

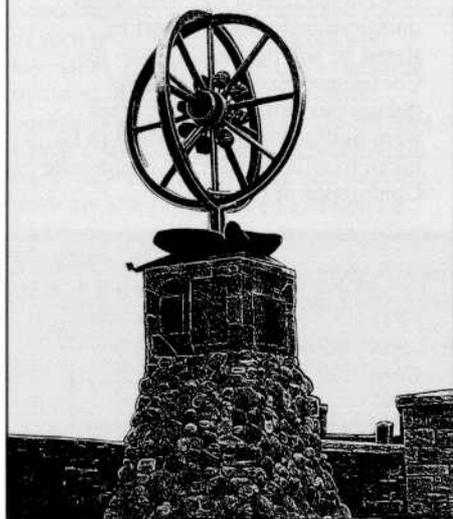
# Ontario Mennonite History

THE  
NEWSLETTER  
OF THE  
MENNONITE  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

VOLUME XII  
NUMBER 1

MARCH 1994

ISSN 1192-5515



## The Steeles Avenue Mennonite Congregation

by J.M. Nighswander



*Lynelle and Steve Drudge.*

### Introduction

To understand the emergence in 1964 of the Steeles Avenue Mennonite congregation it is helpful to learn a little of the Mennonite presence since the early 1800s in the Vaughan, Markham and Stouffville area.

Most of the ethnic Mennonites in the area can trace their ancestry to emigrants from Pennsylvania who were of earlier Swiss Mennonite origin. Along the way some people of other cultural and geographic origins adopted the Mennonite faith and practice, and became a part of the Mennonites of Ontario.

Common names of people whose forebearers pioneered in the Markham area and helped establish the Mennonite communities include Reesor, Hoover, Stouffer, Wideman, Burkholder, Barkey, Smith, Nighswander, Grove, Ramer, Snider, Lehman and others.

Mennonite meetinghouses built in the early to mid 1800s were the Reesor building on the line between Markham and Pickering Townships, the Wideman building on the 8th Concession of

Markham (now Highway 48), Almira on the 5th Concession (now Warden Avenue), the Altona building on the line between Pickering and Uxbridge Townships, Cedar Grove on the 10th Concession of Markham, and the Edgely building in Vaughan Township.

Members of these churches belonged to the main body of Mennonites in Ontario until the division of 1889. At that time about half of the families identified with the more traditional Wisler (Old Order) movement and used the Reesor, Almira and Altona buildings, while the more accommodating group used the Wideman building, and for a time, shared in the use of the Altona building. For a time both groups used the Wideman building as well.

The Wisler group in Markham, which later became known as the Markham Conference (1931) and then Markham-Waterloo Conference (1939), alternated on Sunday mornings between the Reesor, Almira and Altona locations. It was said the rotation was like an old fashioned washing machine, with the Reesor building the pivotal point.

This writer was a member of the Markham-Waterloo Conference until the formation of the Steeles Avenue congregation in 1964. I remember the well-attended Sunday morning services, with three ministers and two deacons seated on the crowded bench behind the long pulpit. The order of service was the same each Sunday: two opening hymns, an opening meditation, another hymn and prayer, Scripture reading, a rather longish sermon, a prayer, another hymn or two before the benediction. Testimony to the sermon was given at the close by each of the preachers and deacons.

There was no Sunday school or any special effort to teach the children. Mid-week activities were primarily a hymn sing and occasional informal social events. Mid-week Bible studies were initiated in the 1950s by persons who felt the need for such studies in addition to the Sunday sermons. The women met regularly to do sewing and quilting for the MCC relief efforts. There were also some informal prayer groups.

There was an interest in MCC and generous financial support. There was no official mission program, either in the home communities or abroad, although individual members supported the mission efforts of other denominations.

Traditionally, most members were farmers, although in the 1950s and 1960s some were becoming involved in other vocations. Higher education was not encouraged.

Increasingly, the efforts of Bishop Abram Smith of this congregation in the Markham/Stouffville area, focused on maintaining the status quo, even though other ordained leaders of the group endeavoured to introduce new ideas by which a more effective witness to Christian faith could be given. Also, a number of members began to develop concepts of the Church which were quite different than the traditional ideas.

#### **Origins of Steeles Avenue**

From the above mentioned background of traditional theology and the simple practical lifestyle of the Markham-Waterloo Conference, the Steeles Avenue Mennonite congregation had its beginnings.

A number of members were regularly exposed to more progressive ideas of what it means to express Christian faith in

meaningful ways through involvement in Mennonite Central Committee, broader Mennonite Church activities, as well as through contacts with Brethren in Christ and Missionary Churches and other Christian groups.

Three ministers who assisted Bishop Smith in the early 1960s were Fred Nighswander, Cecil Reesor and Alvin Baker. Their personal struggles with more progressive understandings of Christian faith and practice were reflected in both implicit and explicit ways in their lives and their sermons.

Beginning in January of 1964, a series of "brotherhood" meetings were held in an effort to resolve a number of somewhat contentious issues related to faith and practice. Incredibly, there are records of thirty-eight such meetings! These meetings were held in an orderly manner, and records were kept. While feelings sometimes were intense, it is a fact that the levels of communication and understanding were quite high, and there was little animosity or ill will.

Toward the latter part of 1964 it became apparent the differences could not be resolved, and uneasy agreements were reached that a large segment of the congregation, mostly younger and middle aged families, would separate from the Markham-Waterloo conference. Once this decision was made the question was, "Where do we go from here?"

Most of the approximately sixty persons who withdrew did not want to form a new Conference affiliation in the area. With the exception of Fred Nighswander and Alvin Baker and some members of their families, it was unanimous that counsel should be sought from Emerson McDowell, then pastor at the Hagerman Mennonite congregation and from Newton Gingrich, pastor of the Wideman Mennonite congregation, both of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario.

Both responded to the request for help with warmth and respect and a willingness to provide the badly needed leadership. There was also a consultation with Bishop J.C. Wenger of Indiana who was in the area at the time for an MCC meeting.

A lay committee of Fred Drudge, Harvey Nighswander and Herb Diller was appointed by the group to represent the new congregation in contacting the Ontario Mennonite Conference Executive,

in searching for pastoral supervision and finding a place of worship.

Following several congregational and committee meetings and consultation with Emerson and Newton, the first worship service was held on 22 November 1964 with sixty persons in attendance, and lay persons from the group taking worship-leading responsibilities. A Sunday School was held for the children.

Tentative plans for pastoral services were made, and Emerson McDowell first served the group in a worship service at the Almira church building on 20 December 1964.

Lay members who took turns preaching in the early months were George Reesor, Cecil Reesor and Joe Nighswander.

Initially the group met in the Almira building, and were therefore known as the "Almira Mennonite congregation." It was later decided the Reesor location would be a more desirable location.

Because this building is immediately adjacent to Steeles Avenue, the northern boundary of Metropolitan Toronto, the new congregation adopted by consensus the name, "Steeles Avenue Mennonite."

At a meeting of the congregation on 28 December 1964, the following significant actions were taken: 1) to meet regularly as a new congregation on Sunday mornings and to attend and support the prayer meetings and Sunday evening worship services at Wideman, Cedar Grove and Hagerman; 2) to contact the Mennonite Conference of Ontario regarding application for affiliation as an organized congregation of the Conference; 3) to organize a regular Sunday School with the necessary teachers and support persons, appointing Albert Drudge as the superintendent, and Herb Diller as treasurer; 4) to draft a letter to Bishop Abram Smith, notifying him of the withdrawal of the new congregation from the Markham-Waterloo Conference.

Newton Gingrich was invited to a congregational meeting on 4 April 1965. The minutes of that meeting state that:

A good discussion was held, many questions were asked. Newton stated he will be meeting with the Conference Executive and will discuss our situation there. Steps were outlined which will need to be taken to affiliate with the Mennonite Conference of Ontario.

*Ontario Mennonite History* is published semi-annually by the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G6, and distributed to all members of the Society.

**Editor:** Reg Good

**Book Review Editor:** Leonard Friesen

**Other Members:** Linda Huebert Hecht, Lorraine Roth, Herbert Enns

Financial assistance from the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture is gratefully acknowledged.

Inquiries, articles, book notices or news items should be directed to the Editor, Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario c/o Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G6 TEL. (519) 885-0220, FAX (519) 885-0014

A member asked if we were ready to accept the Ontario Conference Statement of Faith, and some concern was expressed that practice sometimes falls short of the ideals upheld by official statements. Someone suggested that we will not likely find the perfect fellowship; and, if we did and we would join, it would no longer be perfect!

It was unanimously agreed that we accept in a general way the Statement of Faith, thus opening the way for initial application to join the Ontario Mennonite Conference.

On the following 9 May 1965 action was taken on a motion by Joe Nighswander, seconded by Norman Smith, to apply for membership as an organized congregation, in the Mennonite Conference of Ontario. At the same meeting action was taken unanimously to request Newton Gingrich to serve as part time pastor. This was done after previous discussion with Newton and with the support of the Wideman congregation of which he was pastor.

At the Annual Conference sessions of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario held on 2 June 1965 the "Almira Mennonite congregation" was officially welcomed as a new congregation and Newton Gingrich was recognized as its pastor.

#### **Pastoral Leadership**

Newton Gingrich assumed the duties of part time pastoral leadership from July 1965 to April 1966. His organizational and pastoral skills were a God-send to the emerging congregation. His perceptive sensitivity to both group and personal needs of the congregation was a tremendous help during this first year. His preaching was hard-hitting, clear and forthright. His recurring theme was about the dangers of legalism and the better way of self discipline and loving service. He led us to see that Christian faith is best expressed through word and deed and attitudes rather than through nonconformity in dress codes and rejection of such material things as radios and television. He encouraged us to become involved in service ministries and in vocations and professions where the love of Christ could be expressed in meaningful ways. Newton's counselling and pastoral skills are still remembered and helped members grow and become more mature as Christians.

At a joint meeting in January 1966 of the Councils of the Hagerman and the Steeles Avenue congregations, it was mutually agreed, along with Newton Gingrich and Emerson McDowell, that Emerson would become responsible for ongoing pastoral leadership of the new group. The transition to Emerson became effective the following March.

Emerson was a kindly, caring pastor who demonstrated his deep conviction that every person was a person of worth. He provided excellent leadership to the people of Steeles Avenue, constantly urging others to search out and use their God-given gifts. He preached regularly and gave active leadership until stricken with cancer in November of 1974. During the months of his illness and following his death on 9 July 1976 the congregation relied heavily on visiting speakers including Dave Ringer of Toronto and Paul Martin, pastor of the Wideman congregation.

In July of 1977 Paul Martin began a part-time assignment as pastor and served effectively until August of 1979, when he took a leave of absence to study in Elkhart, Indiana at the Mennonite Seminary. Paul is remembered by the people who were members at Steeles Avenue during that time for his eloquent preaching, his love of music, his enthusiasm, and his positive affirmation of the congregation. This was very important to the Steeles people because, as time went on, some began to question whether or not a fourth Mennonite congregation was warranted in the Markham area.

It is interesting to note the preaching schedule during a period of time from 2 April 1978 to 20 August 1978. In addition to Paul Martin, the following persons preached one or more times: Glen Brubacher, George Reesor, Maurice Martin, Dalton Jantzi, Jim Shantz, John Reesor, Danny Milton, David Apavoe, Bill Turner. It is obvious the people of Steeles were blessed with a variety of speakers and ideas!

Following Paul Martin's announcement of study leave plans, the Steeles people again began a pastoral search. Discussion with Ralph Lebold, then Conference Minister, resulted in an invitation to Arthur and Evelyn Byer. Art had pastored at Hanover for twelve years, followed by a year of study.

After prayerful consideration by both the Byers and the congregation, Art and Evelyn and their family accepted the call, moved to the Markham areas where they had both been born and raised, and Art began serving the Steeles congregation as pastor on a half-time basis on 1 July 1979. An installation service was held on 15 July 1979 with Doug Snyder of Waterloo representing the Conference.

Art became known and well liked for creating a warm, relaxed atmosphere for worship, and for his down-to-earth, practical sermons, and enriched our lives with his own unique and special gifts.

In April of 1982 Art and Evelyn announced their decision to terminate at Steeles in June of the same year. There was some feeling on the part of Art and Evelyn—perhaps especially Evelyn—that Steeles should work at integration with one

of the other Markham Mennonite congregations, rather than continue on its own. The need to have afternoon services every third Sunday to accommodate the Markham-Waterloo group was seen as disruptive to some. Also, Art was employed part-time as Director at Willowgrove and found the two jobs somewhat incompatible.

These problems, however, were discussed openly and compassionately, with the result that the Byers agreed to respond positively to the invitation of the congregation to continue their ministry for another three year period, subject to a more specific job description and evaluative study of the other issues. The "every third Sunday issue" was identified as urgent. The possibility of the relocation of the congregation was a consideration during this time.

On 9 January 1984 a pastoral review was done with Arthur Byer, primarily by a committee and the Church Council, but involving the congregation through a questionnaire. General satisfaction with Art's ministry was expressed, goals were reaffirmed and articulated, and issues were discussed. During the evaluation, Art suggested that he would not likely continue at Steeles beyond September 1985, when his contract expired. Again Steeles began a search for a Pastor to shepherd the congregation.

In late 1984 a Congregational Profile was developed and forwarded to Herb Schultz, Conference Minister, and to the Personnel Committee of Conference. A Pastoral Search Committee was organized which worked actively with the congregation, the Conference, and a pastoral couple from the Kitchener-Waterloo area. This couple expressed a high level of interest at one point, but decided later against coming to Steeles.

Stephen Drudge, a young man from the Steeles congregation attending the Ontario Theological Seminary at this time, became increasingly involved in the life of the congregation. Steve began to take a turn at preaching while the Byers were pastoring, and after they terminated he agreed to take a major pastoral role on an interim basis.

Following several consultations with Herb Schultz it was mutually agreed by the Pastoral Search Committee and the congregation that an invitation be extended to Steve to serve as Pastor on a part-time arrangement while he finished his studies. Steve accepted this invitation, and began preaching and providing pastoral services in the summer of 1985. His first sermon as interim pastor was given on 7 July. A licencing celebration was held on 8 September 1985.

Steve was very much appreciated by the Steeles Avenue people. Many of his sermons focused on worship, on reaching out to others with the Good News of the Gospel, and on the issues related

to spiritual and numerical growth. His preaching skills developed rapidly and well. The congregation felt very much a part of his own development as a young pastor, and there was mutual support and affirmation. Steve was helpful as, during this period of time, the congregation wrestled with the question of a merger with the Cedar Grove congregation.

While it is another story, it must be mentioned here that Steve, with his wife Lynelle, was installed as full-time pastor of the Rouge Valley Mennonite congregation.

### **Congregational Life, 1965 to 1986**

Under the strong leadership of Newton Gingrich from July 1965 to April 1966, and of Emerson McDowell from April 1966 to November 1974, the congregation flourished, with significant spiritual growth on the part of most members, and some numerical growth on the part of the congregation.

There was a high level of enthusiasm and commitment, even though some members found it somewhat traumatic to change from the more traditional legalism to the Ontario Mennonite Conference emphasis on self-discipline and less isolation from the "world" in order to witness more effectively in word and deed. Many members became increasingly involved in service vocations and some in service professions.

There was increased involvement in the broader Mennonite Church and its boards, committees and agencies, largely in the early years, due to encouragement from Emerson and Newton, who were both heavily involved in Conference, Mennonite Central Committee, and other agencies. A Steeles Avenue Mennonite "boy," Joe Nighswander, became Conference Moderator from 1982-1984.

A number of members were also involved in local Mennonite affiliated service agencies, such as Willowgrove, Glenbrook Day Camp, Fraser Lake Camp, Parkview Home for the Aged, Parkview Apartments, The Care and Share Shoppe, Boys and Girls Clubs, the Oshawa Men's Hostel, Vacation Bible School at Ajax and Cedar Grove, Warden Woods Community Centre and 15 Tobermory (Toronto).

To quote from a Congregational Profile prepared in early 1985 by George Reesor, "During the life of the congregation many lives have been touched at Steeles Avenue Church. Our doors have been open to Native people from the North, to the boat people from the East, to troubled youth from the nearby inner city, to foreign students and lonely persons who lack family and friends. Not the least of our ministry has been to our own youth and to our friends from work and school. Some of these have found faith and meaning and have moved on to service in other areas. Others may have caught a spark which still smoulders within, ready to burst

forth at an opportune time. People of diverse backgrounds have found support and fellowship and make a significant contribution to our congregational life and in the community."

New names appearing on the attendance and membership lists from 1965 to 1986 include Forrest, Kobold, Baker, Pogue, Jennings, Turman, Ribble. There had consistently been a good mix of people in terms of background, occupation, educational levels and age groupings. While membership remained in the 40-55 range, attendance sometimes reached into the 90s or higher on special occasions.

### **The Final Milestone**

On 17 February 1986 Horst Rabe, Chair of a Cedar Grove planning committee, and Joe Nighswander, Chair of the Steeles Avenue Council met, along with their wives Freda and Elsie at the Rabe home.

Out of their discussions related to declining membership in both congregations, the difficulty in carrying on full programs with fewer people, and the fact the two buildings were within three kilometers of each other, came a suggestion that the two Church Councils should begin a process of serious planning for a merger.

It could well be said that this was the beginning of the final milestone in the history of the Steeles Avenue Mennonite congregation, because by July of the same year, the merger was well in process and the final worship service of the Steeles Avenue Mennonite congregation occurred on 22 June 1986 in the historic Reesor Church building. The next Sunday, 29 June 1986, was the first worship service of the new congregation, meeting in the Cedar Grove church building.

Following the above mentioned meeting of the Rabes and the Nighswanders on 17 February 1986, two representatives from Cedar Grove met at the new Parkview Village apartment building in Stouffville with the Steeles Avenue Council representatives on 17 March 1986. There was good discussion and mutual sharing of the problems being experienced in both small congregations. It was also noted that Steeles had issued a call to Steve Drudge to serve as pastor, but only on a part time basis because of financial considerations.

Two additional meetings were held on 3 April 1986 and 27 April 1986. People from both congregations attended. It was decided to move in the direction of forming a new congregation. Steve and others felt that the organizational issues must be decided before a pastor/leader was chosen. At this meeting a steering committee of six persons representing both congregations was chosen to begin working on the organizational issues.

The Steering Committee was made up of Glen Brubacher, Horst Rabe, Kathy Nighswander, John Reesor, Paul Reesor, Joe Nighswander, Glenn Steiner, Lois

Burkholder, Kirrk Kobold and Hugh Laurence. It met on 1 May and 8 May. Hugh Laurence was chosen to serve as chair of this ad hoc committee. Goals for the committee were identified as follows: 1) setting goals for the new congregation, 2) determining the nature of the structure, 3) working on the process of selecting a name, 4) communicating well with all of the membership of both congregations, 5) developing a time frame for creating a new entity, 6) working on the leadership issue, 7) finding ways to involve the community in the decision to form a new congregation, 8) working at the relationship with the other Mennonite congregations in the Markham area. A facility committee was selected to prepare an inventory of our current facilities (both buildings), to identify the facility needs of a new congregation and to make recommendations.

### **A New Congregation**

Subsequently a new congregation was formed and a name was chosen, The Rouge Valley Mennonite Church. Steve Drudge was installed as full-time pastor of the new congregation. Initially, the attendance at Sunday worship services averaged in the 70s. As of the date of the writing of this history, average attendance is over 100 persons.

### **Summary**

It can be truthfully said that most, if not all of the people involved through the years in the Steeles Avenue congregation, and in the formation of the new Rouge Valley congregation, have felt the power and presence of God in both their own lives and in the spiritual life of the Christian community. So, from the Markham-Waterloo Conference congregation, through the years of the Steeles Avenue Mennonite Conference of Ontario congregation, and on into the formation and rather rapid growth of the Rouge Valley Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada congregation, some of us as members have made the entire journey. Joyfully, many new members have become a part of the body of Christ along the way. All have experienced love, acceptance, nurture, many challenges and the opportunity for participation in the Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

*J.M. Nighswander is a former moderator of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Quebec. He also served as Administrator of Parkview Services for Seniors, a complex serving 360 older adults in the town of Whitchurch/Stouffville, from 1971 to 1990. This article was written with the help of records preserved by George Reesor. Steve Drudge, Paul Burkholder, George Reesor and Elsie Nighswander checked the manuscript for accuracy. Arlene (Diller) Ramer did the word-processing.*

# Ruth Nighswander Smith

by Loralyn Smith

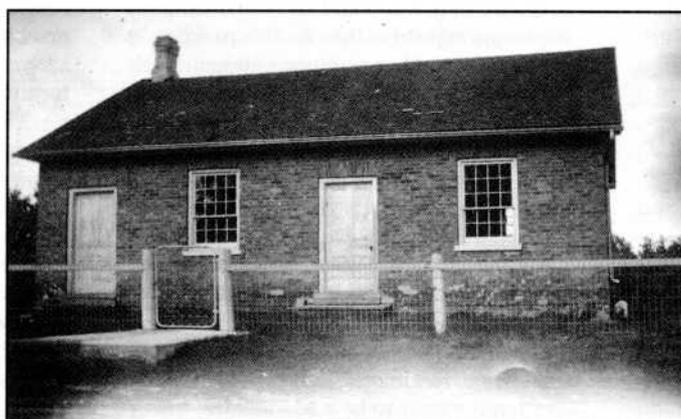
My mother, Ruth Nighswander Smith, was born on 21 November 1939 in Pickering Township to Fred and Ada Nighswander. She was the second child in a family of six children. As a young girl, she was aware that there were Christians other than Mennonites. This was largely a result of the fact that many of her fathers' family attended the local United Missionary Church and many of her mothers' family were members of Wideman's Church, which was part of the Ontario Mennonite Conference. Her family also attended annual inter-Mennonite Peace Conferences sponsored by the Non-Resistant Relief Organization where she came to realize that although there were some outward differences between the Mennonite groups, their basic beliefs were the same.

Because the congregation of the Markham area was considerably smaller than that of the Waterloo area, the members of the Markham congregation did not remain as separated from society simply because there were fewer of them and they were also more scattered. Thus, Ruth was aware that there was a difference between herself and those around her. However, as a child there were few visible differences between Ruth and her classmates at school even though she and her siblings were the only Mennonites in that particular school. All girls wore dresses, so Ruth's dress did not set her apart, although her dresses tended to be plainer than some. One exception to this situation came as a result of Ruth's role as a preacher's daughter.

As such, she and her sisters were expected to wear bonnets to church on Sunday mornings. This only became a problem for Ruth when, every third Sunday, services were held at the Altona Church. The United Missionary Church, where many of her school friends attended was located around the corner from the Altona Mennonite Church. Ruth recalls hiding behind the skirts of the adult women when church let out, to prevent passing friends and schoolmates from seeing her with her bonnet on. Since she was aware that the bonnet made her stand out from the rest, she became very self-conscious and feared that she would be ridiculed at school should her friends have seen her.

Ruth's experience in the church was largely shaped by both the thoughts and

values of her father, Fred L. Nighswander, as well as his position of leadership within the church. Ruth's father had always had dreams of being a missionary and would have probably liked to have been more involved in the Missionary Church. However, at a young age, he was chosen by lot to become a preacher in the Markham-Waterloo Mennonite Conference. Since he had always felt God's call, he entered the ministry with the intention of making changes and educating from within. However, he sometimes felt uncomfortable with the things that were happening within the church. Ruth speculates that he may have also felt somewhat trapped since he



*Altona Mennonite Church.*

was very inquisitive and valued education very highly, yet higher education was not allowed in their church. As a result of these church restrictions on education, my grandfather educated himself by reading many books and building up a large personal library. His children, then, benefited from this, as he would often bring home books for them and encouraged them to read and to learn. Through this, he also ingrained in his children the importance of not just taking what the church taught without knowing why it was taught, and the meaning behind the teachings, but instead to learn, and understand for themselves, thus making their faith their own and not just that which the church and their parents taught.

Ruth's father believed so strongly in education that he went as far as obtaining Sunday School materials from the Missionary Church, so that he could teach his children at home because he did not want his children to be deprived of such knowledge merely because the church did not share his thoughts on education. He

also made a point of buying Bible story books which he distributed to families with young children. This impressed on Ruth the importance of reading the Bible, and knowing what you believed, so that you would be able to help others to come to such understanding. While the local bishop (who supervised the actions of preachers in the Markham district) did not approve of what Ruth's father was doing, he did not say anything. Here it became clear to me that the Markhamers of Waterloo were a more conservative group, since Ruth explained that in Waterloo her father would most likely have been excommunicated for not complying with the traditional attitude towards education.

When I asked her why the church frowned on education, she explained that while reading the Bible was encouraged, the reading of any other commentary or literature of those sorts was frowned on, for reading such materials, it was feared, might give people different ideas than what the church was expounding. She found great paradox in the thought that knowing too much would lead to trouble, for what trouble could come from gaining a better understanding of the Word of God!

With regards to formal education, the norm in the church was to attend until public school was completed or one reached the age of fourteen. Therefore, when Ruth completed Grade 8, at age thirteen, she was expected to stay home the following Fall to help with duties at home. However, in mid-September, a Truant Officer visited her father and informed him that according to the law, Ruth was required to be in school until she reached the age of fourteen, and that if she did not attend school, my grandfather would be taken to court. Soon after, my grandfather did attend court to request that Ruth be excused from attending High School, but was unsuccessful, and on 13 October Ruth began her high school career, one month into the school year. Although this meant a lot of catching up for Ruth, she enjoyed the opportunity to attend high school, since she, like her father, enjoyed learning, and had a very inquisitive mind. The most negative aspect of her high school experience was that of her Physical Education Class. This is one area that Ruth thoroughly enjoyed, but was denied

participation in as she found herself caught between two conflicting sets of values. At the time, the high school required that students in this class wear uniform gym suits. Ruth's father, however, forbade her to wear such an outfit, and thus she was not permitted to take part, but had to sit on the sidelines and watch the rest of her classmates take part in the activities that she longed to be a part of. Ruth felt that her teacher had little sympathy towards her situation, as her teacher would not allow her to take part in any activities, but neither would she allow her to work on other homework during that period, and insisted that she merely sit and watch the rest of the class. When Spring came, and the class began to play baseball, Ruth begged her teacher to allow her to take part, as she explained that she had played baseball many times before while wearing a dress. The teacher relented only on the condition that Ruth brought another dress to change into when the class was over. This experience would contribute to Ruth's questioning of the dress code of the Markham-Waterloo Church.

When Ruth reached her teens, she desired to make a commitment to God, but was reluctant to do so at a young age since she was restricted to one church and depended on her parents to get her to church. In many ways, Ruth was very attracted to the Missionary Church. As her father had always taught that it was more important to become a member of the church because that is where you wanted to be rather than out of a sense of obligation or tradition, my mother decided to wait to make a commitment, and to carefully and prayerfully consider her options. Ruth recalls that a familiar saying of her father was that God has no grandchildren, indicating the importance of not just growing into faith, but making a conscious adult decision to make it a personal faith. Another consideration for Ruth in this process was that of dress code. When a woman became a member of the church, she was expected to wear cape dresses, head coverings, and black shoes and stockings, and at age thirteen she was not sure she was prepared to comply with these demands. However, at age 15 she felt that she could not put God off any longer, and decided that she would join the Missionary Church.

Soon after this, Ruth shared with her parents that she had dedicated her life to Christ, but decided to wait to tell them about her choice to join the Missionary Church. The following Sunday, one of her younger sisters was sick, and in an attempt to demonstrate a Christian attitude, Ruth offered to stay home to care for her sister while the others went to church. A few days later, Ruth met one of the young men

from her church who said that he was glad to hear that she had decided to join the church. Upon further conversation, Ruth learned that her father had announced that she planned to join the Markham-Waterloo Church. He evidently had not considered that she might choose another church. As a result of this miscommunication, Ruth felt that she was obliged to become a member of the Markham-Waterloo Church. Not only did she want to spare her father the humiliation of having to announce that his own daughter had decided to join a different congregation after an announcement to the contrary had already been made, but she also reacted to social pressure to support her father in his preacher's role.

And so began a flurry to make dresses and coverings for Ruth to prepare her for the transition to membership. In this time she openly questioned her father about the dress code which the church enforced. In response to her demand for scriptural explanation/justification for this practice, her father read her scriptures about modesty. This did not satisfy Ruth, who replied that one could be modest without cape dresses, and that she felt that wearing black stockings was not displaying modesty since she had been created with light colored legs. With these questions still in her mind, she felt that perhaps if she tried hard to believe in this practice, eventually she would become convicted of its truth. Though this conviction never came, it did not change her long-standing perception of what it meant to be a Mennonite, which included 1) living simply and not wasting resources, 2) living peaceable lives, 3) adult baptism as a personal decision, and 4) a sense of community as members shared with one another and cared for each other.

In recounting her experience as a member of the Markham-Waterloo Church, Ruth remembers feeling great frustration. She felt like a newly-hatched butterfly, who wanted to experience a new-found freedom, and stretch her wings. However, in the church to which she belonged, she felt quite trapped and unable to do this, since there was no place where she was free to speak about her own spiritual experience, and the peace that she had come to know. A further frustration came with her lack of opportunity to share her experiences with other non-Christians, because she felt uncomfortable and somewhat unwilling to invite them to her church.

These and other issues were very discouraging for Ruth, as she felt that they did not fit with her interpretations of Christ's teachings, which instructed her to share the Word and reach out in service to others. At this time she also became increasingly frustrated by the dictated role

of women in the church. Ruth admits that there were many times when she wished that she had been born a man, so that she would have been able to take part in the decisions of the church, as well as being able to share her experiences, talents and abilities with the church and in service for God. In her study of the Scriptures she found accounts of women's involvement in the church and therefore had great difficulty justifying the logic of disallowing women to play any role in the life of the church. The choosing of preachers, bishops and deacons by lot was one example of the alienation which she felt. She felt the exclusion of women from this decision-making process was unfair, since God spoke to her as well, and she desired to share that with the church, but was not allowed to. In effect, women were not permitted to contribute to Sunday morning services, nor did they have a part in the life of the church. When semi-annual conferences were held for the bishops, preachers and deacons, other men were allowed to attend, but women were forbidden to attend. Then, in conference reports given in church the following Sunday, the focus was generally aimed at women and pertained to enforcing dress code regulations on them, such as dress lengths and the importance of wearing covering ties under the neck as opposed to tucking them under the covering. Ruth often wished she could have attended these conferences to hear what was actually discussed and also to be able to challenge the legalities of dress code issues that seem to arise at such meetings. But just as education and knowledge were seen to be in the hands of the leadership, so too were these matters to be left in the hands of the men.

At the same time that Ruth was feeling frustrated by the existing church, her father continued his vigorous attempt to make changes in the church. For instance, he asked for permission from the bishop to start Sunday night Bible Study groups for the young people. The bishop was very reluctant, but allowed it, since there were many young people interested in it, and perhaps feared that they would leave if their needs were not met within this church. The bishop continued close supervision of these Bible studies and their progression. However, Ruth's father continued to push for further change as he wanted to see more growth in the church. One way in which he encouraged this was by encouraging the young people to consider doing Voluntary Service terms, or to attend the Ontario Mennonite Bible School, which was run by the Ontario Mennonite Conference. He even encouraged women to consider such options as missions or Bible School, as he

felt that they too could benefit and grow from such experience. Unfortunately, Ruth was denied such longed-for opportunities to serve God and learn more about Him because her father felt that she was needed at home.

Ruth's choices were once again dictated to her because of circumstances, but she responded with a determined effort to serve God from where she was, and in the ways in which she was able. Since she could not leave for missions abroad, she began voluntary service of a different sort in her area by voluntarily assisting mothers with young children, primarily women from the church, and found much satisfaction in the giving of her time and abilities in this manner. Furthermore, she worked for one year as the caregiver of the local public school, doing janitorial-type duties, and at the end of this year, gave her earnings to Mennonite Central Committee to help further their work in missions. Although she may have resented that fact that she had been denied the opportunity to go to Bible School or to complete a voluntary service term with MCC, Ruth learned a valuable lesson about service in the process: that each person can serve God no matter where she is and one does not have to go far away to find opportunities to serve others.

In Fall of 1960 Ruth married Norman E. Smith, who also was a member of the Markham-Waterloo Church in Markham. Their experience of the church in the matter of marriage is one which again dictated their actions and left little room for personal choice. Firstly, I find it surprising, and somewhat sad, that the only marital counseling that they received was an instruction by the bishop telling them what they were expected to wear on the wedding day; for my father, it was a dark colored suit of the regular style with dark, plain shoes, while my mother was to wear a white dress, which was to be no different in style than the customary cape dresses. It amazes me that more time was not spent instructing each partner of what their duties would be within marriage, and the expectations of them in the church, however this was apparently left to the couple to discover. The wedding ceremony left little room for individuality, as there was a prescribed and uniform ceremony which was to be used by all. Ruth and Norman decided that they wanted to have a hymn sung immediately following their exchange of vows, which seemed to them to be a minor deviation from the norm, and thus they approached the bishop with their request. After much discussion, the bishop reluctantly agreed to allow it; however, on the actual wedding day he proceeded with the ceremony following the exchange of vows, without permitting a congregational

hymn. Once again Ruth was forced to deal with disappointment as the church denied her the ability to make personal choices.

After Ruth was married, she and her peers in the Markham-Waterloo Church decided that they wanted to have Sunday School for their children. Just as Ruth's father had worked from within for change, so too did this group attempt to satisfy their needs within this church rather than look to another church. Over many months they met with the bishop to seek permission to begin a Sunday School program since they desired to stay in the church rather than leave it. The bishop, however, refused to allow Sunday Schools. Ruth suggests that the bishop felt somewhat powerless in the situation because he had promised the bishop prior to him that he would keep the church as it was when he began, and having made such a promise, felt that he would be dishonouring both God and his promise if he were to allow such changes to take place. As a result, all the young couples in the church as well as those into their early 60s formed a group in 1964 which initially met in homes where Sunday School activities began for children while the adults spent much time discussing where the group would go. It was eventually decided that they would join the Ontario Conference Mennonites, but would do so by creating their own congregation, in order to avoid creating a burden on the existing church in the area who would have had to absorb a sizable influx of members. The congregation which they formed was called Steeles Avenue and they met in the Reesor Church, which had been one of the meeting places of the Markham-Waterloo Church.

In this new congregation, the women began to meet for prayer and Bible study. Initially they met separately from the men, since as a result of their teachings thus far in their lives (regarding women speaking in the church, etc.) they still felt uncomfortable speaking out and sharing with men present. My mother fondly remembers their first meetings as women, at which they each shared with each other their faith journeys to date. This was a freeing experience for these women who had never had a chance to say aloud the experiences they had, and all that their faith meant to them. Not only did this experience free these women, but it was a touching and bonding experience which allowed them to be honest with each other, revealing the masks of piety and saintliness that they had worn for so long. For the first time these women were permitted to see the strengths and weakness of one another, and share their personal feelings with one another. This created a close bond between the members of this new church, and taught my mother an important lesson

about looking at people in a different light, recognizing that peoples' outward appearances are not always accurate indicators of who they truly are. As this group continued, women from the community began to join them thus fulfilling the desire of this congregation to reach out to those around them. Ruth explains how this women's group even reached her mother, who had not followed this movement. She attended one of the women's Bible studies and spread her wings as she had never done before. Ruth feels that this was a life-changing experience for her. After this experience she began to witness to others as she spoke with and interacted with her neighbours.

Another important development in this congregation was the increased involvement of women in the life of the church. For instance, women taught Sunday School, shared in song-leading and in congregational decision-making. The men expected help from the women and enjoyed having aid in the burdens of decision-making. Ruth can not account for their liberal attitude since these men had been brought up in the thought that women were not to take part in such matters.

As Ruth reflects on the lasting impact of her experiences in the Markham-Waterloo Church, she says that she was made to realize the importance of being able to exercise ministry, living out her convictions, reaching out to those around her, and being able to utilize her abilities to further the Kingdom of God. Today, she feels the satisfaction of being in a setting where she feels that she is available for God to use her in whatever way he can, and she encourages each of her children and other young people to do whatever they can in serving Christ.

In conclusion, as I study the life and experiences of my mother in the Markham-Waterloo Church, I realize that I have grown up with a completely different experience. I have always felt myself as a valued member of the church and have been encouraged since a young age to get involved in various aspects of my church. Most importantly, I have been encouraged in my spiritual growth and desire to learn. It is for these reasons that I value the stories and experiences of my mother, for it is through them that I can gain a greater appreciation for the opportunities that I have been given and gain further insight into the values which my parents have passed on to me.

*Loralyn Smith is a student at University of Waterloo. She received The J. Winfield Fretz Award for Studies in Ontario Mennonite History (second place) in 1993 for this essay.*

## People and Projects

The Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario invites submissions to be considered for **The J. Winfield Fretz Award for Studies in Ontario Mennonite History**. The award is offered annually at three levels: high school students, undergraduate students/local historians, graduate students. First prize is \$100. Second prize is a book for the first category and \$50. for the second and third categories. Persons whose submissions receive honorable mention will be given a year's membership in the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. Deadline is May 31. Address correspondence to the editor of *Ontario Mennonite History*, Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, ON, N2L 3G6.

**Linda Huebert Hecht** received \$2,700. from the **Frank H. Epp Memorial Fund** to catalogue approximately 1,700 MCC-related photographs in the *Canadian Mennonite* photo series at Conrad Grebel College. Huebert Hecht also hopes to prepare a photographic essay on the history of MCC Canada.

Ron Mathies of Waterloo, Ontario, and Robert Kreider of North Newton, Kansas, have been named co-editors of a project to produce a book for the **75th anniversary of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in 1995**. The project planners hope the book will emerge from essays on MCC by a wide variety of Brethren in Christ and Mennonite journals.

The Brethren in Christ Church has appointed E. Morris Sider general editor of a forthcoming *Brethren in Christ Encyclopedia*. The encyclopedia will be in one volume of some 600 pages, with two columns to a page. It will contain such subject areas as people, institutions, events and historic sites. A history of each congregation, past and present, will be included. Projected publication date is 1997. Readers are encouraged to indicate their willingness to write one or more articles by contacting Sider at Messiah College, Grantham, PA 17027.

**E. Morris Sider** is writing a two-volume history of Brethren in Christ missions. One volume will be a survey history, the other volume will be a collection of biographies. Projected publication date is 1998. Sider is engaged in several other long-term writing projects, including a collection of Canadian Brethren in Christ biographies, a book-length biography of **E.J. Swalm**, and a book of creative stories based on his childhood and early years in Ontario.

**Elizabeth Bloomfield**, who is researching and writing the history of Waterloo Township, solicits copies of Waterloo Township Council's *Proceedings and bylaws*, 1855-. These are annual printed summaries of minutes of all regular and special meetings, with text of all by-laws, auditor's statements and minutes of Board of Health. Given the gaps and uncertainties in the other Township records, this series is especially useful. The largest known set was collected by John Steckley and is preserved by his daughter, Jean. Bloomfield appeals to other families of Township councillors for missing years. Still needed to make a complete set: 1851, 1852, 1853, 1856, 1857, 1858, 1859, 1860, 1861, 1862, 1863, 1864, 1865, 1868, 1869, 1872, 1873, 1874, 1875, 1877, 1880, 1881, 1882, 1883, 1884, 1885, 1889, 1890, 1893, 1895, 1896, 1899, 1900, 1905, 1906, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, 1922, 1923, 1927, 1928, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1940, 1941, 1943, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1952, 1953, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1972.

Paul Grove of Ringwood, Ontario reports that documents recently discovered by him show that construction of **Wideman's Mennonite meetinghouse in Markham**, Ontario began in 1817. A hand-written copy of a translated German document, the original of which is dated 26 December 1816, refers to a decision of "the united brethren of the mennonist [society]...to build a house to keep godly servise within, for oure selves and oure children." An account book kept by Daniel Hoover, one of the first known trustees at Wideman's meetinghouse, lists donations "for the meetinghouse" beginning in January 1817. Grove has translated excerpts from the account book and deposited them in the Wideman Mennonite Church collection in the Mennonite Archives of Ontario.

Kathy Baker is researching the genealogy of **Valentine and Anna (Lederach) Kratz**. Valentine Kratz was the first known Mennonite preacher in Canada. He was chosen in 1801 for the Mennonite congregation now known as **The First Mennonite Church**, Vineland, Ontario. The Kratz's had at least eleven children. One of them, Barbara Kratz, married Abraham Honsberger. Baker would like to obtain any information about Valentine Kratz, his ministerial service with the Mennonite Church, and his family. Address correspondence to her at 2170 Sherobee Road, Apt. #806, Mississauga, ON L5A 3P8.

**Lydia Marlene Harder** successfully defended her doctoral dissertation, "**A Hermeneutics of Discipleship: Toward a Mennonite/Feminist Approach to Biblical Authority**," at the Toronto School of Theology in 1993. Harder examines how particular biblical interpretations evolved within the Mennonite theological tradition. She includes a comprehensive bibliography on the history of Mennonite theology which will be useful to others wishing to do further study in this area.

**Marlene Epp** received a \$3000. grant from the **Quiring-Loewen Trust** to assist her doctoral research on the experiences of Mennonite women who emigrated from Russia to Canada after WW II.

A biennial gathering of conference-based Mennonite historians, focusing on the **history of Mennonite women**, is planned for 20-22 October 1994 in Harleysville, PA. Marlene Epp will address the group on "**Rereading Mennonite History with a Woman's Eyes**."

The first academic conference on **Anabaptist Women's History** is planned for 8-11 June 1995 in Millersville PA. Proposals for single papers/presentations should include a 500-word abstract and one-page CV. Contact person is Diane Zimmerman Umble, PO Box 1002, Millersville University, Millersville, PA 17551.

Mennonite Central Committee's bi-national **Committee on Women's Concerns** celebrated its 20th anniversary last year with the publication of a commemorative issue of *Women's Concerns Report* 109 (July-August 1993). A complete listing of themes in past issues of the *Report* is included on p. 18.

**Reg Good** successfully defended his doctoral dissertation, "**Crown-Directed Colonization of Six Nations and Métis Land Reserves in Canada**," at the University of Saskatchewan in 1993. Good focuses on the role of Mennonite block settlements in displacing Aboriginal peoples.

Old Order (Wisler horse and buggy) Mennonites held their last official worship service at **Martin's meetinghouse** in the former township of Waterloo, Ontario, on 26 December 1993. Urban sprawl has shifted the Old Order community north and west so that it is no longer convenient to worship there. The meetinghouse continues to be used regularly by Markham-Waterloo Mennonites.