Church in Reedley served as a dietitian at North Fork (California) Civilian Public Service Camp. (Photo courtesy of Ruth Kope)

created women’s missionary societies that met to sew clothing for the needy. In 1937, after a previous attempt to organize, the women of the Zion Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church of Dinuba framed a constitution and named themselves the “Willing Workers of God.” Throughout

the 1940s the projects of the Willing Workers of God ranged from making quilts and kitchen cupboard doors, to providing shrubbery for the church, creating a flag for the “boys in service,” and baking fruitcakes for men in CPS. Their support extended beyond the Mennonite

1944, M250 Harold Gaede, CPS Diary 1944, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA, (CMBS-F).

⁵ P. C. Hiebert, et. al., Committee for General Welfare and Public Relations, “Civilian Public Service,” 31; and, Paul Toews, “Civilian Public Service and the Transformation of American Mennonites,” *California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin*, No. 19 (April 1988), 5.

⁶ “Program of the Fifth Annual Kern County Christian Fellowship Conference Held September 5, 6 and 7, 1942,” *Minute*

Book, p. 128-129, CB600 Kern County Christian Fellowship Records, File: Minute Book, CMBS-F.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 130, 132, 135.

⁸ “The Pastor’s Chat,” *The Herald*, First Mennonite Church, Upland, California, May 1943, p. 3; and, “Our Church at Work,” *The Herald*, First Mennonite Church, Upland, California, August 1945, p. 2. Upland, California, First Mennonite Church (Unprocessed), File: “The Herald” Newsletter of Upland, CA First Mennonite Church, 1937-44, 45.

⁹ Mrs. Pete Friesen and Mrs. Egon Hofer, “History of the Zion Sewing Society,” *Christian Witness*, October 5, 1955, 11; and *75th Anniversary: 1911-1986 Zion Mennonite Brethren Church* (Dinuba, CA: n.p., 1986), 13. Both sources found in Zion Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Dinuba, CMBS-F, Box 2, File: 60th & 75th Anniversaries 1971, 1986; Valerie Rempel, “‘She hath Done What She Could’: The Development of the Women’s Missionary Service in the Mennonite Brethren Churches of the United States,” *Bridging Troubled Waters: Mennonite*

“... the projects of the Willing Workers of God ranged from making quilts and kitchen cupboard doors, to ... creating a flag for the ‘boys in service,’ and baking fruitcakes for CPS.”

world to include the Gideons, an evangelical organization that distributed Bibles, and to the Red Cross. The Willing Workers’ efforts for these groups illustrated the blending of priorities in ways that combined service work for both Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike.⁹

The sewing circle at the Dinuba Mennonite Brethren Church divided its work primarily between the Red Cross and Mennonite participants in the war effort, whether in CPS or the military. By the mid-1940s,

the Dinuba women spent their society time making a “service flag, on which to put the names of the boys in the service of our country,”¹⁰ and making items such as aprons for the CPS camp at Three Rivers, California.¹¹

Even when sewing circle records did not mention CPS, women’s societies promoted humanitarian concerns through the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and non-Mennonite organizations. The Shafter Mennonite Brethren sewing circle, for example, worked hard throughout most of the 1940s. During that time, with an average of only twenty members a year, it produced dozens of comforters and quilts for MCC to distribute to the needy, along with donations of thousands of pounds of clothing. In addition, the Shafter circle worked on several projects for the church and, on one occasion, with the Boy Scouts.¹²

A similar pattern of involvement existed in the Reedley-Fresno area, which was the California Mennonite population center. The sewing circle at the Fresno Mennonite Brethren Church, for example, also supported the local Red Cross. When the Fresno MB sewing circle began on February 15, 1940, it

had to decide whether or not to work for the Red Cross. On March 21, 1940, the group appointed a committee to study the possibility of doing work for the Red Cross. Three years later, on March 4, 1943, it decided to do work for the Red Cross, but only when the Red Cross had plenty of work to do.

Even then, the sewing circle decided that it would determine action on a case-by-case basis, a restriction that was short-lived. On April 1, 1943, some women took Red Cross work home with them from a sewing circle meeting. At a June 24, 1943 meeting, Red Cross work was fully embraced when the sewing circle did Red Cross work as its official project for that day. It is of particular significance that it did so without holding a special meeting or recording an official discussion, implying that these women had come to view work for the Red Cross as a complement to work for church organizations.¹³

Throughout the first half of the 1940s, the Reedley Women’s Missionary Society ran successful relief sales averaging \$4,000 a year for the years 1943-1945. According to the fiftieth-year-anniversary history, the Reedley Women’s Missionary Society conceived its mission broadly. This conception of mission included raising money

Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century, ed. Paul Toews (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1995), 153; Valerie Rempel, “‘She Hath Done What She Could:’ The Development of the Women’s Missionary Services in the Mennonite Churches of the United States,” M.A. thesis, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1992, 33; and, Valerie Rempel, “Early Missionary Society Activity Among U.S. Mennonite Brethren Women,” *Direction* 24:2 (Fall 1995), 42-43.

¹⁰ *Minutes*, January 25, 1944, Dinuba Mennonite Brethren Church Records,

CMBS-F, Microfilm reel #4, frame 4270.

¹¹ *Minutes*, March 7, 1944, May 15, 1944, and, October 17, 1944, Dinuba Mennonite Brethren Church Records, CMBS-F, Microfilm reel #4, frames 4272, 4277, and 4286.

¹² *Annual Church Report*, March 1, 1945 to October 11, 1945; October 25, 1945 to October 17, 1946; October 24, 1946 to October 2, 1947; October 16, 1947 to October 7, 1948; October 21, 1948 to October 20, 1949; and October 20 to October 5, 1950, Shafter Mennonite Brethren Church Records, CMBS-F, microfilm reel

#77, frames 1406-1411.

¹³ *Minutes*, February 15, 1940, March 21, 1940, March 4, 1943, April 1, 1943, June 24, and July 8, 1943, Bethany Mennonite Brethren Church Records, CMBS-F, Box 5, File: Sewing Circle 1940-1946; and, John Goertzen, *Bethany Church: 50 Years* (Fresno: Bethany MB Church, 1992), 3.

¹⁴ *50th Jubilee 1905-1955: Mennonite Brethren Church Reedley, California* (n.p., 1955), 47.

¹⁵ *M.B. Mission Society Yearbook, 1940-1941*, and, 1942-1943, Reedley Mennonite

and gathering items for their church's building fund, Kings View Homes, the Home for the Aged and other projects for their church.¹⁴

Throughout the early 1940s, this group described its work with a prayer for rational efficiency: "Lord help us to accomplish the greatest possible good in the shortest possible time." Its slogan used a language of global concern in the time of world war, "For God and Home and Everyland."¹⁵

In 1942, in an expression of self-awareness, the Reedley sewing circle created an office of historian. The historian kept a scrapbook of pictures, mementos and newspaper clippings that described the group's activities.¹⁶ In this manner, the group affirmed the importance of its work.

When the Reedley General Conference Mennonite women organized the Worthwhile Circle, their purpose was to facilitate "Christian Fellowship" and "maintain missionary interest among the women of our church."¹⁷ In 1945-1946, their theme verse was Revelation 3:8: "Behold I have set before thee an open door." Throughout the 1940s, their yearbook covers affirmed the theme of worldwide concerns with a picture of a globe and the words,

"Committed Unto Us."¹⁸

Civilian Public Service was only one focus for women's societies in California Mennonite churches. Self-consciously, these groups of women expanded their role beyond the Mennonite sphere to include social and religious commitments to other organizations. In their responses to the challenges of a world at war during the 1940s, the sewing circles confidently professionalized their services,

expanded their work to encompass Mennonite and non-Mennonite organizations and values, and understood their charge to be global even when their reach was local.

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• *The California Mennonite Historical Society* •
ANNUAL SPRING MEETING

April 24, 2004

**College Community
(MB) Church**
 2529 Willow Avenue
 Clovis, CA



Speaker: Victor Wall
 Evangelical University of
 Paraguay in Asuncion

**Topic: *Mennonites and Government
in Paraguay***

3:30 p.m. Genealogy workshop
 6:00 p.m. Dinner
 7:30 p.m. Meeting and speaker

Dinner Cost \$10 (members)
 \$15 (non-members)

Reservations required. Call (559) 453-2225.

Brethren Church Records, CMBS-F, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1940-1947.

¹⁴ *M.B. Mission Society Yearbook, 1942, 1942-1943, 1944-1945*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, CMBS-F, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1940-1947; *M.B. Mission Society Yearbook 1951-1952*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, CMBS-F, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1947-1957; *M.B. Mission Society Yearbook 1957-1958*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records,

CMBS-F, Box 5, File: Women's Missionary Society 1957-1970, 1985-1988; *Scrapbook 1940-1955*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, CMBS-F, Box 10; and *Scrapbook 1965-1977*, Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church Records, CMBS-F, Box 11.

¹⁷ Darlene Hinamon, "History of the First Mennonite Church of Reedley," Research Paper, Bethel College, February 23, 1955. Student Papers, Mennonite Library and Archives/Mennonite Church USA Archives, North Newton, Kansas.

¹⁸ "Worth While Circle Yearbook 1945-

46," CONG.88 First Mennonite Church, Reedley, California, Box 2 File: Misc., MLA, "Worthwhile Circle Yearbook, 1947-1948," p. 9 and, "Worthwhile Circle Yearbook, 1949-1950," CONG.88 First Mennonite Church, Reedley, California, Box 2 File: Constitutions, Handbooks, Yearbooks, MLA.