

The Chinese Mennonite Brethren Church in Vancouver

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Early Growth of Mennonite Brethren (MB) Churches in BC

The Chinese in Canada have formed a distinct community since the first Chinese immigrants arrived here in the mid-nineteenth century. At first, they came as gold prospectors to the Fraser Valley¹ and as coal miners to Vancouver Island.² The highest influx of labourers came from southern China in the early 1880s when the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway got under way to connect British Columbia (BC) to the rest of the country. Many miners and railway workers stayed behind after they had finished their work. By the turn of the twentieth century, they were living in every Canadian province with the largest population, 15,000, in BC.³ As the Chinese settled across the country, the Methodist church was the first Christian church to reach out to them. It started a mission school in Victoria in 1876 and another in Vancouver in 1888.⁴ Around the same time, the Presbyterian church founded the Victoria Chinese Presbyterian Church in 1892. It is the oldest Chinese church in the country that is still in active ministry today.⁵

In the 1960s, MB Christians started to reach out to the Chinese as part of its broader ministry among non-German speaking groups. In 1964, Henry Klassen of the British Columbia Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (BCMB) started the Pacific Grace Mission Chapel on the east side of Vancouver.⁶ Because the church was in close proximity to Chinatown, many students in the children's Sunday school were from the neighbouring Chinese fam-

ilies. Subsequently, the church extended its evangelistic effort to the Chinese community. In 1973, a worship service in Cantonese was held for the first time. In the following year, a Chinese ministry department was set up to facilitate adult Sunday school, fellowship, Bible study, etcetera.⁷

Henry Klassen was a missionary known as a visionary with a generous mind and a loving heart. Seeing the quantitative growth of Chinese Christians in his church, he recommended dissolving the English congregation and selling the church property for one dollar to their Chinese counterpart.⁸ His idea was well received by the Caucasian members, most of whom willingly joined other MB churches in town. However, a handful of them stayed behind to help with the childrens' Sunday school in the new church. In 1977, the first Chinese MB church in North America was born and it was officially accepted by the BCMB Conference in 1981. To remember their roots in the Pacific Grace Mission Chapel, the members named their new church after it, exchanged only the word Chapel for Church,⁹ although later it was renamed the Pacific Grace MB Church. In 1978 a second church, the Bethel Chinese Christian MB Church began its ministry and in 1980 it, too, became a member of the BCMB.

The two Chinese churches were organized in time to join a major church planting campaign initiated by the MB Canadian Board of Evangelism in the 1980s.¹⁰ Chinese MB Christians understood that their outreach responsibility was their Chinese compatriots in Metro Vancouver. Pacific Grace MB Church, thus, commissioned their pastors and fifty members to plant the Burnaby Pacific Grace Church in north Burnaby east of Vancouver in 1990.¹¹ About three years later, the Burnaby church established an MB church in Port Moody, approximately twenty-five kilometers east of Vancouver, and named it the Port Moody Pacific Grace MB Church. For the next two decades the mission of planting Chinese MB churches carried on throughout Metro Vancouver. From a humble beginning with one church in 1977, there were sixteen churches in the Lower Mainland by 2018.¹² Together they form the MB Chinese Churches Association (MBCCA) for the purpose of support and cooperation. Besides churches in greater Vancouver area, by 2018 there were also Chinese MB churches in Winnipeg, Calgary, and Prince George, BC.¹³ In 1989, the Pacific Grace MB Church sent out its first foreign missionaries, choosing Venezuela, where in 1991 the Iglesia Evangelica China Gracia De Dios was planted in Caracas, the capital, and Iglesia Evangelica China La Cruz in Puerto la Cruz east of Caracas.¹⁴

Factors for Rapid Growth of the Chinese MB Church

At least two factors contributed to the rapid growth of the Chinese MB church in the 1990s. The first one was the campaign of church planting in the MB family coupled with Chinese members' persistent effort in reaching out to their compatriots. The second factor was the influx of some 166,000 Hong Kong immigrants from the end of the 1980s to the mid-1990s before the return of the former British Crown colony to China in 1997. Facilitating this outreach was the fact that, as the *Vancouver Sun* reported in 1997, "30 per cent of new Chinese immigrants [mainly from Hong Kong]" in Metro Vancouver were Christians.¹⁵ They came to Canada because they were petrified by the Chinese government's crackdown on the peaceful student-led democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in Beijing on June 4, 1989. They were apprehensive about losing their freedoms, especially the freedom of religion, under an oppressive government.

In addition to Hong Kong immigrants, the Chinese from Mainland China formed another immigration wave arrived in Canada between 1999 to 2011, with more than 42,000 arriving in 2005 alone.¹⁶ Because most of these newcomers experienced culture shock and an identity crisis upon arriving in Canada, many began attending Mandarin-speaking churches in a metropolitan city like Vancouver, and according to Douglas Todd, did so, "to strengthen their original Chinese identity."¹⁷ Many soon converted to Christianity and the Chinese MB church was a beneficiary of these conversions.

Many Hong Kong Christian immigrants chose the Chinese MB church for their own reasons, and despite the fact that they knew little about it.¹⁸ The reason for this may be threefold: first, their friends who had been attending the church invited them to join it; second, they were contacted by the church in their neighbourhood; third, they visited the church on their own and found that the church's statement of faith was compatible with theirs. Together with mainland Chinese Christian converts, Hong Kong Christian immigrants contributed to the numerical growth of Chinese MB churches in BC and indirectly to the changing face of the MB family in Canada.

Denominational and Cultural Identity

Most of the Chinese MB churches in Metro Vancouver have been active in ministry for over twenty years. One would expect

that they would have developed a basic MB identity, that is, knowledge of MB history and MB roots in Anabaptism. It might have been expected that they would also have become acquainted with Pietism and its influence, familiarity with the interpretation of the Bible and understanding of the teaching of peacemaking and other teachings. Surprisingly, that is not the case. An informal internal survey conducted among the pastors showed that a Mennonite identity was not very noticeable.¹⁹ On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being most noticeable, the rating was no higher than 3. Significantly, the Chinese-speaking pastors who were immigrants tended to rate higher than their English-speaking counterparts who were mostly Canadian-born or Canadian-raised Chinese. The same survey also revealed that church members were not familiar with MB history and values. On a scale ranging from Very Well to Poorly, the rating was between Fairly and Poorly.

Several possible reasons account for why the MB identity is not strong in the Chinese church. First, it was probably not emphasized when the church joined the Conference. Second, Chinese churches do not usually send delegates to provincial conventions or national gatherings. Third, over the years, Chinese-speaking pastors in leading and associate roles, almost without exception, have grown up in a non-MB church and received their training in a theological institution other than an MB Bible college or seminary. Furthermore, most of these pastors served in another denomination before joining the MB Conference. Although, as MB pastors they are required to attend the Pastor's Credentialing Orientation to learn about MB history, theology and ministries, they receive but an introduction to these themes, hardly sufficient for them to gain an in-depth understanding and appreciation of the MB family. Thus, the MB identity has been weak over the years.

This situation, however, is gradually improving. Since the MB *Confession of Faith* was translated into Chinese in 2017, many churches have begun to study it regularly in their board meetings and to use it for leadership and membership training. Undoubtedly, such practice will nurture a better understanding of the MB beliefs and a stronger sense of belonging and an MB identity in time.

At first glance, the term "Chinese Mennonites" seems incongruous. The word "Chinese" connotes people or language relating to China and "Mennonites" refers to a group of believers of Jesus who follow Menno Simons' teaching concerning the Bible, Christian faith and life.²⁰ Now the term has acquired a different connotation. The two groups are bonded together by their common faith in Jesus Christ.

Although Chinese have settled in Canada for more than 160 years, the majority have not been fully integrated into mainstream society. Among many factors, the policy of multiculturalism of Canada has been noteworthy, as well as the continued influx of Chinese immigrants mainly from China. For a long time, nearly each Chinese MB church also doubled as a cultural centre besides being a place of worship. It is a school where immigrants send their children to learn to read and write Chinese; it is a place where they gather to celebrate Chinese traditions, e.g. Chinese New Year; and it is a community centre where they attend talks on different social issues in their native tongue.

One can't help but wonder what would happen to the Chinese MB church and its ministry when Chinese immigration slows down and even stops one day. The church needs to realize that it exists neither for intraracial evangelism nor for cultural preservation only. It should develop a broader vision and mission to see beyond its current ministry involvement. Being a member of the BCMB, the Chinese church is an important partner in the spiritual health and vibrancy of both provincial and national conferences.

Chinese Mennonites Over the Next Generation

Many Chinese MB churches have decided to drop the word "Chinese" from their name long ago in hopes of blending in with the community. Has it worked? Not quite. The churches have no doubt been accepted as part of their community. Yet, there is little interaction with their neighbours, let alone integration. The congregations have essentially remained ethnically Chinese. What is required is a clear vision and a detailed long-term plan. According to the findings of an informal survey, the Chinese-speaking pastors admit that they will not see their churches become a truly neighbourhood and multiethnic church in their time. The reason is that the resistance to such change is rather strong within the Chinese congregation who are the majority of the membership.²¹ They are concerned about losing their cultural identity, their language, their traditions, their social life, etcetera. The pastors believe that the change will most likely occur with the next generation who are Canadian-born and Canadian-raised. The young people are more attuned to the broader Canadian culture and better equipped to make the change happen.

However, this is easier said than done because many churches are facing a challenging problem – the hemorrhaging faith. The youth leave the church in substantial numbers when they enter

university. Another problem concerns a sense of belonging. Many young people feel that the church is not theirs but their parents'. Such sentiment arises from the fact that they have little input in casting the vision and planning the mission. Most of this visioning is done by the Chinese-speaking leadership. The youth do not feel obligated to continue the mission started by their parents' generation. They can leave the church easily and join any English-speaking church in town whose vision and mission they share.

The history of the Chinese MB church began when Henry Klassen and the Pacific Grace Mennonite Chapel reached out to the Chinese immigrants on the east side of Vancouver almost fifty years ago. Despite the challenges and struggles, the church has certainly taken root and become an integral part of the MB family over the years.

In the early years, the relationship between the Chinese MB church and the BCMB Conference could best be described as advisory and financial. The church had no MB roots and relied on the Conference to provide guidance in theology and governance, including writing bylaws. The relationship was financial because the church was young and did not have the means to operate its ministry; it definitely needed assistance from the Conference, especially when it planted a number of churches in the 1990s.

However, the church became self-contained as it grew in quantity and matured in quality. This has enabled it to play a more active role through the MBCCA in the Conference. Previously, the role was also limited due to language and culture. In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in Chinese leaders' involvement in the provincial as well as national MB conference. Such involvement undoubtedly allows the Chinese church to gain a fuller understanding of the operation of the MB family, enhances the communication between the two which can lead to more cooperation in the future, and nurtures a stronger sense of belonging which is beneficial to MB identity.

Today, the term "Chinese Mennonites" is no longer an incongruous name. Rather, it is a term that proclaims the "Pacific Grace" of God for a specific immigrant group; also, it is a term that expresses spiritual unity as well as cultural diversity of the Canadian MB family.

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Notes

- 1 Anthony B. Chan, (2015). "Chinese Canadians." [http://www. Thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chinese-canadians/](http://www.Thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chinese-canadians/) [March 6, 2018].
- 2 "History of Canada's Early Chinese Immigrants." [https://www. bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/early-chinese-canadians/Pages/history.aspx#bc3](https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/early-chinese-canadians/Pages/history.aspx#bc3) [March 6, 2018].
- 3 Ibid. <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/early-chinese-canadians/Pages/history.aspx#ac> [March 6, 2018,].
- 4 John Atkin, (2013). "Chinese Methodist Mission Church, Chinatown" [Online]. <https://topofmydesk.com/2013/04/03/chinese-methodist-mission-church-chinatown/> [March 8, 2018].
- 5 "Victoria Chinese Presbyterian Church" [Online]. <http://pccweb.ca/victoria-chinese/> [March 8, 2018].
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- 7 Ibid. 9.
- 8 This information is provided by Rev. Xavier Law, lead pastor of Pacific Grace MB Church.
- 9 Joseph Kwan, chief ed. 9.
- 10 Victor Wiens, ed., *The Church in Mission: Perspectives of Global Mennonite Brethren on Mission in the 21st Century* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2015), 184.
- 11 Joseph Kwan, chief ed. 11.
- 12 For a list of these churches see: "Churches." <http://www.mbcca.ca/en/churches.html> [May 15, 2018].
- 13 They include: Winnipeg Chinese MB Church, South Winnipeg Chinese MB Church, Mountainview Chinese MB Church in Calgary, and the Prince George Chinese Christian Fellowship.
- 14 Joseph Kwan, chief ed. 12.
- 15 Douglas Todd, (2011). "Ethnic Churches Flourishing." <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/staff-blogs/ethnic-churches-flourishing> [November 12, 2018].
- 16 Anthony B. Chan, (2015). "Chinese Canadians". <http://www.theCanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chinese-canadians/>[November 13, 2018].
- 17 Douglas Todd, (2018). "Vancouver's Chinese Flock to Christianity more than Buddhism". <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/staff-blogs/vancouver-chinese-flock-to-christianity-more-than-buddhism> [November 13, 2018].
- 18 Unlike the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church or the Baptist Church, the MB does not have any church in Hong Kong.
- 19 This informal internal survey was conducted among pastors of MB Chinese Churches Association in March, 2018.
- 20 Andrew Dyck, Elenore Doerksen, Jon Isaak and Angeline Schellenberg, ed. *Family Matters: Discovering the Mennonite Brethren* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2017) 11
- 21 In general, there are at least two congregations in a given church – Chinese and English.