

Mennonite COs and the United Church in Northern Aboriginal Communities

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On 29 May 1941 the Honorable James Gardiner, the Minister of the Department of National War Services, told the House of Commons that the first call-up of conscientious objectors (COs) for Alternative Service camps would begin in June. It was soon discovered that the Forestry Service in which men worked as lumberjacks, road builders and fire fighters did not appeal to all young Canadian Mennonite men, so other alternative forms of service were considered. A number found jobs in hospitals or related institutions that offered meaningful avenues of work and Christian service. Others, trained as teachers, spent their alternative service teaching in Northern Manitoba Aboriginal communities.¹

In his book *No Longer at Arms Length*, Peter Penner writes that in Manitoba the United Church of Canada and the Mennonite Brethren (MB) joined hands for the last years of the World War II by providing places of service for a number of Mennonite Brethren men who were of mobilization age, but were prepared for alternative service. Penner goes on to say:

...while there is some vagueness as to how this association came about, it is evident that A.A. Kroeker (Minister in the Winkler Mennonite Brethern Church) had connections with the United Church leadership in Manitoba, especially with Mission Superintendent Rev. J.A. Cormie, who appeared at a Mennonite Brethren Conference in LaSalle, Manitoba in May 1940 accompanied by W.C. Graham of United College in Winnipeg. They were hosted by Kroeker, who underlined the similarities between the two bodies in their primary concern for home missions. Cormie appeared again with three officers of his church at Steinbach, Manitoba two years later, and Rev. Herman Neufeld (Editor of the *Mennonitische Rundschau*) and George Pries (Treasurer of the Home Missions Committee) were asked to reciprocate the visit in order to bring fraternal greetings to the Manitoba United Church conference. One may

conjecture that the thought occurred to Kroeker, and perhaps to Cormie, that Mennonite conscientious objectors might be used as lay pulpit workers in United Church mission fields; moreover, that they might be able to serve there in lieu of alternative service in camps. Obviously, the United Church, which also had some conscientious objectors, was feeling an acute shortage of workers by 1943.²

These origins are confirmed in a letter written by Rev. Herman Neufeld to Mr. Harry Meadows of the United Church at Cross Lake, Manitoba, on 11 November 1943:

Years ago when Dr. Stevens was president of the Manitoba Conference of the United Church of Canada, a delegation was received from the Conference of the MB Church, headed by myself. Shortly after, a delegation of the United Church conference was greeted at our conference. Since that year, delegates of the two conferences began attending sessions of the [each] other[‘s] conferences. The United Church was represented by such distinguished leaders as Superintendent Dr. Cormie, Principal Dr. Graham, Principal Dr. Kerr, President Dr. Allison and Professor Dr. Freeman, secretary of the United Church. All they, without a single exception, are stating that the Mennonite Brethren church is the most broad-minded of all the Mennonites. In my church, with a seating capacity of 1,200, Dr. Cormie, Dr. Riddell, and other ministers of the United Church have served as guest speakers, as we are broadminded.³

For the United Church of Canada the war created some very serious problems. The editor of the *United Church Observer* described the situation in this way:

The unprecedented demand for men and women to serve in the Armed Forces and in the various war industries has had a rather serious effect on the Church and her institutions. Churches are vacant, home mission fields are in need of ministers, our theological colleges are thinned out and few men and women are left in the arts colleges looking towards a theological training. Perhaps few people realize the difficulty which faces those who have to meet these pressing needs. Many ministers, both in the east and west, have taken on extra services and are carrying a heavy load. Veterans of the cross who had retired, have returned to service and are often

doing more than their age or strength warrants. Consecrated laymen too are meeting the emergency, serving as lay supply. The church is grateful for all this service and that all of the people of the pastoral charges and mission fields are not altogether neglected. There is one sphere of the church work however, which does not receive the publicity that it might. The institutions are finding it extremely difficult to keep their staffs up to full strength. This is particularly true of our Indian work.⁴

In his annual report Rev. J.A. Cormie added that the most severe hurdle for the United Church's Home Missions program was the lack of personnel:

There are 15 Indian Reserves for which we have accepted responsibility to provide 11 missionaries, 4 missionary teachers, 8 other teachers and 2 field matrons. At the end of the year (1944), every reserve had a missionary, every school a teacher and both field matronships were filled. In addition, there were three residential schools, one under the supervision of the Women's Missionary Society, with accommodation for 375 pupils. Each of the residential schools lost its principal and several members of its staff during the year. New principals were found and staffs were mostly filled. It should be said, though, that for most of these fields there could not be found workers of the United Church affiliation, and had it not been for a number of young Mennonites interested in Indian Missions who volunteered for this work most of these reserves supplied by the parent churches and the United Church of Canada for the greater part of a century, like Norway House indeed since 1840, would have been lost to the church.⁵

In spite of the huge challenges faced by the United Church at the beginning of the war, church leaders were very grateful for the way circumstances had turned around. This change came about through the hard work and diligent efforts of a number of leaders in the church. Cormie added that cooperation with the Mennonites had had a particular effect:

The United church has done much to foster a good feeling and mutual understanding between the Mennonites and British elements, more indeed than any other body...Since for better or worse we are all here in this young country, there is surely only one sensible line to follow. Whatever our background

and point of view, we must learn to live together in peace and amity.⁶

In my research I found reference to a total of 25 young men – 19 Mennonite Brethren and six Bergthaler Mennonites (or General Conference Mennonites) – who served as missionaries, teachers or missionary teachers in lieu of military service. There were also six young women who served as teachers and who all had formal training as teachers. These young people worked in the Manitoba Aboriginal Communities of Berens River, Cross Lake, God's Lake, Island Lake, Indian Springs and Long Plains (both near Brandon), Little Grand Rapids, Nelson House, Norway House, Oxford House and Poplar River.

The first group of four men left for Northern Manitoba in the late spring of 1943. Rev. George Dorey, the associate secretary for the Board of Home Missions of the United Church, suggested to Rev. John Cormie that an orientation should be conducted for them. In a letter to Cormie, Dorey suggests that "it would be a good thing for Henry Schellenberg to come in and tell them of his experiences and how he has met his problems, and although the work at Indian Springs differs very much from the work in Northern Manitoba, I think he could make a contribution."⁷

Henry Schellenberg had begun teaching at the Day School in Indian Springs two years earlier in 1941; he had been a teacher at Altona for 14 years prior to this and came to Indian Springs highly recommended.⁸ Henry Schellenberg's father had been a teacher and his four brothers, who were serving in the air force, were also teachers. Schellenberg served as a missionary teacher and was considered to be a model teacher by the United Church for the respectful way he related to Native people and the innovative things he did to assist the community.

Cormie was pleased overall with the quality of character and service that these Mennonite people brought to the roles they were in. "In 1944," he wrote to Rev. Dorey, "I have found another good man for Poplar River, not a qualified teacher, but has a good education and five years of training in Bible School. He is of excellent character. He is very musical, in fact he conducted a male choir of 20."⁹ Cormie goes on to say:

I am very happy about the general condition on the reserves which I visited. I found the new missionaries very happy in their work and enthusiastic about the opportunity of service. They all spoke of plans that will carry them for some time and I am hoping that these plans will be taken care of until the war is well over. I am bound to say that I had a certain amount of

misgiving about the appointment of these young people but I have no hesitation in saying that they saved the situation for us. Every one of them, men and women alike, has had a real religious experience and they have a sense of mission. Every one of them alike said something like this, "This is what we always wanted to do."¹⁰

On a number of occasions, Cormie had to defend the Mennonite COs from some of his co-workers who did not share Cormie's enthusiasm. On one occasion Cormie writes to Rev. Dorey with reference to a Mennonite teacher: "He is very high strung and allows things to get on his nerves but he is doing good work and ought to be encouraged."¹¹ On another occasion, Rev. Cochrane of the Home Missions board asked Cormie to remove a CO because "he is unreasonable and very stubborn. I would like to see him come out and fall into the hands of Mr. Blair of the Alternative Service Board. I do not think we should protect him from what would have happened to him as a CO if we had not given him this position in the north."¹² Another time Dorey writes: "He is a perfect headache to me, I have no doubt he means well but his execution is faulty or worse."¹³ In spite of these complaints, Cormie remained optimistic and hopeful despite the quirks and shortcomings that these young COs displayed at times. He tended to take hope from voices like Abram J. Friesen, the Missionary Teacher from Poplar River, who said: "I find that I have great love for the Indians and am really interested in their way of life. We are very thankful for this privilege to serve the Lord amongst the Indians."¹⁴

The tasks these COs performed and the challenges they faced varied. In 1944 the CO missionary teacher from Oxford House reported to Dr. Cormie his activities for the previous months:

During January and February, I had a really hard time of it. Sickness was all over the country, 40 miles north, 30 miles west, 50 miles northeast. I visited many of them who were nearing their last days, a few I never saw alive by the time I got there and many died before I heard of them. Altogether I had 14 burials in January, once two in one day and once four in one week. It wasn't an epidemic because four were stillbirths and three mothers died as a result of them; two women died of the flu, three children of different causes and two children died of tuberculosis. Fur is nowhere to be found and in February I was forced to issue destitute relief. The traders now refused debt to trappers and the whole reserve fell on me for support. I had to refuse in many cases. In some cases they cut wood for the school, while the sick and starved received food outright.¹⁵

This sentiment was shared by the missionary teacher at Poplar River, who wrote that he “had so many difficulties and hardships with the people this winter, the conditions nearly crushed me at times. We had a lot of sickness and lost 11 people. We sent for a doctor but nobody paid us a visit, as yet not even a Mountie. I find that this reserve is neglected by the government and things will have to be straightened out if these people shall survive.”¹⁶

Jacob Toews needed to be a minister, teacher, social worker and doctor all rolled into one. He wrote:

My duties were to be fourfold. As a missionary I was to conduct services in the church, baptize, marry and bury members of the congregation as the occasion demanded. Then I was to teach Indian children according to a program of studies issued by the Department of Indian Affairs. Next I had to hand out food rations to widows and other destitute people on the reserve. Lastly, I was expected to tend to minor medical needs of the people. Here I feel entirely inadequate. I tended to minor aches and pains but refused to pull teeth. I realize I should have gone to a sympathetic dentist and got a few points on basic procedures.¹⁷

The CO stand was not very popular and some had to endure harassment along the way. Henry Gerbrandt of Cross Lake tells the story of how it was rumored that he had German connections. The Indians even believed a story that a German U-boat had come up the Nelson River to get instructions from him. Henry received a letter from the United Church head office that unless he discontinued his German activities they would release him. This puzzled him. Finally the source was discovered. A doctor, a school principal and a minister had spread the stories to get rid of him. When the United Church head office discovered the plot, they forced these men to come and apologize and to kill the rumors on the threat of being dismissed.¹⁸

One of the biggest sources of tension between the Mennonite COs and the United Church leadership was that of infant baptism. In a letter from Dr. Cormie to Rev. Dorey he says: “I could wish that these Mennonites would not have such a sensitive conscience on so many things. They are men of good character with a real religious experience and their devotion to the work is unquestionable. The main trouble I have with them is over the question of infant baptism.”¹⁹ Many of the COs who worked as missionary teachers struggled with this issue and tried to avoid baptizing infants. The CO from the Nelson House best describes his dilemma:

We are praying for God's guidance in this vital question. We want to serve the Lord Jesus Christ to the best of our ability. We love the Indians and in many cases have experienced their love for us. We find, however, that infant baptism is the chief obstacle to their salvation. Although baptism means dedication to the United Church, the Indians have a deep-rooted conviction that through baptism they come to heaven. The work of the Roman Catholic Church greatly confirms this conviction. They base their salvation upon baptism. They can swear, tell lies and cheat and live as they want to. They go to heaven anyway because they have been baptized. When we first came over we worked to baptize them but wanted them to understand that it was not just dedication but it was necessary to be based on faith as well. When we found how deep their conviction was and that it was raising false hopes in them, we could not but change our mind on infant baptism. How could we as missionaries go on deceiving them? Now we do not use the word baptism. Upon the wish of the parents we ask the Lord to bless their babies, as he blessed the babies on earth. We ask the parents whether they will do their best to bring up their children in the knowledge of God and in the knowledge of their Savior Jesus Christ. We have explained to them that the Lord Jesus did not use water when blessing children so we do not think it should be used but because it is customary with them, we give them the option.²⁰

Rev. Cormie responds that he is very disappointed by the CO's attitude towards the baptism of infants on the reserve:

I must remind you that you are employed by the United Church of Canada and that when you applied for the appointment I asked you if performing the rite of baptism would offend your conscience; you assured me that it would not. It was only after receiving your assurance that I agreed to recommend you for appointment. You will remember that I said to you that your appointment to the United Church Indian station would not be considered on any other basis. I consider that under the circumstances you are honorably bound to carry out the terms of your appointment. Whatever you think of baptizing infants with water, you must remember that a very large part of the Christian world does believe in and practice infant baptism. Of course, we of the United Church do not hold the Roman Catholic view of baptism, but we do believe that our children should be baptized because they are born within the

fellowship of the church and that Christ claims them for his own and entrusts them to their parents to be brought up in the household and family of God. It has been the practice of the Nelson House Reserve since the Methodist Church began work there many years ago to baptize the children of the Protestant Indians and I think you will easily see that the work at Nelson House should not be dissipated by action contrary to these old traditions...you must baptize the infants in harmony with the United Church practice and preach to all the people Christ crucified. If you do this, I will assure you that your work will be a great blessing to all the people.²¹

The CO replied to Cormie that he was happy now that matters were clearing up concerning the baptism of infants. "If all that you require of us when we dedicate infants is that we use water, we are willing to do this. That is what I understood when I talked to you, that baptism of infants was nothing else than dedication but that water must be used."²²

Cormie seems to have been a remarkable person, a man of honesty and integrity. Henry Gerbrandt, the CO Teacher from Little Grand Rapids, was also impressed with Dr. Cormie:

Dr. Cormie was the man who swooped me up from the office of the Selective Service Board and arranged for my assignment at Cross Lake. Almost a year earlier he had helped me to sort out the direction that I should go. At that time he had fit into the thought from Proverbs 3:5-6 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. Dr. Cormie protected me when other United church workers decided to get rid of all COs...He was an understanding man, a senior church minister and administrator. He appreciated the Mennonite peace position and defended us at considerable expense to himself.²³

Dr. Cormie resigned from his position in July of 1946, a role that he had played since 1920. In a letter to Dr. Dorey he writes, "You will be interested to know that on average, I would say, twice a month I receive from readers of the *Mennonite Review* contributions ranging from 2-10 dollars. Our employment of some of these young Mennonites has been good for the Mennonite Church as well as ourselves and has done more than anything I could think of to create fraternal relations between the two churches."²⁴ As the war was nearing its end, there was speculation about what might happen to the teaching positions and missionary

roles that Mennonites had filled and whether they would be replaced by soldiers returning from overseas.

On 19 January 1945 Dr. Cormie wrote the following defense of the Mennonite teachers:

I would expect some of the Mennonites will leave our service, though as far as I am concerned they will not be asked to leave if their work is satisfactory. They came to our assistance in the most critical period of work on these reserves and we are enormously indebted to them. The burden of keeping these fields supplied is almost entirely on my shoulders and I can assure you that it has been no easy task. Some of these young Mennonites have been a little difficult though no more than some men of our church who have been on these Indian Missions. I do not care to mention names, but during my nine years of responsibility for the work of the Indian Missions in this conference, I can name three United Church ordained ministers that did far more harm than good to our Indian work and at least two lay supplies who were not successful.²⁵

In his book *Mennonites in Canada: A People in Transition*, historian Ted Regehr acknowledges that these experiences with the native people in the North gave valuable experience to Mennonite teachers and opened a new field of missionary work after the war:

The wartime work had captured the imagination and enthusiasm of several young Bergthaler, or later Conference of Mennonites in Canada, and in 1948 they set up the Mennonite Pioneer Mission. The idea was to send qualified teachers and health care workers who would serve as missionaries into the Native communities... The first mission endeavours usually involved organization of a Sunday School or daily vacation Bible school depending on the season. If there was sufficient interest, Bible studies were arranged for parents as well but the missionary teachers and nurses also spent a great deal of time learning the language, getting to know the people and helping them with many of their economic and practical problems. They frequently served as mediators when the local people had to deal with unfamiliar agencies, becoming a voice for Native peoples. The early missionaries found the work difficult and results disappointing. A historian has noted that during the first 20 years with the Native people of Northern Manitoba the missionaries and board members learned that one could not simply announce the gospel at

Sunday services and expect the church to emerge automatically...the northern people wanted to see the Christian faith and this took time.²⁶

Years later the Native Ministries under Mennonite Church Canada continued to build on these early relationships, as Regehr goes on to note:

The Mennonite Brethren missionaries and mission board administrators were not able to make the necessary accommodations in their efforts to take the gospel to Canada's native people, either on Northern Reserves or in poorer urban districts. They like the Canadian Mennonite Conference (today, Mennonite Church Canada) followed up wartime assignments by establishing new mission stations in native communities in Northern Manitoba. Several missionaries at Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg were sent out but they encountered several difficulties. They emphasized a specific kind of conversion experience apparently not recognizing that such an experience incorporated elements of Western civilization that did not meet native needs. There was less understanding for the need to fit the gospel into Native society and a greater insistence that at conversion the Native leave behind and abandon all the old ways. The MBs also placed greater emphasis on church planting; they wanted to set up in Native communities denominational churches similar to in those in Mennonite communities. The most serious complaint against the MBs was that these people were more interested in building a church than serving a people. These problems eventually resulted in a withdrawal of the MBs from Native ministries in Northern Manitoba.²⁷

For Manitoba Mennonites the World War II opened new and unfamiliar opportunities for mission projects and service to brothers and sisters in need. For the United Church there was a real sense of fear and apprehension about allowing Christians of another denomination to minister to mission fields that they had nurtured for nearly a century. World War II brought together these two unlikely partners in a way that helped to foster a good working relationship that lasted beyond the war. A sense of mutual respect was ignited that recognized the caring spirit that they shared in common. In spite of the differences that exist between these denominations that cannot be minimized, the War brought together Mennonites and United Church people in a way that helped to create closer relations, that brought mutual benefit, new

strength, hope and vision to both churches, all positive development being built on today.

Notes

- ¹ For me personally, the most difficult part of putting this paper together is that it does not contain the voices and stories of the Aboriginal people who were most directly affected by these mission efforts. There are descriptions of life in Aboriginal communities given by teachers and missionaries who served there but the actual stories from the people themselves are missing. I have searched for information through a variety of sources but could not find anything. Their stories would have made this paper much more complete, so my apologies to those voices that were not heard. There were also 6 young women who taught in Northern Communities whose story was not recorded in this paper. Thank you to Diane Haglund and the staff of the United Church Archives in Winnipeg for their generous assistance in providing archival material for this paper.
- ² Peter Penner, *No Longer at Arms Length* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1987), 32.
- ³ Letter from Rev. Herman Neufeld to Harry Meadows. 11 Nov. 1943. Cross Lake Correspondence, United Church Archives, Winnipeg [hereafter UCA].
- ⁴ "Manitoba has shortage of ministers teachers and Medical Services," *United Church Observer*, 15 Oct., 1944.
- ⁵ *United Church Year Book*, 1945, 158.
- ⁶ Rev. J. A Cormie, "Manitoba Shows Manifestation of Racial Prejudice," *United Church Observer*, 1 June 1943.
- ⁷ Letter from Rev. Dorey to Dr. Cormie, 14 April, 1943, Norway House Correspondence, UCA.
- ⁸ Letter to Dr. Cormie from Henry S. Schellenberg, 15 May 1941, Indian Springs Correspondence, UCA.
- ⁹ Letter from Dr. Cormie to Rev. Dorey, 14 Sept. 1943, Poplar River Correspondence, UCA.
- ¹⁰ Letter from Dr. Cormie to Rev. Dorey, 4 Sept. 1943, Norway House Correspondence, UCA.
- ¹¹ Letter from Dr. Cormie to Rev. Dorey, 12 Dec. 1944, Little Grand Rapids Correspondence, UCA.
- ¹² Letter from Rev. Cochrane to Dr. Cormie, 2 March 1945, Oxford House Correspondence, UCA.
- ¹³ Letter from Rev. Dorey to Dr. Cormie, 21 Jan. 1944, Norway House Correspondence, UCA.
- ¹⁴ Letter from Abram J. Friesen to Dr. Cormie, 21 July 1944, Poplar River Correspondence, UCA.
- ¹⁵ Letter to Dr. Cormie from Wilhelm Dueck, 28 Feb. 1944, Oxford House Correspondence, UCA.
- ¹⁶ Letter from Abram J. Friesen to Dr. Cormie, 24 Feb. 1946, Poplar River Correspondence, UCA.
- ¹⁷ "Teachers in Northern Manitoba," <http://www.alternativeservice.ca>.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Letter from Dr. Cormie to Rev. Dorey, 16 Jan. 1945, Long Plains Correspondence, UCA.
- ²⁰ Letter from Alfred Kroeker to Dr. Cormie, 2 Dec., 1943, Nelson House Correspondence, UCA

- ²¹ Letter from Dr. Cormie to Alfred Kroeker, 10 Dec. 1943, Nelson House Correspondence, UCA.
- ²² Letter from Alfred Kroeker to Dr. Cormie, 4 March 1944, Nelson House Correspondence, UCA.
- ²³ Henry J. Gerbrandt, *Enroute: Memoirs of Henry Gerbrandt* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1944), 99.
- ²⁴ Letter from Dr. Cormie to Rev. Dorey, 19 Jan. 1945, Little Grand Rapids Correspondence, UCA.
- ²⁵ Letter from Dr. Cormie to Rev. K.C. McLeod, 19 Jan. 1945, Norway House Correspondence, UCA.
- ²⁶ T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada: A People Transformed, 1939-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 335.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 339.