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Mennonite Tourism as Witness

by Maurice Martin

"A city built on a hill cannot be hid."

- Matthew 5:14

*"Always be ready to make your defense
to anyone who demands from you an
accounting for the hope that is in you."*

- I Peter 3:15b

I. Elmira and District Tour Program

This year marks approximately 35 years since the beginnings of a conscious attempt to provide a Mennonite witness to tourists in Waterloo Region. The counter-cultural lifestyle of the Old Order Mennonites in Woolwich Township had in the 1960's drawn many tourists into the area. They would park beside the road at the Elmira Meetinghouse or the Martins Meetinghouse in Waterloo and take photos of the horses and buggies and their passengers. Increasingly tourists found their way into the surrounding countryside in search of "Mennonites," by which was meant "the horse and buggy people." Truly for such a "visible minority" "a city built on a hill cannot be hid!"

How did Old Order Mennonites respond to the influx of tourists? This attention was not welcomed by them



The two Mennonite churches on the west side of Elmira. Photo courtesy of St. Jacobs Printery.

and was often experienced as intrusive. Depending on their personality, they would have a range of responses - from being openly welcoming and ready to engage in dialogue, to being slightly bemused or embarrassed by all the attention, to being greatly annoyed at the intrusion on their privacy. When asked, however, about their Christian responsibility in all of this, their pastors and others would respond with the verse: "Always be ready to make your defense for anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (I Peter 3:15b).

Tourists coming into the area would often look in the telephone book under "Mennonite" in hopes of making a connection, not realizing that (at that time) the Old Order Mennonites they sought did not have telephones. Sometimes they called MCC Ontario, who directed them to Vernon Leis,



Vernon Leis. Photo courtesy of Orvie Horst.

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pastor of the Elmira Mennonite Church 1966-1980.

The Leis years of ministry at Elmira Mennonite Church are well-documented in Ken Bechtel's history *Three Score Years* (Elmira, 1984). Some members of the congregation were drinking from a variety of theological streams. Leis described a major aspect of his Elmira ministry as work on the Mennonite self-image. Through his personal and educational experiences Leis had become a convinced Anabaptist Mennonite, influenced greatly by H.S. Bender and the "recovery of the Anabaptist vision."

In articles in the local newspaper, *The Independent*, Leis articulated the Mennonite emphases of believers church volunteerism, peace, social ethics and responsibility as being at the core of the gospel, not mere expendable attachments. He did not want his congregants to see themselves as "second class fundamentalists with a few quirks." "He asserted the value of the Anabaptist view of scriptural faithfulness, says Bechtel."

Leis brought guest speakers into the community to focus on issues of war and peace and other important Mennonite distinctives. Soon the *Kitchener Record* and others came to see him as a spokesman for the Mennonite faith perspective. He held breakfast meetings at a local restaurant to which he invited persons from the community. Guest speakers included John Ruth, John Howard Yoder, David Shank and Millard Fuller, to name a few.

Pastor Leis gave talks to area Catholic and Christian Reformed groups. A Roman Catholic principal at one of these meetings urged Leis to invite a few student groups. The word spread. Soon Women's Institutes, seniors groups, and student groups came to the Elmira Mennonite Church to learn about Mennonite "culture." Leis broadened the topic to include Mennonite history, theology

and practice. Soon people from across Ontario, the USA and beyond came to Elmira to learn about Mennonites.

In 1968-69 the Elmira Mennonite Church Council approved the concept of hosting groups to interpret the Mennonite faith. They understood the objectives to be threefold: 1) "to give a witness to our faith in Christ and to interpret the Christian life as we understand it," 2) "to seek to clarify the Mennonite vision," and 3) "to learn from an experience of dialogue with others." Bechtel reports: "One Thornlea high school student summarized her learnings this way: 'I think I understand what a Mennonite is now. A Mennonite is the way Mennonites we met acted towards us yesterday and today. A Mennonite is an attitude towards others, a way of life. It is Christian belief put into practice in a special way.'"

Other Mennonite congregations from the district became involved and helped with the program. The Tour Program of Elmira and District Mennonite Churches was constituted by 1974, with its supporting Mennonite Tour Program Association. Membership in the Association, which met annually in November, was "open to interested persons of any Mennonite Church in Ontario."

The Tour Board of Elmira and District Mennonite Churches (Tour Board) was composed of nine members, 2 appointed by the Elmira Mennonite Church Council, 1 from each of the Elmira Mennonite Women's Mission and Service Commission (WMSC) groups, and 5 from the Mennonite Tour Programme Association. The Tour Co-ordinator was to be the pastor of the Elmira Mennonite Church or any other persons so designated by the Tour Board.

The first meeting of the Tour Board as it was simply called, was held in the pastor's study at the Elmira Mennonite Church on January 23, 1974. Members present were: Roy Bauman (Elmira Mennonite Church),

Roy Brubacher (St. Jacobs Mennonite Church), Mel Weber (Hawkesville Mennonite Church), Rita Bauman, Lucinda Reist and Doris Gingrich (Elmira Mennonite Church WMSC), Allen Martin (Floradale Mennonite Church), and Vernon Leis (pastor, Elmira Mennonite Church). Roy Brubacher was declared chairman, Doris Gingrich secretary. Joe Snyder was appointed treasurer at the second meeting, held April 4, 1974.

At the second meeting the Tour Board met with representatives of the Elmira Mennonite Church Council to finalize plans to hire Maurice Martin as assistant pastor. This was intended to be a two-year "residency" type of ministry role, with one-third of his time to be devoted to assist in the tour program. Some questions were being raised: Was the program worth it? Was the congregation itself being neglected? Having an assistant pastor allowed both the continuation of the thriving tour ministry and an expansion of other pastoral services. There were subsequently several more assistant pastors who had a similar dual role in the congregation. They were Stephen Dick (1976-78), Marvin Shank (1978-80), Gary Knarr (1980-83) and Kenneth Bechtel (1983-85).

The year prior to the Mennonite churches forming their Tour Board, the Elmira and District Chamber of Commerce formed its own Tourism Committee. There had been some informal co-operation between the Tour Board and the Chamber. They worked together formally to create a Tourism Information Centre with three stated purposes: 1) to fairly represent the total culture and uniqueness of the Elmira district, 2) to provide information and personal contact for visitors, 3) to stress values, customs, and ideals of early Upper Canada settlements.

The proposal went on to state a concern for quality and interpretation: "It is our hope that all interpretation of Mennonites and the general district

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Mennonites and the general district will be completed by persons who are qualified and understand the subject matter as well as have the capabilities for dialogue with various kinds of people." The responsibilities of the Chamber of Commerce and the Elmira Mennonite Church were set out in the document. They also proposed to form a Tour Guild with guidelines of operation, quality control, etc. The agreement between the Chamber and the Elmira Mennonite Church was put into effect in early 1974.

In June 1976 the Chamber concluded that there was a need to simplify the organizational structure for the co-operation of the Mennonite Tour Programme and that of the Chamber of Commerce. This new entity would be called the Elmira and District Tourist Association, with representation from the Mennonite Church Tour Board (4), the Chamber of Commerce (2), the Tourist Guild (2), the Maple Syrup Festival Committee (1), the Woolwich Township Council (1) and 2 from the General Public.

The stated purpose was "To act as the overall authority on matters pertaining to tourism in the area." Its objectives included: 1) to fairly and accurately represent the total culture and uniqueness of Elmira district and to stress the values, customs and ideals of the Mennonite community, 2) to control tourism and tourist activities in the area, 3) to avoid exploitation of the Mennonites or any other specific group in our area, 4) to provide information and personal contact for visitors and to administer the

Tourist Information Centre (formed in July, 1973) and its staff, 5) to attain community involvement in tourism and tourist activities, and 6) to co-ordinate the tourist programs in our area.

The Tour Board of the Elmira and District Mennonite Churches subsequently met to study the proposal presented by the tourism committee of the Chamber of Commerce and found that they could not accept the proposal. Reasons given included: 1) a desire to continue to work with the Elmira and District Chamber of Commerce in accordance with the present agreement, 2) a concern that the Mennonite Tour Board would not have fair representation in proportion to investment of energies in the program, 3) that Mennonite tour guides can best present the Mennonite faith and life, and 4) that the most interest is in the theological tour, therefore the paid person is of more value at the church. Other reasons for rejecting the proposal were more administrative in nature.

Leis in his Review of Mennonite Tour Programmes succinctly reported that the Mennonite Tour Board said: "Since the Elmira and District Chamber did not agree to work with us in the past, we recommend that we participate in the new organization which has been proposed, but as an autonomous tour organization of the Mennonite churches of the area." Is there here a hint of an uncomfortable alliance?

Leis reported on reasons given by the Tour Board for continuing involvement with the Chamber:

1) People say that our objectives are the same and that we should all work together.

2) What will people think if we separate from the Chamber?

3) If we do not control tourism, outside interests are going to do it for us.

4) To influence what happens the church must remain involved in it.

He lists concerns people have about continuing involvement:

1) The Church and the Chamber have differing objectives and maybe we should face up to that fact and programme accordingly

2) The active promotion of tourism with the financial agreement with Brox's Olde Town Village feels like an unholy alliance with an aggressive business venture.

Leis concludes: "I am beginning to feel that the people who talk about "controlling tourism" may lead us into questionable actions" (emphasis mine).

In the interchange of memos, proposals and counter-proposals we readily see the reticence of Mennonites to align themselves too closely with tourism which literally capitalizes on the Old Order Mennonites in the

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Mennonites in the community. This debate continued in the Mennonite Churches and on the Tour Board throughout the history of Mennonite tourism in the area. Were the goals of commercialism and Christian witness compatible?

For Leis and others who supported the Tour Program, there was a clear sense that this was a "mission field at our doorsteps." Instead of "going to the people" the people were "coming to us" and it gave the church a wonderful opportunity to bear witness to its faith from an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective. Thus emerged the phenomenon "tourism as witness."

At its zenith, as many as 5,000 tourists each year came through the Elmira Mennonite Tour Program. A typical day in the tour program in the 1970's is as follows: At 10.00 a.m. a bus rolled into the parking lot to dis-



Vernon Leis speaking to a tour group in the Elmira Mennonite Church basement. Photo courtesy of Orvie Horst.

charge its passengers at the rear door of the church. There they were greeted by the pastor or the designated tour guide for the day and invited into the sanctuary. They saw the film *The Mennonite Story* (or another suitable film), followed by discussion of Anabaptist-Mennonite history and theology and Mennonite practices.

Many questions had to do with sorting out the different "orders" of Mennonites - "Old Order" and "New Order" as tourists tended to see them.

They were confused by the fact that on one Sunday there would be buggies parked at the meetinghouse next door; the next Sunday, black cars, belonging to the Waterloo-Markham group which worships there on alternate Sundays. And persons from all three groups are buried in the adjoining cemetery. The location is a good microcosm of the Mennonite world in Woolwich Township!

Meanwhile the women of the church whose turn it was to prepare the meal were busy in the kitchen. They could be from Bethel, Floradale, St. Jacobs, Elmira or Hawkesville Mennonite churches. At noon they would serve the group of 50 or more people what might be termed "a Mennonite meal." After the meal the group was invited to browse at the literature table, pick up some free pamphlets describing Mennonite history and beliefs, or purchase books provided on consignment by Mennonite

publishers.

After lunch they boarded the bus with the designated tour guide and drove into the countryside north-west of the church on a 35 mile (90 minute) tour of "Mennonite country." If they were fortunate, they might see a six-horse hitch plowing the land, or a four-horse hitch doing spring seeding or harvesting grain. Now they finally saw what they had come to see! It was always a challenge for tour guides to remind them that even



A scene sought after by tourists, a farmer with a horse drawn binder. Photo courtesy of St. Jacobs Printery.

the "modern" farms they saw in the area were also operated by Mennonites, with the same essential beliefs as the Old Order, but with a different way of life.

More rarely, and by careful pre-arrangement only, tour groups would actually be taken onto farms, a local buggy shop or other cottage industry, to meet the Old Order people and engage them in dialogue. Leis had built careful bridges to allow this to happen, and was always selective as to which groups might have that special experience. It was a fine line to draw whether the Mennonite tour program itself would participate in the intrusiveness of tourism, or shelter the Old Order population from it?

In 1976 Leis reported that 4500 people came to the tour program. They came to Elmira by bus (115 busloads) or car (15 cars) from various cities, small towns and villages of Ontario. They came from Hamilton, Toronto, Barrie, Seaforth, Stratford, Hensall, Dunnville and Sault Ste. Marie, to name but a few. They also came from Montreal as well as several states in the USA. Others came from India, Africa, England, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium and New Zealand, again to name but a few of the groups listed in his report.

Sometimes Vernon Leis would go to people, rather than having them come to him, as he visited other churches, or classrooms. He spent one day at Milton District High School, telling the Mennonite story in five 70 minutes periods. Thus was added an

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C. Kalbfleish, the head of the history department of Goderich District Collegiate Institute sent Leis a memo outlining "What high schools want to learn from the Mennonite Tour Program." These include: 1) Why are Mennonites pacifists? 2) How do Mennonites view marriage? Does the wife complement the husband? How do they deal with women's lib? 3) Does the Mennonite Church have sacraments? 4) What role does the ordinary church member play within the Mennonite Church? and 5) What are the major differences between the various groups of Mennonites? to



The Mennonite Story building as it looks today in downtown St. Jacobs. Photo courtesy of St. Jacobs Printery.

name a few of the questions he raised. He added a list of ways in which the afternoon tour could be improved. Most notably he said: "Students want contact with the Old Order or Amish - not just driving through the country. This means a visit to an Old Order farm and a dialogue with the family."

There were many various and creative approaches to telling the Mennonite story which went far beyond tourism. Sometimes groups were invited to worship with the Elmira Mennonite Church on Sunday morning, to be hosted for dinner following. This felt less like "tourism" and more like "fraternal fellowship." At least one might characterize it as "tourism with a plus."

Often there was Catholic-

Mennonite dialogue. Sometimes there was Christian-Jewish dialogue. And one day a group of Tibetan monks came to visit with Martin at the Elmira Mennonite Church. They had been given special dispensation by the Dalia Lama to travel by conveyance, not by foot, on a world-wide mission "to dialogue with people of faith," in a materialistic world.

Much more could be said about the Elmira Mennonite Tour Program. But we turn now to the program as it developed in St. Jacobs.

II. St. Jacobs and the Meetingplace venture

In St. Jacobs there was a more immediate link between tourism and commerce in the person of business entrepreneur Milo Shantz and his wife Laura. In 1971 while on a TourMagination trip to Europe they received encouragement to become involved in a people oriented project, perhaps a restaurant. Milo had become aware of many unused empty buildings in the village of St. Jacobs. To satisfy tourists, more attractions would be needed, such as crafts, boutiques, gift shops, etc. Thus began the development of St. Jacobs as "a tourist destination."

The Stone Crock restaurant opened in 1975. The hostess and the waitresses in the restaurant, most of whom were Mennonites, could answer questions about the faith and life of Mennonites. But they did not have time to do justice to the inquiries.

The Shantz family had received a letter from Doug Snyder, Executive Secretary of MCC Ontario concerning increasing tourism in St. Jacobs and vicinity, and the need to better inform people about the Old Order Mennonites. Shantz, a good friend of Vernon Leis, also attended a meeting of the Elmira Chamber of Commerce, where it was further noted that greater tourism was inevitable because of interest in Old Order Mennonites. The goal was to avoid exploitation.

Ca. 1976/77 one of Shantz's properties was leased to the Post Office but half of the building remained empty. After visiting Peoples Place in Pennsylvania, and after dialogue with Frank and Helen Epp, remembering the empty buildings in St. Jacobs,

Shantz envisioned creating an information centre to tell the Anabaptist and Mennonite story.

In 1977 Milo and Laura Shantz invited a number of couples to their home for a weekend of sharing, fellowship and planning the information centre. Persons present included Arnold & Rhoda Cressman, Jan & Barb Gleysteen (Tourmagination), Vernon & Arvilla Leis, John & Roma Ruth (Tourmagination), Merle & Phyllis Good (Peoples Place), Doug Snyder (MCC Ont.) and Richard Yordy (pastor, St. Jacobs Mennonite Church). Milo and Laura Shantz had drawn up a rough sketch of a plan with 7 rooms, including a multi-media room. Arnold Cressman brought the idea of a "cave" representing the Cave of the Anabaptists in Switzerland. Vernon Leis suggested the replica of an Old Order Meeting House room.

The group did not want to exploit the Mennonites or even the Mennonite name. Calling it "the Meetingplace" while still telling the Mennonite story would be the answer. The Meetingplace opened its doors in the summer of 1979, sharing a building with the post office. Burton Buller was the designer and Glen Fretz the general planner of the various multi-media aspects. The Meetingplace facility itself was developed through the generosity of the Shantz family who continue to own it.

The program of Mennonite interpretation was operated by a Management Committee of the St. Jacobs Mennonite Church and its missions committee. The Meetingplace committee was composed of twenty-four persons representing eight congregations, two

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composed of twenty-four persons representing eight congregations, two Mennonite Conferences and the Inter-Mennonite Congregational Resources Board. They took responsibility for policies and operations of the Meetingplace beginning in 1981. Previously this responsibility had been carried by Milo Shantz and associates. The first organizational meeting was held on October 5, 1980.

In 1985 the Meetingplace Association was incorporated into the organizational structure.

Included in the Association were representatives from local Mennonite congregations and volunteers.

"The Constituency of the Meetingplace is considered to be the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ community in Ontario (the MCC Ontario constituency). They were invited to send representatives to association meetings.

A typical day at the Meetingplace is described as follows: Tourists entering the Meetingplace were met by a host who answered inquiries about tourist information for the village. Some would also ask questions about the Old Order Mennonites. They were invited to enter a multimedia journey through the Mennonite story. They viewed a 30 minute film "Mennonites of Ontario" narrated by John Ruth. The film included Walter Klaassen and Frank Epp, professors at Conrad Grebel College, describing Anabaptist-Mennonite history and thought. It went on to show scenes from Mennonite life, service and programs in Ontario.

Visitors then went downstairs and walked through several rooms in which were pictures on the walls and tape-recorded messages of explanation which they could access from room to room. They would sit in the "cave" to experience something of the feeling of being an Anabaptist, a persecuted hunted minority within Christendom.

They would learn the differences between Mennonites, Lutherans, Calvinists and Catholics. They would also learn the difference between Mennonites of Dutch/North German descent, and Swiss/South German descent. They would experience a replica of an Old Order Meeting House, as well as a typical Old Order Mennonite farm kitchen, complete with Pennsylvania German dialect from a headset.

In April, 1980 Dave Brubacher, who was youth minister at St. Jacobs Mennonite Church, assumed the responsibilities of Manager at the Meetingplace. He was succeeded in that role by the late Gordon Hunsburger, a St. Jacobs Mennonite Church member, then by Curtis Brubacher, a member of St. Jacobs Mennonite Church, followed by Joseph Snider, a member of Elmira Mennonite Church. The Centre is managed currently by Del Gingrich, a member of the Elmira Mennonite Church and a retired elementary school teacher.

Over the years the Meetingplace has provided a number of students with Summer employment, financed by governmental programs. Many volunteers have staffed the centre as well. "Some of these have retired and new volunteers need to be recruited," writes Elmer Sauder, himself a long-time volunteer.

The program continues today much as described above, with a number of changes made along the way in décor and content of some of the rooms. The 30 minute film has been revised a number of times, reduced to a 15 minute video, and just last year revised again. Most tourists simply do not have the time to spend going into the topic in great depths. There are of course notable exceptions when tourists engage the volunteers in significant dialogue on matters of life and faith. This makes the work of volunteers who staff the centre especially rewarding.

Some of the same concerns applied to St. Jacobs as in Elmira about trying to avoid the commercial exploitation of Old Order Mennonites. Bob Verdun, editor of the Elmira Independent found his fears allayed when he paid a visit to the Meetingplace for a showing of "Mennonites in Ontario." His April 30, 1980 editorial was entitled "The Meetingplace can turn tourism from negative to positive." He wrote: "The Meetingplace offers easily-understood lessons on basic principles of life, and cannot help but teach tolerance and understanding."



The replica of an Anabaptist cave inside the Mennonite Story. Photo courtesy of St. Jacobs Printery.



The display of photos telling the Russian chapter of the Mennonite story. Photo courtesy of St. Jacobs Printery.



The display of photos telling the Swiss chapter of the Mennonite story. Photo courtesy of St. Jacobs Printery.

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In the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, June 2, 1996, writer Lynne Muller suggested the Meetingplace brought a different perspective to the commercial aspects of the St. Jacobs area. She quotes Milo Shantz: "People are always going to come to look at Mennonites. Nobody's going to stop tourism, so wouldn't it be better if visitors understood us?"

And indeed, nobody would stop tourists from coming to St. Jacobs, which is among the top four tourist attractions in Ontario, after Toronto, Niagara Falls and Stratford.

Reports in the late 1990's indicate that each year since 1998 over 20,000 people from more than 100 countries came into the Visitor Centre and took part in at least some of the program *Telling the Mennonite Story*.

From its inception, it was agreed to promote *The Meetingplace* (Visitor Centre) for pastors to visit with their church instruction (catechism) classes. It seemed like a good way to have our own people become more familiar with their history and faith roots. Gingrich reports that sometimes more conservative Mennonites arrange to visit the Centre, to inform themselves of their historical faith roots. He sees this as an opportunity to provide "safe" access to good material for groups with the broader church who do not have television or technical equipment in their homes.

At the November 2, 1993 Management Committee meeting a name change was discussed. Perhaps "Meetingplace" was too ambiguous for the tourists. Consensus leaned to the name "Mennonite Information Centre".

In 1998 Maurice Martin, pastor at the Hillcrest Mennonite Church, became the first chair of the Management Committee from outside the original sponsoring group of congregations. By this time the wider church interest had waned considerably; the program was seen largely as a program of St. Jacobs Mennonite

Church from which came all five or six committee members, with the exception of Martin. Recall that in 1980 the Meetingplace Committee had 25 members, including representation from area Mennonite Churches, conference and other representation.

During Martin's leadership (1998-2003) it was agreed that the Centre would play a stronger role as an information centre for the village, while it continued to inform interested persons about Mennonite history and thought. Thus it was renamed simply Visitor Centre, with a sub-title "Telling the Mennonite Story." "The Meetingplace Association" was seen as an appropriate ongoing title for the group of supporters.

At the 21st. annual meeting of the Meetingplace Association Dr. Leonard Friesen spoke on "Tourism - the Practice of Hospitality." Reflecting on the 75th. anniversary of Mennonite immigrants from the Ukraine receiving the gift of hospitality in the area, he presented a vision for hospitality to tourists who come to the Visitor Centre in St. Jacobs from every corner of the globe. Thus perhaps "witness" changed to "hospitality" as a goal of the Visitor Centre?

In the late 1990's and early 2000's, the Visitor Centre Management Committee increasingly heard reports from the manager that the various media mechanisms were wearing out. The film, now a video, had lost its sharpness through each of several editions. In short, the Meetingplace was showing its age. Martin called a meeting of interested persons to begin exploring future plans for a rejuvenated Mennonite information centre. Several fund-raising events were held to begin improvements on the present presentation, in hopes that these stop-gap measures would tide the program over until more substantive changes could be made.

In a letter dated April 23, 2001 Martin wrote the Council of St. Jacobs Mennonite Church inviting

them to explore gaining charitable status for the Meetingplace Association, to be constituted as an organization separate from the St. Jacobs Mennonite Church, in hopes that the program could spread its wings in new ways with an increased base. It seemed apparent that the Visitor Centre was at a critical juncture. Within five years it would need to either be greatly revised/ revived, or be gracefully put to rest. That initiative did not proceed, and the visionary thinking seemed to grind to a halt.

By the late 1990's it was increasingly clear that the commitment of St. Jacobs Mennonite Church itself to the tour program was also waning. Interpreting Mennonites to the broader world no longer seemed to be at the cutting edge of ministry for the church. Meanwhile the volunteer group also was showing its age, with little sign that younger persons were poised in the wings to take their place. Having said that, it seems clear that many people still appreciate the message of peace and good will that the Visitor Centre offers as it tells the Mennonite story, under the capable direction of Del Gingrich.

In 1999, in what might be seen as a last-ditch attempt to renew interest in the program of the Visitor Centre, copies of the 20th. anniversary booklet were sent to each congregation in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. This did not generate the hoped-for response, either on the part of congregations of MCEC, or of its Missions Commission.

As the St. Jacobs church tended increasingly to relinquish its role in the program, Milo Shantz began resuming more direct personal control. In consultation with John Ruth and others, he made some changes to the program in its present setting, and informed the management committee of these changes as they occurred. These changes are seen as stop-gap measures. Martin resigned from the

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stop-gap measures. Martin resigned from the committee at that time.

What the future holds when Milo and Laura Shantz no longer are able to take personal interest, is uncertain. For the present, they continue to carry out a vision held by those who planned the Centre 25 years ago.

III. Mennonite tourism among the Amish - the Millbank tour program

Tourism, attracted by the smell of good baking from Anna Mae's bake shop, spilled west of Elmira and St. Jacobs into the "Amish country" of Millbank and vicinity. Many times people saw the traditional Amish in the community and asked "Who are these people?" Glenn Zehr, pastor of the Riverdale Mennonite Church in Millbank, and Winston Martin, member of the Poole Mennonite Church saw an opportunity for Mennonite witness.

In May, 1993 they invited all Amish and Mennonite churches in Mornington Township to discuss opening an information centre and Self Help craft outlet. Representatives on the planning committee came from Bethel Conservative (later Heritage Mennonite Church replaced Bethel), Poole Mennonite Church, Crosshill Mennonite Church, Wellesley Mennonite Church, Maple View Mennonite Church and Faith Mennonite Church. The committee meets annually and reports to the churches they represent. Zehr spoke with all of the Old Order Amish bishops in the vicinity as well. They did not object to the formation of an information centre, but for reasons of their church value of separation, could not be part of the organization.

The craft outlet did not materialize, but the information centre did, lodged in the basement of Riverdale Mennonite Church. Visits to the Millbank Information Centre (at the church) are usually for groups, and by appointment. The video *The Amish -*



Glenn Zehr and the village sign greeting visitors to Millbank. Photo courtesy of Glenn Zehr

A People of Preservation by John Ruth is shown, followed by dialogue. Some literature is made available, particularly the pamphlet *The Mennonite Story* which was produced by Vernon Leis and MCC for the Elmira program. For several years over 500 people came. That has waned to about 150 people in four or five groups in 2003.

Zehr reports that typically several school groups from Ottawa and Montreal would take in the Amish tour in conjunction with their attendance at the Festival Theatre in Stratford. They would also take in St. Jacobs on their way through. Zehr will refer tourists to St. Jacobs for the broader picture, while he himself is very comfortable telling the Amish story, since that is also part of his heritage. Paul Wagler of Faith Mennonite Church and presently chair of the committee, and Glenn Zehr see this "Amish tourism" as a mission, "to explain what we believe and why." They explain to those who come that Amish and Mennonites have similar beliefs; how to practise their beliefs in relation to the world around them is where they differ.

Zehr would also on rare occasions take student groups onto an Amish farm. One student remarked "This is an ordinary house!" To this Zehr replied "Yes, it's not a museum; real people live in it." Questions are varied. One adult asked "How would you compare Jesus with a conservative Jew?" Through the years Winston Martin, Darrell Jantzi, Vernon Zehr and Mary Ellen Zehr, as well as Glenn Zehr, have hosted groups or staffed the centre.

IV. Analysis and Prognosis

Is the Mennonite tour program still a viable witness to tourists? Joe Snider, long-time member of the Elmira Mennonite Church and at one time Manager of the Visitor Centre in St. Jacobs reflects on why the Tour Program at Elmira ceased to exist after thriving for approximately twenty years. He offers two reasons: It was increasingly difficult to co-ordinate meals, commonly part of the hosting of tour groups. There were increasingly mixed views regarding this approach to public witness, though the majority supported it.

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I would add that the program, though widely-accepted and supported, nonetheless was the brainchild of several persons, particularly the late Vernon Leis in Elmira with some

key lay leaders. Pastors who succeeded Leis did not have the same passion for the tour ministry. The area churches soon lost interest, as did the various institutions of the Mennonite Conference in Ontario.

The same could be said for the Millbank tour program. Though Glenn Zehr continues to have interest in continuing, and lives in Millbank, he is no longer pastor at the Riverdale Church. This year the Committee decided to get new brochures printed and contact tour leaders who regularly come into Millbank and offer a more aggressive, friendly invitation to include the Millbank Information Centre in their next excursion. There are still interested individuals who believe it is important that tourists get factual correct information about these intriguing Amish people.

Del Gingrich, present manager of the Visitor Centre in St. Jacobs, outlines his vision for the Visitor Centre—Telling the Mennonite Story. His vision includes attracting a broader base of sustainable support in terms of finances, visionaries and volunteers. It includes establishing an achievable plan for improvements and additions to displays and programs, to transform an image of “old and tired” to “renewed and fresh.”

His vision includes making congregations within MCEC aware of what the Centre has to offer in introducing thousands to what Mennonites are all about. And Gingrich contemplates the possibility of establishing a connection with the “right group” such as the Missions Commission of MCEC, to support the program.

Gingrich’s vision includes possibly inviting membership on the management committee from the Old

Order community; after all, it is interest in this community that brings visitors to the Centre. He would like to provide guides for bus tours into “Mennonite country” when there is sufficient staff available. His vision is to continue to provide a welcoming, friendly and warm environment for all visitors.

Gingrich concedes that most of the vision is contingent on the first point - finances, volunteers, etc. He is also aware that, though the Centre is considered an outreach of the St. Jacobs Mennonite Church, there is apparently little interest in the congregation for this program.

While interest on the part of the Mennonite church in tourism has decreased, tourism itself has increased. There is still significant curiosity on the part of tourists about these “plain people” that they have heard of by word of mouth, or seen depicted in tourist promotional literature. The commercial enterprises and artisans continue to “cash in” on the Old Order Mennonites as a visible minority and tourist attraction. It is quite an anomaly though that the extensive tourism and attendant commercialism which was based on these people, combined with urban sprawl, effectively drove them out to seek new land, far from probing tourist eyes. How long will it be till tourism “catches up” with them in Mount Forest, Kincardine, etc.?

While tourism continues, as does the Mennonite witness, albeit with less enthusiastic support than before, the question must be raised about the effectiveness of this kind of witness in today’s world.

At a Visitor Centre Management Committee meeting (ca. 2002) chairperson Martin commented: “It seems increasingly clear that we are trying to present a pre-modern message via a modern medium, to a post-modern audience.” Harold Hildebrand-Schlegel, pastor of the St. Jacobs church agreed with that assessment. In our post-modern society, which is

also increasingly post-denominational, people are drinking from a variety of spiritual streams. Does the Visitor Centre engage them at that level, or is it too fixed on denominational agenda? Describing denominational variations among various kinds of Christian groups has limited appeal to most tourists. The main attraction continues to be the horse-and-buggy culture depicted by Old Order Mennonites. There are of course some exceptions.

It is even more critical to note that many of the people who come through the centre have no Christian background at all, so explaining the fine differences between Catholics, Protestants and Anabaptists seems a moot point to those who probably do not comprehend the very basics of Christianity. Yet, how does one “tell the Mennonite story” without having it be merely the description of a counter-cultural “ethnic” group? There are many complex challenges facing those who wish to continue to see Mennonite tourism as an opportunity for Christian witness.

Clearly the most effective witness is personal contact, such as that reported above by the student from Thornlea. We cannot minimize the important role of the volunteer staff at the Visitor Centre in St. Jacobs, who in their role as information centre staff are the “gate-keepers” into the local community. The same is true of those who staff the Millbank Information Centre. As they meet the visitors and engage them in conversation they offer a window into Mennonite life and a witness to their faith.

Maurice Martin lives in New Hamburg. He is currently ministering at Shantz Mennonite Church near Baden, Ontario. This article has been adapted from Maurice’s presentation at MHSO’s Spring 2004 meeting at the Dettweiler Meetinghouse.

The Frank H. Epp Collection

by Jennifer Konkle

After combing through nine of Frank H. Epp's filing cabinets (so far), Linda Huebert Hecht knows more than a little bit about this important church leader. Hired by Conrad Grebel University College in 1999, she has worked part-time archiving Epp's extensive collection of correspondence, research notes, articles and newspaper clippings. According to Sam Steiner, Grebel Archivist, this five year project, jointly funded by the Frank H. Epp Memorial Fund and Grebel, is important because "Epp was a very significant Canadian Mennonite leader that helped influence 20th century Mennonites to be more actively engaged in the political discussions of the day. Whether one judges this to be a good or bad thing, he helped this to happen. Persons that have this kind of pivotal influence need to be preserved in their papers."

The Epp Collection is very large, consisting of 22 four drawer filing cabinets and includes documents from Epp's entire career, reflecting the many roles he had, as journalist, radio speaker, ordained minister, church leader, historian, professor, college president, politician, peace activist and author, as well as his positions with Mennonite Central Committee, several non Mennonite organizations, and on many committees. He began collecting materials in the 1950s when he became founding editor of *The Canadian Mennonite*, and continued to do so until shortly before his death in 1986.

Nearly half finished, Huebert Hecht is currently processing cabinet number 10, on political science. There are several larger sections related to Epp's sermons, writing, speaking and travels, which remain



Linda Huebert Hecht sorting the files of Frank H. Epp. Photo courtesy of Conrad Grebel University College.

to be processed. Finished files include issues pertinent to the Mennonite community at a particular time, such as conscientious objection and alternative service Mennonites and peace, and information on Mennonite educational institutions. "The Middle East section reveals the breadth of Epp's contacts as he did the research for his books on this topic," says Huebert Hecht. "As well, this collection includes newspaper clippings and magazine articles on many different social, political and cultural topics, a selection of which has been kept. One of the oldest items processed to date is a newspaper article on Mennonites in the *Family Herald* and *Weekly Star* of 1938." Huebert Hecht mentions the integral role that Epp's wife Helen played in creating and managing the collection and in handling correspondence. The archival guide to the collection is based on their filing system.

Frank Epp's personal correspondence, distributed throughout the cabinets, is one of the most interesting parts of the collection. According to Huebert Hecht, he kept copies of all the letters he sent - from simple requests for information and longer personal answers, to short notes of affirmation and concern for individ-

ual people. She notes that "Epp often took the time to write a letter, extending congratulations, sending a personal thank you, giving encouragement and in general keeping in contact with many different people. In his correspondence one can follow 'both sides of a conversation' and learn much about Epp's thinking and ideas over the whole span of his lifetime." This cataloguing is a continuous process, and is not yet complete. The guide for the collection is on the web at:

grebel.uwaterloo.ca/mao/Manuscript%20Collections/HM1.26.htm. It will eventually be open to the public, but interested researchers may be able to look at the finished sections already. As for the usefulness of the collection, Steiner speculates that "Epp is significant enough that someone might do a biography; persons interested in Mennonite participation in political life (i.e. running for office) would find it useful; and persons interested in Mennonite responses to Vietnam and to the Middle East will find it useful since Epp was an outspoken Mennonite leader on these areas.

All in all, anyone interested in how Canadian Mennonites engaged society in the 1950s-1970s would likely find it useful."

The Frank H. Epp Memorial Fund granted \$1,000 in 2004 for the ongoing processing of the Epp archives. The Fund is a memorial to the late Frank H. Epp (1929-1986) and its proceeds are used to support projects in those areas of Christian concern and scholarly interest to which his life was devoted.

Jennifer Konkle is Communication Coordinator at Conrad Grebel University College.

The Riser/Reschly Burial Plot On Deborah Glaister Line (Formerly Third Line) Wellesley Township

by Lorraine Roth

Although Amish Mennonite settlers had been in Mornington Township since the mid-1850s, they had not yet established a cemetery. Even in the West Section of Wellesley, they had no designated burial ground. All of these settlers still belonged to the congregation known as Wilmot-Wellesley (because it included the Amish Settlement in the northwest end of Wilmot Township.) Thus until the early 1870s, the closest Amish Mennonite burial ground was the Amish Mennonite Society Cemetery - also in a field - south and east of the Village of Wellesley, on what is now Settlement Road.

Christian and Catherine Riser were the occupants of Lot 2, E 1/2, Concession III, in the West Section of Wellesley Township. They had already buried two infants in the southeast corner of their farm. This location was about two miles east of the Mornington Township boundary. Peter Kipfer died at Musselburg in 1855 and, no doubt, he was buried here. In April 1865, Joseph Reschly, also a resident of Mornington, purchased the burial ground (two roods) from Christian Riser. It was still in private hands, but gave it a more official status as a cemetery. Little did Joseph know that about six months later, he would bury his wife Anna (nee Schweitzer) in this burial plot.

Time passed. Joseph Reschly moved to South Easthope, and then probably also spent some time in Iowa. The Wellesley congregation began using the McKee family burial ground (at the present Maple View Cemetery) after Leonard Streicher purchased Lot 11 from Samuel McKee in 1869. Burials were also taking place at the present Poole Mennonite Cemetery (north of Poole) by 1873 when Joseph L. Lichti sold a half acre to the trustees of the

"Society called Mennonites." In the meantime, however, about 20 burials had taken place on Joseph Reschly's burying ground west of Kingwood.

By March 1886 the farm had changed hands. Joseph Reschly sold the parcel of land to the trustees of the "Mornington and Wellesley Amish Society." A few months later, they sold it to the owner of the farm, Jacob Siegner, for \$25, with the stipulation that he would take care of the burial plot in the following manner: "The party of the second part... hereby agrees to keep up and maintain all fences in and around the within described portion and also the burial ground now owned by the parties of the first part in consideration of this conveyance the party of the second part agrees to the above, and will move gate." The deed was signed by the three trustees: David N. Kropf (occupant of former Reschly farm), C. B. Schwartzentruber, George Schultz.

Subsequent owners no longer felt responsible to keep the agreement (perhaps did not know there was one), and the area became overgrown with weeds. Some years ago, the owner at the time called on a number of Amish Mennonites who had relatives buried there to see what could be done about it, but evidently there was no agreement. (from an oral report) The area is now worked with the rest of the field and all signs of a burial ground are gone.

The Reformed Mennonites built a meetinghouse and established a cemetery at the southwest corner of the adjacent farm (Lot 3, W 1/2). The burial ground is across the trees on the west side of the present Reformed Mennonite Cemetery. Due to dwindling membership the Reformed Mennonites maintain only the North Easthope meetinghouse, but their var-

ious cemeteries are still being used, including this one.

Lorraine Roth lives in Waterloo, Ontario. She is the author of The Amish and Their Neighbours.

Burials in Unmarked Amish Cemetery

- Peter Riser*, b. Mar 21, 1850; d. Jan 7, 1851
Peter Kipfer, b. June 29, 1803; d. Aug 1855 [not documented]
Leah Riser, b. July 3, 1854; d. Apr 10, 1862
John Schweitzer, b. June 1861; d. 1861
Anna Ulrich, b. 1846; d. Mar 7, 1863
John B. Jantzi, b. July 29, 1842; d. Jan 28, 1865
Katie Jantzi, b. 1868; d. 1869
Moses Jantzi, b. Sept 1870; d. ?
Andreas Jausi, b. Aug 24, 1844; d. Oct 11, 1862
Magdalena (Gardner) Wagler, b. 1841; d. Dec 27, 1862
Anna (Schweitzer) Reschly, b. 1819; d. Oct 21, 1865 (listed on her husband Joseph Reschly's tombstone at Maple View Cemetery)
Elias Jausi, b. July 12, 1848; d. July 13, 1848
Daniel Jausi, b. June 15, 1851; d. Apr 3, 1854
John Jausi, b. 1815; d. 1878
Magdalena (Ernst) Bast, b. ca 1831; d. Sept 25, 1866 [not documented] (listed on her husband George Bast's tombstone at Maple View Cemetery)
John Ulrich, b. 1808; d. Feb 4, 1876
Elizabeth (Boshart) Jantzi, b. Feb 26, 1845; d. Apr 17, 1871
Dau. of Joseph & Catherine (Jantzi) Lichti, b. Dec 6, 1860; d. Dec 7, 1860
Bishop Christian Gascho, b. Nov 1, 1838; d. Oct 22, 1872
Gideon Gascho, b. July 13, 1867; d. July 16, 1867
Christiana Gascho, b. July 25, 1871; d. June 10, 1873
- ### JOSEPH MEGLI CHILDREN
- Elizabeth Megli* (Feb 14, 1857 - 1857)
Magdalena Megli (Feb 27, 1859 - before 1871)
Sarah Megli (June 3, 1860 - 1860/61)

People and Projects

EDITOR'S NOTE

In the last issue of Ontario Mennonite History an error occurred in Maurice Martin's book review on *Risk and Endurance: A History of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church* by Laureen Harder. It was stated that Stirling Avenue joined the Central District of the General Conference Mennonite Church, when in fact it joined the Eastern District.

RECONCILIATION REFLECTIONS

In June 2004, two very different ceremonies of confession and reconciliation took place in Switzerland. The first was a simple confession and apology offered by lay-members of the Reformed Church in an isolated field of a national park located on a mountain between Schleithem and Schaffhausen in an area known to the local people as a meeting place of

Anabaptists. Local intercessors concerned about the Reformed Church's declining attendance and disconnected spirit among members daily pray for their church's healing and recovery. As acknowledgement of their church's participation in wrongs committed against Anabaptists during the Reformation, several individuals had a commemorative stone set in that place in remembrance.

The second ceremony was part of a weekend conference held in the more formal setting of Gross Munster Cathedral in the city of Zurich with church and civic officials participating in the event. A plaque beside the Limmat River acknowledged Anabaptist deaths in the city and for the first time in about 500 years, an Anabaptist spoke from the high pulpit in Gross Munster.

Reminded that previous reconciliation calls did not lead to "sustained dia-

logue and cooperation", perhaps this time with involvement from across the membership, Reformed and Anabaptist descendants can begin to forgive, trust and respect each other, not only because of these two attempts in Switzerland - but also because of the rainbow that shone that same evening. *Submitted by Catherine Schlegel.*

FRETZ' AWARDS

There were two prizes bestowed this year by the J. Winfield Fretz Awards. Sheena Gingerich won in the undergraduate category with her essay *The Extraordinary Life of Orland Gingerich*. The winner in the graduate category was a study on cultural backgrounds of hymn selections in various Ontario Mennonite churches called *Gutierrez is also a Mennonite Name: Identity and Hymnody in Contemporary Canadian Mennonite Churches*.

Book Notes

Paul Knowles, editor of *Piecemakers: The Story of the Ontario Mennonite Relief Sale and Quilt Auction* (Kitchener: English Garden Publishers, 2004) recounts how the Ontario Mennonite Relief Sale and Quilt Auction evolved from its beginnings in 1967 to become the large fund raising event that it is today. Over the years it has raised about \$11 million for Mennonite Central Committee. \$15 paperback.

Adolf Ens, author of *Becoming a National Church: A History of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2004) in 249 pages tells the history of the national church's history through the years 1902-1999. Ens argues that

many of the issues that Mennonite Church Canada faces today are related to issues that its predecessors, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, faced in the past. The book was commissioned by the Mennonite Heritage Centre. Ens was a professor of history and theology at the former Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg. paperback.

Edsel Burdge Jr. and Samuel L. Horst, authors of *Building on the Gospel Foundation: The Mennonites of Franklin County, Pennsylvania, and Washington County, Maryland, 1730-1970* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2004) in 928 pages tell the stories of three centuries of faith and life among the Franklin County, PA, and Washington

County, MD, Mennonites. From small beginnings in colonial American settlements, issues such as personal spiritual commitment, corporate accountability, nonconformity, and peace have been constants. As questions of language, fashion, work, education, and mission produced internal stresses, they struggle to maintain group unity. This history describes in detail the particulars of that struggle as well as recounting stories illustrative of community life in general. This is Volume 42 in the Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History Series. Edsel Burdge Jr. edits the Conococheague Mennonist, a publication of the Mennonite Historical Association of Cumberland Valley and Samuel L. Horst is emeritus professor of history at Eastern Mennonite University. \$69.99 hardcover.