

# MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BC

#211-2825 Clearbrook Rd. Abbotsford, BC V2T 6S3 Phone:853-6177 Fax:853-6246 E-mail:mennohis@rapidnet.net

## NEWSLETTER JULY 1998

*What we have heard and known we will tell the next generation. Ps. 78:3*

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### One People, Many Voices by Henry Neufeld

Mennonite historians gathered at Columbia Bible College from May 7-9 to discuss their work, their relationship across the US Canada border, and to chart the course of Mennonite historical studies for the next generation.

Sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, various US historical societies, and MCC, sessions dealt with the way each national group writes history, pacifism among the Brethren in Christ during two wars, the Mennonite girls home in Vancouver, Parks Canada restoration of the village of Neubergthal, the EMB's in Canada and the US, a review of the growth of the MB's in BC (in the 1960's and 70's BC population increase 60%; BC MB's grew by 100%), two Amish leaders views of salvation and ethics, and discussion of two Manitoba firms: D. W. Friesen and Palliser Furniture. Given the diversity of presentations, the conference might well have been titled, "Many People, Many Voices."

#### Canada and USA

National differences were a recurring theme at the conference that attracted scholars from this continent and abroad. The two countries are somewhat different; as are their Mennonites. This gathering also celebrated the completion of the publication of their respective histories: "Mennonites in Canada" and "Mennonite Experience in America."

The authors of the concluding volumes, Dr. Ted Reghr and Dr. Paul Toews respectively, participated in the conference. The US story required four volumes. Canadians told their story in three. Maybe the border does make a difference.

At the closing banquet, sponsored by the BC Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen historian Theron Schlabach encouraged historians to write from a framework of the faith community and to "do our work as Jesus disciples."

#### Honesty

Schlabach "passed the torch" to the younger group of Mennonite historians and encouraged them to develop "communities of competence." He cautioned they not be concerned with the elusive concept of "objectivity" but with honesty and a quest for truth through the church. "Honesty is not the property of Mennonites," he said, "but we should be the first to articulate it as a key professional criteria."

Surprisingly, no historian reported on the experience of Mennonite organizations that work across the border: MCC, seminaries, and Missions boards.

In this and future issues we will be reporting on some of the presentations at the conference.

### BCMHS Newsletter

The MHS Newsletter is produced periodically to inform and promote the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society.

The newsletter is mailed to those who contribute \$25.00 or more to the work of the MHS. It is edited by Henry Neufeld with the assistance of Hugo Friesen and Loretta Krueger. Correspondence can be directed to:

Newsletter, MHS,

MHS board members:

Lorne Dick (Abbotsford)

David Giesbrecht (Abbotsford)

Edward Hildebrand (Vancouver)

John Konrad (N. Vancouver)

David Loewen (Abbotsford)

Peter Neudorf (N. Vancouver)

Henry Neufeld (Delta)

Jacob Quiring (Abbotsford)

Henry Rempel (Chilliwack)

William Riediger (Vancouver)

Lillian Toews (Vancouver)

The BC Mennonite Historical Society is located in the Garden Park Tower, Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford. Mailing address: 211-2825 Clearbrook Rd. Abbotsford, BC, V2T 6S3. Telephone: (604) 853-6177. Fax: 853-6246.

### Summer Hours

Our office will be open as usual in July, from 9:00 to noon. **We will be closed during the entire month of August and will resume regular hours in September.** We regret any inconvenience, but finances and the need for staff vacations make this essential. Archivist Hugo Friesen is currently in Akron, Pennsylvania on an MCC assignment.

### Annual Meeting

John Konrad, President of the BC Mennonite Historical Society, welcomed members and guests to the annual meeting held on May 4 at Columbia Bible College. Konrad noted

that the MHS has made steady progress toward the goal of preservation of and dissemination of knowledge about our common Mennonite heritage.

Three heritage lectures were held in 1997: Dr. Harvey Dyck ("The Soviet Mennonite Inferno"), Dr. John B. Toews ("Singing in Four Part Harmony among the Russian Mennonites"), and Dr. John Redekop ("Can Mennonites be Proud of their Heritage?"). The Board intends to continue this popular lecture series.

A major achievement in 1997 was moving our office and archives to the new facilities at Garden Park Tower, 211-2825 Clearbrook Road. The convenience of the new location is attracting more visitors. The following volunteers at the archives were acknowledged: Naomi Reimer-Duke, Peter Redekop, Mary Ann Quiring, and Tim Olsen.

The **Memorial Wall Project** was launched last year and provides an opportunity to purchase a memorial plaque in honour of someone whose legacy you wish remembered. In addition to the plaques which will be displayed publicly, each subscriber will submit a written testament to the honoree. To date eighteen plaques have been purchased. Please consider buying a plaque (\$500.00) to honour an individual's contribution and to contribute to the work of the Historical Society.

In 1997 our operating expenses exceeded our income by about \$6000.00. Financial reserves of \$28,451.00 are not enough to ensure continues operation of the MHS. **Please consider making a contribution to the BC Mennonite Historical Society; the Society is a registered charitable organization with Revenue Canada and receipts will be issued for donations.** Appreciation was expressed for Agatha

Klassen's contribution as she leaves the MHS Board. Jacob Quiring was elected to the BCMHS Board; reelected were Lorne Dick, David Giesbrecht, and Bill Riediger.

The continued support of members and friends of the Historical Society is essential as we tell the next generation our stories.

### **Mennonite Encyclopaedia**

In our last Newsletter we asked for a set of Mennonite Encyclopaedia. Our thanks to Helen Rose Pauls who graciously donated a four volume set of this encyclopaedia. It is available in our Centre for use by the public.

### **New Books**

"From Prussia to Russia to North America: 300 Years." by Stanley M. Harder. This book traces Mennonite History from the 1500's to the present and includes the family tree of **Peter P Harder** and **Gerhard P. Quiring**. Available from the MHS centre for \$14.00.

### **No Voting**

BC Mennonites were not permitted to vote from 1931 to 1948. John D. Funk addresses this in his 1993 thesis (M.A., Sociology, Simon Fraser University) on the history of General Conference Mennonites in B.C. Funk states:

*One way the government of BC expressed its resistance to Mennonite settlement in the province was to remove the right to vote between 1931 and 1948. As in the case of Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Doukhobours and Hutterites, this limited the province's obligation to acknowledge their interests and justified discriminatory public policies and practices. The fact that the pattern repeated itself regularly throughout Mennonite history explains why few Mennonites in BC took note of the 1931 order in Council and still harbour*

*considerable suspicion about direct political involvement. (P.121)*

Funk points out that the 1931 revision to the BC Elections Act stripped Mennonites, Doukhobours and Hutterites of their right to vote based on "... their exemption from military service granted by the federal government in 1873 and 1879." (P.62) "The disenfranchisement of Mennonites went virtually unnoticed and was restored when it was discovered during the 1947 revision of the Act." (p.62)

Funk, who teaches sociology at Okanagan University College, also discusses the hostility toward Mennonites during World War II.

### **Heritage Lecture**

Our next heritage lecture will be held at our banquet on Saturday, **October 17, 1998**. Dr. Al Reimer, Winnipeg, will be speaking on "**What Price is the Non-Resistance Position to Mennonites in Russia.**" More details will follow in the next newsletter.

### **Family History Research**

With increased traffic and interest in genealogical research we have decided to provide an opportunity for after hours access to our facilities.

Mary Ann Quiring will be at the Historical Society Wednesdays and will help anyone coming in during regular office hours. Additional assistance may be pre-arranged by calling Mary Ann and booking times to use our facilities after hours. Feel free to call at 855-4303 or E-mail her at [QUIRINE@UNISERVE.COM](mailto:QUIRINE@UNISERVE.COM)



## Church - State Relationships: Canada and USA

In a presentation at the May history conference historian John H. Redekop said Mennonite "church -- state relationships in the two countries are substantially different and this difference has had significant impact on the Mennonite people . . ."

Canadian Mennonites are less nationalistic, less capitalistic, less militaristic and less critical in their analysis of and response to church -- state relationship than their American cousins.

US Mennonites are more nationalistic, more pessimistic about cooperating with the state, more militaristic, more capitalistic, and more thorough in their criticism of church -- state relations than Canadians. American Mennonites have been less inclined to be involved in political parties and in the electoral process, noted Redekop.

### Individuals and groups

As individuals Redekop sees Canadian and Americans as virtually indistinguishable. But as groups the assumptions, values and perspectives are different and readily become evident. In both countries Mennonite groups discovered that it is impossible for Christian citizens in a free and democratic society to be politically insignificant.

"Whether they like it or not, Christian citizens are part of the political system even when they think that they have opted for an apolitical lifestyle. In sum, Anabaptist politics is still politics," said Redekop.

### Big and Small

Some of the differences may develop because large countries, like the USA, which are part of Christendom, tend to be judged more severely than smaller countries. Canadians are more critical of America sociopolitical shortcomings than similar misdeeds in Canada. Personal moral deficiencies of Canadian national leaders are not typically newsworthy outside of Canada; American

scandals generate global headlines. "Canadians, perhaps more than other people must be doubly careful not to employ a hypocritical ethical measuring rod," said Redekop.

### Be not conformed

In both Canada and the US, the surrounding environment has shaped Mennonite values and witness more than Mennonites are prepared to admit. Mennonites have been influenced more by society than they have influenced their society.

Redekop said Canadian Mennonites accept and tolerate the marginalization of the church and have been mostly silent in the face of a massive government - backed arms trade. In the US most Mennonites seem to have accepted the widespread assumptions about US uniqueness and divine preference.

### Self interest

Redekop maintains that in both countries Mennonites have a double ethic when it comes to political involvement. "We tend to frown on active politics, especially pressure politics, unless we are the beneficiaries." Education, language, migration and alternatives to military service are examples or benefits cited by Redekop.

"Instead of pressing for fairness for the marginalized and exploited, we insist on fairness for ourselves and tend to press for privileges for ourselves," said Redekop. In this pursuit of self interest Canadian and American Mennonites are similar.

### Why the differences?

Our differences as Mennonites are coloured by our different histories. The US Declaration of Independence in 1776 marked a clear break with the Old World and values that affirm tradition and class structure; Europe was seen as outdated and inferior.

Canada has no one year of national beginnings. Canadian state formation was characterized by gradualism, evolution and peaceful change, said Redekop. "Canadians have no collective memory of breaking away from Europe--they never did--and Canadians, probably alone among all peoples of the world, do not celebrate the birthday of any founding father."

"Canadian Mennonites," said Redekop, "have been tempted to worship a diversity of golden calves but the calves of divine national origin, divinely--ordained national uniqueness, and special divine national favour are not among them."

Second, the differences are also based on political and religious conservatism; the US has never emphasized a collective responsibility (e.g., social welfare) but emphasizes liberty and individualism. "...Many American Mennonites seem to have become uncritical defenders of the status quo," said Redekop.

Canadian Mennonites have not been as attracted to political --- religious conservatism as American Mennonites because Canada had an openness to continued gradual change and improvement.

A third reason for the difference in the two countries is the differing role of religion. The US separation of church and state ensured there would be no officially established denomination in the new country. There was, however, public and official support for Christianity and the practice of civil religion. This continued until the middle of this century.

### **Chaplains or Prophets**

Redekop is concerned about the consequences of Americanization of the faith: "While such a civil religion can improve the moral tone of society, the cost for the Christian church is great for at issue is the nationalization of the church. The clergy become chaplains rather than prophets . . ."

In Canada no one religion dominates the national agenda, and there is hardly a semblance of national faith. Since the Canadian state is relatively weaker than its US counterpart, and less imposing of its ideology, Canadian Mennonites find the political arena not particularly threatening.

Canadian Mennonites, according to Redekop, have a more laid back attitude toward church-state affairs and represent the entire political spectrum in contrast to the US where for instance 84% of MB voters voted Republican between 1940 and 1960.

A fourth difference between the two nations comes from the US belief that God drew the plans for the US. It follows that any criticism of the American state - church arrangement is perceived as desecration. Canada does not have such a sense; our founders produced no inspired document and they are not revered in any sense. "Parliament and 24 Sussex Drive are not shrines," said Redekop. The Canadian political system is a practical set of arrangements " . . . negotiated to accommodate diverse regions, to reconcile squabbling elites, and to broker differences between at least two so-called founding peoples."

Some Americans speak of government as intrinsically evil, as a potential tyrant, and as "principalities and powers." Canadians differ in their view of government: there is no obvious moral dimension, virtually no fear of government becoming dictatorial, and very little suspicion of government on theological grounds. The state is not viewed as intrinsically evil. In this view, Christian citizens, including Mennonites, should welcome a strong government and many Canadian Mennonites do just that, he said. While Americans stress "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," a parallel Canadian constitutional concept is "peace, order and good government." "In actual fact Canadian governments are probably no better or worse than American governments but they are perceived differently by their citizens" said Redekop.

### **Flags in church**

Americans tend to exhibit nationalistic fervour more than Canadians. Patriotism is taught from childhood and the American pledge of allegiance is recited in some "Mennonite Sunday schools and other religious settings."

Canada has no pledge of allegiance. Canadian nationalism is so weak that the 1980 threat of Quebec to sever the country aroused no public outcry. Canadian Mennonites "...exhibit an almost diffident attitude toward their country." "I have found only one MB church in the US which did not have an American flag in it and I have to date not found a single Canadian MB church that does have a flag in it" said Redekop.

### **Socialism**

In the US socialism is a dirty word; in Canada some Mennonites served with distinction as elected representatives in provincial socialist governments. This is a puzzle to many American Mennonites. Redekop explained that American socialism has its roots in eastern Europe where class conflict and violence was acceptable. Canadian socialism is based on the British system "and probably owes as much to Methodism as to Marxism." The founders of Canada's socialist party were mainly Christian clergymen.

### **Migration**

Redekop also noted the differences in migration patterns; in the US the dominant Swiss Mennonites were joined by Russian Mennonites in the 1870's. In Canada the Russian Mennonites are the dominant group with successive waves of newcomers arriving well into this century.

### **Politics**

Most US Mennonites have positive feelings toward their country but are not involved in formal political activity. They have developed exceptional expertise in analysis and critical evaluation of political systems, said Redekop.

Canadians have generally had good relations with their governments and recently accepted government financial assistance for private Mennonite schools.

Canadian Mennonites view government "as simply another arena in which they can exercise good civil responsibility and in which they can serve to the extent that consistent Christian servanthood permits,...American Mennonites view the political order as outside God's mandate for the church," said Redekop.

### **Conclusions**

Redekop noted that the two countries have markedly different theologies about the church and the state. US Mennonites are more nationalistic than their Canadian counterparts. Canadians are less nationalistic but much more active in partisan politics. US Mennonites are suspicious of governments power, intentions and money. Canadians seem not to share these doubts and cooperate with the governments.

*"...Our theologies as well as our practices are shaped more by our surrounding societies than we care to admit"* said Redekop.

### **Challenge**

Redekop concluded: "...the greatest obstacle to achieving greater Christlikeness in Mennonite responses to church state matters...is probably the reluctance to live completely by the requirements of Christian discipleship as modelled and taught by our Lord. In the political realm, as in other realms, complete obedience requires kinds of sacrifices which many of us Mennonites may not be prepared to make."

The above summary of Dr. Redekop's presentation was prepared by Henry Neufeld.