“We also still have ethnic hang-ups”: Church Growth and Identity among the Mennonite Brethren in Post-1960s British Columbia

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In October 1990, Nick Dyck, a longtime head of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Board of Church Extension (BOCE) in British Columbia wrote a brief history and accounting of how his denomination had experienced impressive church growth since the early 1970s. During the 1970s the number of MB churches in British Columbia (BC) increased by one per year on average and then it tripled in the 1980s. To explain this positive development Dyck faithfully stated: “With no noticeable increase of effort on the Board’s and director’s part, doors began to open up in unprecedented fashion…God graciously honored the vision and faith of the Board…Again, this growth did not happen as a result of frantic efforts to fulfill ‘our goals’, but it was the Holy Spirit’s response to obedient faith.”[1] Dyck was not only modest, he was not telling the whole story. Over those twenty years BOCE changed course in their approach to church missions and were aggressive in implementing it.

The changes brought about by people like Dyck and others were not only part of a decades-long history in BC but also part of a larger denominational emphasis on evangelism and church growth.

Included in the open embrace of evangelical initiatives such as this were questions of Mennonite identity and a desire to end the idea of Mennonite ethnicity.

Historical Background

It was not until 1927 and 1928 that Mennonites moved to BC in large numbers, following the second wave of Mennonite immigration to Canada from the Soviet Union in the 1920s.[2] Once in Canada they moved to BC, often after brief stays in Saskatchewan and Manitoba and established themselves as fruit and vegetable farmers.[3] During the 1920s, their primary settlement was in the Fraser Valley at Yarrow.[4]

Many Mennonites also migrated to BC after World War II, and in some instances created large successful capitalist enterprises in a range of industries. In their exercise of historical agency, conflicts developed as they navigated an identity that was traditionally isolationist, and which ostensibly spurned conspicuous consumption. Identity issues for Mennonites invariably dealt with interpreting their relationship with the wider society in terms of "worldliness."[5] Although modernity challenged some Mennonite ideas of worldliness, there resulted significant attempts to use the wealth they created to support Mennonite institutions including the construction of churches, schools, and humanitarian agencies. Such institutions then required an affluence to remain viable.[6]

The decades following World War II were transformative for North American culture virtually across the board and Mennonites were no different. Increasingly, a people once defined by their "quietness in the land" became increasingly connected to the broader world as governments expanded infrastructure construction that linked rural areas to urban centers, and an expanding consumer culture reached the Mennonites too through a host of new products from cars to television sets. Isolation was increasingly hard to come by and with it other fruits of modernity, such as higher education, professionalization, and specialization were picked.[7]

Mennonite scholar, John Redekop, identified two apparently contradictory effects of post-war prosperity, a loss of traditional ideals and the persistence of traditional ideals, observing, "Due in part to this prosperity, one senses today a loss of suspicion toward 'the world.'"[8] He continued, "in many cases prosperity gave Mennonite Brethren the ability to put into practice many of their Anabaptist principles." That demonstration of Anabaptist princi-

ples translated into financial support for missions, education and other forms of church work.[9]

Mennonites came to the Fraser Valley in particular for its climate and agricultural promise. As historian Royden Loewen observed, many Mennonites in their memoirs of immigrating to the Fraser Valley spoke in utopian terms, in the language of a "promised land." Throughout all aspects of life—family, work, community—"faith for them was interwoven into the community's very social fabric."[10] As prosperity enriched the lives of Fraser Valley Mennonites and post-war modernity became the new way of life, religious and cultural identities long established would be reconsidered.[11]

There was also a prairie movement of Mennonites to BC. This story begins in Saskatchewan in the early to mid-1930s. Evidently during the 1932-1933 school year at Bethany Bible College (formally Hepburn Bible School), several students began praying for "the thousands of lost sheep in the northern districts of the Prairie Provinces."[12] Their concern for these "lost sheep" intensified on account of the growing population due to "large homesteading." After heading west, in 1937, to conduct Daily Vacation Bible School (DVBS), Sunday school, and evangelistic programs and services, they officially organized themselves into the Western Children's Mission. Initially their work was in Saskatchewan. From these prairie beginnings WCM branched out to Alberta and British Columbia centered in Coaldale and Abbotsford.[13]

Financed by "free-will offerings," the staff and missionaries were "expected to depend on God for their temporal supplies." In particular they began their focus where they had ethnic connections in western Canada.[14] A nucleus of a program was formed in the Bradner district of BC by August 1939.[15] Over the next six months the young men behind the venture traveled throughout the area, including Chilliwack, Bradner, White Rock, and north of White Rock. From there, on bicycle in warm weather and a borrowed car from local MBs, they extended outward to Queensboro and Pitt Meadows. In the early months, at the suggestion of the "B.C. Brethren," it remained separated from the church. In 1940, MB churches increasingly warmed to DVBS ministry and it was incorporated as a separate mission.[16]

In 1940, the Mennonite Brethren BC Conference began to consider accepting reports from this ministry at their annual meetings and soon recognized them as a conference ministry re-naming them West Coast Children's Mission (WCCM). Significantly, the mission did not use the name "Mennonite" in order to avoid societal tensions some Mennonites experienced as Canada was fighting

in the Second World War.[17] After a few years the MB Conference of British Columbia assumed responsibility and in the early 1960s changed its name to Mennonite Brethren Home Missions in British Columbia. The MB in BC then emerged in a significant way in the 1930s through WCCM. Generally, WCCM worked in remote locations, creating Vacation Bible School programs—consisting of Bible stories and various activities—for children in the summer, which eventually led to Sunday schools, and at times, the creation of churches.[18]

The first forty years in BC was filled with significant transitions, notably moving from rural communities to urban centers, moving largely from poverty to middle-class life, the language transition from German to English, and as Nick Dyck described it, MBs also moved "from self-preservation to a degree of altruism."[19] These major transitions occurred largely in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, in the early 1970s, another major transition occurred in their conception of mission and the MB shifted from children ministry to adult ministry. They moved away from Vacation Bible Schools to church planting and alongside a second corresponding transition was the dropping of the MB name by new churches for descriptors like community, bible, fellowship, or, chapel. Dyck was clear that these were MB churches, if not in name they were by denomination.[20]

According to Dyck it was difficult for the evangelistically minded MB for they "were rightly known as being very clanish [sic], being distinctive in history, culture and language…The war years had caused alienation and suspicious of German-speaking people…With such negative attitudes, it was difficult over the next several decades to establish a clearly identified Mennonite Brethren work." By necessity, he argued, MB were heavily non-denominational in their evangelistic work, culminating in the reality that by the 1990s new churches largely took non-denominational names.[21] The change in emphasis regarding evangelism began in the early 1970s across the evangelical world and MB in North America. It was picked up passionately in BC.

Church Growth and Identity

Following the Lausanne 74 Congress in Switzerland, held July 16-25, 1974 – a large international conference on evangelism headed by such leaders of evangelical evangelism as Billy Graham and John Stott – an MB Ad Hoc Evangelism Committee met in Fresno, California to discuss missions. The Congress was attended by MB

leaders J. J. Toews, Henry Schmidt, Leonard Vogt, Bob Hodel, and G. W. Peters, while others were invited to the larger committee. From BC helping to represent the Canadian Board of Evangelism was Nick Dyck. The larger North American MB Conference was in a period of rethinking their commitment to evangelism and inspiration flowed from Lausanne.[22]

In their conversations, the committee discussed the relationship of revival and evangelism, and how to engage both church leadership and laity. Dyck argued, "we lost out in both evangelism and revival because there was no structure to follow through those reached or those who need to be converted," and called upon the church to restructure its programs.[23] Their general agreement was to establish training seminars to which local churches would send a representative and pastor to attend and then adapt what they learned to their local situation.[24] British Columbia planned their seminars for January 19-23, 1976.[25]

The key themes for January 1976 were "the Spirit controlled person," and the "Instrument in Evangelism." They held seminars on strategies, methods, and intended a New Testament focus to equip pastors to train others. The BC Conference acknowledged that there were many similar programs, such as Campus Crusade and Vancouver Reach Out, but they were not trying to duplicate their work as many MBs were already involved with them. Their seminars, however, were designed to connect MBs across north America, assist churches without a program of their own, and to provide something for those who desired something "under our denominational 'umbrella.'"[26]

Dyck had a few concerns prior to the upcoming training seminars. First, each church was asked to include a woman as part of their team to the seminar, "What do we expect her to do when she returns to her church?... One of the naturals for ladies is the coffee hour evangelism/home bible studies. Should we offer training in this ministry?" Another concern of his was that the sessions be practical and in particular, he wanted the topic "evangelism and the total church program" covered, for he thought too many churches treated evangelism as an extra, if not unnecessary, appendage.[27] Dyck's ideas were well received, and regarding women at the seminar, it was recommended that churches send a woman to the seminars to then provide leadership in their home churches for women in their own ministries such as Home Bible Studies or Friendship Evangelism.[28] In the end, the seminars were well attended with ninety-two attendees representing twenty-eight churches.[29]

Participants received a detailed handbook produced for the seminar that explained how churches could modernize their church growth approach. It guided the reader on crafting a purpose statement that included three points to their success and unpacked their major activities, key market, and, anticipated results.[30] Once a purpose statement was written, assessment followed. The statement must be clearly understandable by all church members, ensuring that all activities were clearly connected to their purpose and, to verify they were "rapidly progressing" to its completion.[31] There were worksheets on "Faith Planning" and "Developing a Faith Plan," to aid in reflection on God's purpose, humanity's purpose and problem, and how to operate greater than the sum of their parts.[32] To achieve this, people needed to "[picture] in your mind's eye what God wants to do," while charting everything from goals to results on the "Faith Planning Control Sheet."[33]

Objectives and goals for the church board were calibrated a bit differently, though the rationalized professionalization was its organizing principle. The purpose here was "to provide means to mature every believer and motivate him to share his faith," though actual planning and goals were specific to hiring staff, such as secretary, custodian, associate pastor and "pastor-shepherd." Churches were advised to construct more classrooms, a gym, enlarge the worship area, have a deacon to member ratio of 1:25, and ensure every member was in a bible study group. Furthermore, to strengthen families programs were to be developed to assist in coping with their needs especially in finances, relationships, and sex education. Then "intensive evangelism of a prescribed area around our church location" was discussed with an annual evaluation of organizational structure prescribed.[34]

P.J. Fast gave a presentation, which he acknowledged was based on a presentation given by Dr. Win Arn, of California, founder of the Institute for American Church Growth, with Donald McGavran. He encouraged the BC churches to be "aggressive" in their evangelism. Furthermore, he argued, that ninety-five to ninety-eight per cent of church people were involved in "maintenance" work and not interested in evangelism. Fast explained this was the case because most Christians no longer thought of "lostness and hell." Side-stepping his theological concern, he proposed that to reclaim the fire of evangelism, churches needed to employ a variety of evangelistic methods. Using medical imagery he explained, "methods used must fit the body or the body will reject it." Borrowing from Dr. C. Peter Wagner, of Fuller Theological Seminary, regarding "The Cost of Church Growth," Fast explained that pas-

tors have to meet a price based on their willingness to have a hard and heavy work load, improve training, and, share leadership; meanwhile, people in church also have a price to meet, a willingness to contribute financially, "follow a growth leader," give of their time, and be ready to sacrifice.[35]

To these ends, master planning was a must. The suggested instructions for a comprehensive church extension plan should include a chart listing goals, the associated resources and the expected time-lines measured in years and milestones. In concert with creating a master plan the MB were to work with the Fuller Institute to help create a profile for church planters. The core ideas to inform goals in the plan included an increasingly familiar platform of planting churches, outreach to various ethnic groups, work with local MB college faculty and students, engage the laity, develop church planters, and clearly definded resources to enact their strategy. When cataloging barriers to growth it was fear of failure, finances, and a lack of vision and leadership that topped the list. They also identified needs in their "target group" as loneliness, family, finances, and lack of purpose.[36] The new post-1960s approach was professionalized, modernized and wrapped in the language of medical and social science. Such initiatives flowed from Pasadena, southern California, which was the epicenter of the church growth movement.

Reflecting on the seminar, Mary Fehr commented she appreciated the accessible messages and "spicy humour among the leaders." She was also among the first to raise the question of Mennonite ethnic identity in the growth context: "I feel that many people, especially of British background still look at Mennonites as those who immigrated here and they, not we so much, find it difficult to identify with us. We also still have ethnic hangups [sic] that probably a generation after us will not have." In the spirit of newness, becoming modern, not only was the jettisoning of ethnic identity increasingly important, so too was understanding evangelism and church growth scientifically, as "new methods must be experimented with and just like so many things in science and medicine we try but the results are not what we expected."[37]

Church leaders that responded found the event helpful and detailed their existing efforts at evangelism.[38] Some, such as the pastor at the Harrison Gospel Chapel, emphasized the evangelical side of being MB as in working with Campus Crusade for Christ. John Schmidt of Fort St. John expressed similar sentiments, writing, "We as Mennonite Brethren, have the claim of being an evangelical church, but we need to be more than just evangelical; we must be much more evangelistic." Herbert J. Brandt of Rich-

mond Bethel Church suggested MB churches needed to be "more visible" in the community and Christianity "made practical," that is, "spread the salt around to do some good in our corrupting society" and suggested multi-use church buildings to include day care, public health clinics, recitals and so on.[39]

Building on the momentum of the mid-1970s, the MBs held a "Church Growth Leadership Seminar" in late February 1978 with Dr. Gene Getz, from Dallas, Texas, and Vern Heidebrecht, pastor of Lincoln Glen MB in San Jose, California as featured speakers. Getz lectured on the "nature and life of the Church" and Heidebrecht on such practical matters as methods and organizational structures. The purpose of the seminar was to "inspire, direct, and provide practical information" for church growth.[40] Though church growth was emphasized in the province during the 1970s, this was their first attempt at a seminar with delegates from all BC MB churches. Dyck's expectations were high. He expected it "to affect our entire conference" through the channeling and crafting of evangelistic inspiration and direction to all churches. He mentioned to Getz that much of what MBs had done prior was work through parachurch organizations, but now it was time to develop their own philosophy and approach to church growth relative to Canadian Mennonites.[41]

Some churches resisted the emerging approach to growth. Pastor John Thielmann, wrote, "we felt uneasy with expressing church growth in terms of percent." He described their church growth over the past year as "significant" and reported they will continue their efforts to reach families in their community.[42] In Richmond, H. E. Pankratz, of the Fraserview Church, reported doing much outreach through clubs for children and young people, as well as developing a small group for an "'evangelism explosion.'" He too ignored the percent metric.[43] The pastor at Kelowna informed Dyck that they were not filling out the report form. He summarized their activities including how they sent out a "scouting mission" of four board members to churches experiencing growth and from that distilled principles to developed a "growth mentality." They held a banquet where people brought unchurched friends, and used non "church-types" of music, such as singing groups and orchestras.[44] Churches were reportedly active in their communities, taking part in the programs offered by the denominational leadership, even if not completely buying in to its metrics.

The sharpest criticism came from Arnold Peters of the House of Praise in Terrace, who also ignored the form. In a four-page letter he explained that he thought the BC conference was too focused on method and program for evangelism and not as open to the moving

of the Spirit. He was tired of so many surveys coming in the mail from many ministries within the conference, such as education, evangelism, and church growth. Peters argued the surfeit of surveys gave the appearance of a lack of focus, a "casting about," that the conference was merely "caught up in the machinery of keeping the whole thing going."[45] Furthermore, he criticized the new direction for seemingly ignoring healing ministry for "mind and soul" and observed that evangelists should be a part of the local church and not just flown in for a week and leave. He concluded that while the early church had meetings, where they worshiped fasted and prayed together, but also heard the Holy Spirit speak, implying the new church growth model did not.[46]

Narrating Identity: The Ethnic Issue

There was at least one other concern present in the evangelistic growth push. Similar to Mary Fehr's ethnic concern of 1976, the role of Mennonite historical identity re-surfaced. In a 1979 report to the Board of Evangelism, H. D. Neufeld reported that established congregations, defined by being in existence for twenty-five plus years, "all had a strong Mennonite ethnic background." Several had ministries to immigrants largely from Paraguay and other German speaking areas and were bilingual English and German. There were several churches simply maintaining their numbers while facing a generational issue especially as German usage was disappearing, though some had attempted outreach in their communities. Accordingly, extension churches sponsored by BOCE, reportedly created a more stable base for church growth. Many of these churches went on to become self-supporting and penetrated into their communities, usually at a more effective rate than established churches. The churches that did not have long-standing core memberships were often prone to division, resulting in some leaving the MB fold. Of paramount importance to Neufeld was that in many of these churches "the ethnic barriers have been successfully bridged," and many were seen as the "'the Church' in the area."[47] It became an increasing concern through the 1980s as church growth enterprises and Mennonite ethnic concern comingled. Significantly, question marks around issues such as stability and divisiveness were largely overlooked in favour of rooting out Mennonite ethnicity.

James Nikkel, in 1982, articulated a detailed vision for church planting in Canada infused with a deep sense of divine urgency: "We need men of great faith and vision for our times and our coun-

try…We need to believe that God wants to use us in special ways at this point in our History [sic] to lead our provinces into spiritual renewal and harvest. The world can be changed by men of vision." The destiny he envisioned incorporated the inventiveness of modernity: "Today we are enjoying may benefits of men from the past who have changed the world through their visions and courageous actions. Wright's dream of airplanes, Ford's dream of automobiles, Galileo's dreams in science and Pasteur's vision of better health, have all left their marks on us. Will our faith and our visions make any difference to our future?"[48] In this fixing the denominational gaze to new, and implicitly better horizons, Mennonites could ironically invoke heroes of the past – inspired by non-Mennonite examples.

Calling his vision "New Frontiers," Nikkel observed that there were two new horizons that needed to be worked on: class and ethnicity. The MB was a largely middle and upper class socioeconomic denomination and they needed to reach beyond this into lower income brackets. Secondly, "[t]he ethnic people in the cities are a further ready target group for extensive church planting." To move on these two horizons, he called on higher MB education to stop their recalcitrance towards church growth thinking and establish a "positive climate for church growth" to help create vision, "harvest thinking," and training, and to think of cultural and ethnic identities as something belonging to others while being excised for themselves. In otherwords, MB educators were encouraged to think of "Mennonite" as something entirely non-ethnic as a key step forward towards church growth.[49]

Using biblical image of the pruner, where cutting away branches improves both fruit and harvest, Nikkel spoke to Mennonite identity:

> [I]t is a serious matter for a church to confuse its gospel message with ethnic identities. If the term 'Mennonite' means mostly museums, credit unions, food specialties, folkloramas, German origins or horse and buggies, to the public at large then we need to do some pruning…Our historic landmarks are valuable only in so far that they help us to be faithful to the scriptures. Our vision and hope lies in the future rather than in the past.[50]

Church planting proposed to expand the church and break down Mennonite ethnic identity.

Similarly, in 1982 Dyck provided a brief history and analysis of church growth that would dominate the next decade. Here Dyck used MB history to illuminate his idea of church growth as an origins tale:

> [O]ur Mennonite Brethren history began with dynamic growth. The Holy Spirit did a mighty work of regeneration, bringing repentance to sinners and joyous assurance to believers…With great concern and persuasive urgency they carried the good news of grace and forgiveness to family, friends, and passersby. Thus the 'believers were added daily,' and the Church of the Mennonite Brethren grew![51]

For Dyck, there were good times in MB history, but they were not long lived; "it is not unusual for a church or a denomination to fall into periods of mediocrity, complacency and even stagnation." He explains that evangelism came and went for MBs and was often short lived because Mennonites, in response to their immigration experiences isolated themselves. There were exceptions, such as WCM in Saskatchewan and WCCM in BC. Then two decades of major change for BC MBs occurred over the 1950s and 1960s. During these twenty years were the transitions in language transition to English and in ministry to adults. Then, through the 1970s, adaptation to society by Mennonites having started after World War II, sped-up as more diverse peoples entered Mennonite churches "through marriage, conversions, and friendships."[52]

Despite the pattern of accommodation and disappearing Mennonite ethnicity, Dyck argued that a growth plan remained essential, remarking, "except for extra-ordinary visitations of God upon people, church growth does not happen. It must be made to happen!" Perhaps sensing criticism, he argued that "quality and quantity…are inextricably linked" and demonstrates that actual numbers are important in the bible: "Numbers are most important as they represent people, people for whom Jesus gave His life. Numbers are used extensively and purposefully in Scripture – e.g. Book of Numbers, Luke 15, Book of Acts, Revelation."[53] Dyck immediately qualifies that argument with, "Church growth is not a statistical display or exercise. Nor is it a mechanical or psychological approach to arouse church members to do that which they are not motivated to do…It is not merely a system but a church using God's Word effectively in its cultural and sociological setting."[54] All this despite the emphasis on strategy, technique, assessment of needs of target groups, market understanding, and efficiency at the expense of historical identity.

Dyck, working through McGavran, wrote that social relativism influenced the church so that it saw its mission as "proclamation of the gospel only." In church growth parlance this was called "search theology." While not "wrong" in any theological sense, Dyck and McGavran argue that theology must be both a "seek and find" emphasis. Here Dyck quotes McGavran, "'The goal is not to

send powdered milk or kindly messages to the son in the far country. It is to see him walking in through the front door of his father's house.'" Furthermore, "'If any will not receive you shake off the dust of your feet as you leave that town…go where…received."[55] While acknowledging that bothering people with relentless proselytizing is not desirable, Dyck was convinced the opposite was the Mennonite problem. He concluded, "The purpose of witness is not for cultural improvement but that sinners be found."[56]

Dyck explains further that the "gospel is trans-national and non-sociological in nature, its transmission is much affected by an applied understanding of social structures," while conceding some benefit to Mennonite historical experience, "by becoming Christians people do not lose their familial and cultural identification. Our Mennonite history of isolationism in an otherwise Euro-American society bears witness to the above." Therefore, Dyck called MBs to engage in missions research, evangelism, church planting and to set measurable goals that use statistics and figures, though remembering the spiritual dynamic as "essential," while ideally availing themselves of the resources of the Institute of American Church Growth and Fuller Evangelistic Association.[57]

In 1984 the BC Conference of MB Churches did just that and took part in a church growth project led by the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth (CEFI), which was a joint ministry of the Fuller Evangelistic Association and Fuller Theological Seminary. It followed from a conference Dyck and others attended, "How to Plant a Church," in November 1983, that featured Howard Ball of San Bernardino, California and director of Churches Alive, an organization that specialized in helping churches develop revival.[58]

Any denomination wishing to participate in the project was asked to provide three things: first, a payment of $3500 to $4000, towards CEFI's contribution of conducting the research and preparing the seminar, assuring them that all involved were professionals appropriately credentialed and experienced; second, the names of six to eight church planters (both effective and ineffective) for interviews with the professionals from which profiles and "tools to enable good assessment of a candidates likelihood of success in leading a church planting project" will be developed; and, third, to provide time and expenses for staff to participate in all interviews and training sessions to learn from all this process how "to sit with a candidate for a new church project and be able to make selections based upon instruments and techniques which have good predicted outcomes." The goal was to make church planting personal decisions efficient and accelerated.[59]

By February 21, 1984, Nick Dyck sent Carl Ostenberg a list of twelve names divided among church planters across the MB constituency in in BC, Manitoba, South Dakota, California, and Texas.[60] The interviews with the church planters took place over the phone and not necessarily everyone listed was contacted. Once the interviews were held there was a reporting and training event at the conclusion of the project in January 1985 for three participants from each denomination, and anyone else interested who paid an extra fee.[61] By the fall everything was on schedule for the project. In-depth interviews of thirty church planters had been conducted, two focus groups in California and another planned. These meetings all seemed to be going well as 1984 ended when the final interviews conducted, the data complied and reports drafted for their final meetings in January 8 to10, 1985.[62] Later, CEFI planned church planting seminars in Vancouver for early 1986 and hoped to have Dyck's involvement. He was interested and related they recently conducted a Billy Graham Crusade "with unprecedented Canadian results. British Columbia seems ripe for harvest."[63]

As much as there was transdenominational growth initiatives, the MB were trying to develop their own, and the question of identity bedeviled them. In preparation for Alive '85 in Denver, Colorado, an inter-Mennonite gathering on church growth and evangelism, Dyck reflected on a key question for him, "how do Mennonites move from being keepers of the aquarium to becoming fishers of men?"[64] Within his workshop notes, Dyck also observed that obstacles to church growth include traditionalism, language, organization structure and worship style and the need for patience to counter these elements. Furthermore, church leaders were to "love your people so much they will follow you," educate church people of other more effective organizational structures and organization, and to embrace change while remaining a positive and non-polarizing presence. While it remained problematic that people saw Mennonites as "an ethnic group, exclusive," it was vital to counter the ethnic problem of being Mennonite by emphasizing stress disaster relief and community involvement by answering the questions: "What is the community's first impression when they read the name on your billboard? Open? Ethnic?" "What kind of name best reflects the purpose of your church?"[65]

The question of growth, Mennonite identity, and church names was a perennial topic of conversation. In 1987, Jake Balzer, Executive Director of BOCE sent a copy of an article and interview regarding church growth with Simon Gibson to Herb Kopp of the denominational periodical the *MB Herald*. Balzer opens, like Nik-

kel had done a few years earlier, by referencing Henry Ford, "the well known father of the mass production automobile, once said, 'before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success.'" For Balzer, market realities, information-based planning and preparation were vital to growth, "the marketplace is littered with the rubble of failed businesses that were headed by well-meaning people who did not plan or anticipate demands." Though he acknowledged church planting must be predicated on the work of the Holy Spirit and prayer.[66]

Over the course of the interview, Balzer was asked about the controversy regarding the use of denominational affiliation in a church name. While most new churches do not use MB in their name, Balzer assured readers that, "their pastors subscribe to our Confession of Faith. Our churches are very proud of their association with our conference but because of the nature of their communities or lack of understanding of the MB name, the affiliation is identified clearly but not strongly emphasized in all cases."[67] Related was the question of using California-based church growth methods and materials, as Gibson asked, "I understand you are employing a special program based on a successful California system. What's that all about?" Balzer simply described their church in North Vancouver as an example of its effectiveness, explaining, "the response has been higher [than] we expected. It involves phoning some twenty thousand homes and sending information brochures to those who show interest in a new church in their community. From those who do not have a home church, approximately one in three requests to be placed on our mailing list." Part of the critique of the California model was its suburban focus and not inner cities where more unrest exists, to which Balzer responded with the growing MB expansion into ethnic communities.[68]

In his October 1990 report, "Evangelism/Church Growth in British Columbia,",Nick Dyck outlined a dozen points that contributed to MB growth in BC, which belied his observation that there was no special effort by the MB to explain their impressive growth after the 1960s. Dyck acknowledged the work of the Holy Spirit in that the points he was about to make were based on scripture, superseding any human activity. However, the story narrated he was that the first forty years of ministry in British Columbia was performed by people of vision. That vision was realized through the WCCM and "those 40 years thus became the years of preparation for a new era and emphasis in the history of the M.B. Church in British Columbia." The young people who had been ministered by the old WCCM grew up and became the next generation of work-

ers.[69] To evaluate the growth programs initiated, Dyck asserted that "it is paramount that a body have a 'north star' for constant reference" to assess programs effectively and to ensure that new churches were introduced to the Confession of Faith "and several points of biblical understanding often left out by other evangelical bodies." He conceeded that some theological positions—which he did not name—were questioned, but they were usually not a problem for convincing non-traditional Mennonites to affiliate with the MB conference.[70]

Of special delight for Dyck was a "[g]rowing recognition and acceptance of the M.B.'s as a major evangelical force in B.C." Taking cues from elsewhere, he boasted "This is a widely acknowledged fact by other evangelicals" and it was supported by the evidence of non-MBs moving into their churches. That this was the result was a triumph, "a 180 degree turn from 40 years ago." Tied to this success was "ethnic ministries," for as Jesus was "cross-cultural," they now ministered to eight language groups, and the most rapidly growing group were the Chinese.[71] The "reorganization of the conference" was vital for Dyck as BOCE acquired newly "strong representation in the executive" and "ownership for growth" was now accepted by the conference leadership. Dyck enthused, "this is proving to be one of the healthiest, most biblically oriented actions taken."[72] The spadework of historically conscious Mennonites of previous generations was now bearing the fruit of a modern, conservatively evangelical, professionalized form of evangelism. With the strait-jacket of history and ethnicity undone and dropped, entry into a suburbanized southern California developed plan of growth was seemingly working. Though significantly markers such as "ethnic" remained, though now for others and for demonstrating the efficacy of "growth."

Conclusion

Robert Burkinshaw observed that, in the decades from 1961 to 1981, conservative evangelicals in BC demonstrated a "pragmatic adaptability" that was flexible in execution but remained tied to a "bedrock" foundation of a message they considered unchanging. One of the most significant reasons for evangelical expansion in BC was the vigorous effort placed on church planting and in this regard the MB were merely the most active among church-planting denominations in the province.[73] In BC, writes Burkinshaw, the "Mennonite Brethren shared with other evangelicals the same emphasis on personal evangelism and an alienation from

both the theological liberalism of the mainline denominations and the secularism of the general culture." Thus, "North American evangelicalism became for them a 'suitable vehicle of assimilation'" where retaining the evangelical component was the most important element of their identity. Church planters surveyed in the early 1980s by a two to one margin identified as evangelical rather than Mennonite, and after the 1960s a growing trend developed, especially among newer churches, to not use the MB name.[74]

Dyck's faithful modesty in his accounting, while no doubt sincere, masks for the reader the tremendous amount of energy and resources the MB leadership in BC expended, and the re-orienting of their ambition for the cause of church growth. The early 1970s turn to adult ministry brought MB evangelical motivations into further contact with minority communities as new MB churches formed. The aggressive 1980s MB efforts at church growth and planting paid off by the early 1990s as the conference grew from 47 to 50 congregations. Over the 1980s church attendance was increased by sixty-seven per cent representing approximately half of all MB church attendance in Canada.[75]

There was some MB resistance to these general trends, yet as MBs increasingly assimilated into the larger evangelical milieu of BC, the trends persisted. Almost from the start the MB were oriented towards evangelism, beginning with WCCM earlier in the 1920s and then again in the early 1970s with leaders within BOCE increasingly prioritizing church growth, and George Braun and Nick Dyck leading the way. On one hand it is a long missions history and on the other, it is a newer story of assimilating to the rational-technical-marketing-oriented modernity of southern California conservative evangelicalism.

In the North American context, as Wsevolod W. Isajiw argues, the symbolic link to one's ancestors is a viable approach to ethnicity. While being socialized by the larger society, this link gives one a choice as what to pick from the past to be meaningful in the present.[76] And for some in the MB mission fold, it was a choice to largely reject the historical ethnic story for a narration of modernity. As it regards missions in British Columbia, Mennonite Brethren origin stories often invoked a Canadian exceptionalism – such as gold rush imagery and frontier motifs – rather than stories of fleeing persecutions of Europe.[77]

In the post-war decades, European linkages for Mennonite Brethren identity were fading and by some actively expunged in its ethnic and historical forms by people like Nick Dyck among others. The past was for many Mennonites interesting, appreciated but also confining. It was a limitation to overcome. In this context

evangelicalism provided a potent solution for Mennonite entry into the Canadian mainstream and in so doing challenged ideas of ethnizing in the face of Christian calls to evangelize. Evangelicals did not make Mennonite Brethren jettison complicating aspects of identity, they got there well enough on their own. Evangelicalism, did however, bring into tension the relationship of historical consciousness and religious errand, and the late-twentieth century iteration of that story was one of modernist growth and a receding past.[78]

Notes

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