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Changes in Cultural Symbols for Ontario Mennonite Women of the Swiss Tradition during the 1950s & 60: Stories We Need To Hear

by Lorna L. Bergey

Changes in cultural symbols for women in the social, religious and economic life of our Mennonite community during the 1950s and 60s have been subtle, often resisted, and at times forced by circumstances. Most of the changes noted in this article have been personally experienced or observed during this era of our history.

I was born into an Ontario Mennonite family of Pennsylvania German descent. My ancestors were descendants of Mennonites who left Switzerland and came to Pennsylvania via the German Palatinate. My husband, David Bergey, shared this cultural background. When we were married in 1940 we accepted the traditional understanding of the role of man and wife — the husband was to be the provider, and the wife was to be the caretaker and caregiver in the home. In our community the wife usually felt free to offer her opinions on major decisions but there was an understanding that the final decision would be made by the man and supported by the wife.

The wife was rarely employed outside of the home and the care of the children was definitely her responsibility. We fully subscribed to this arrangement until the year that my husband sustained multiple injuries in a farming accident when he fell from the top of a forty foot silo. Our sons were 6 and 9 years of age at the time.

In addition to farming, my husband also operated the family cheese business as a vendor at a local Farmers Market. Several days after the accident it suddenly occurred to me that supervision of the market stand operation was now my responsibility. I had attended market several times as a helper but had no business experience or training. The task in hand looked formidable but since the accident occurred



Lorna Bergey

before implementation of our Ontario Hospital Insurance Plan, the prospect of mounting medical bills forced me to realize that we were in a "sink-or-swim" situation. With the part time assistance of brothers, sisters and friends our little business remained afloat.

My husband was unable to work for the following two years, and remained a semi-invalid for the rest of his life. I marvelled at his ability and willingness to give me freedom and support as I attempted to administer the family business *in light of the fact*, that for these years our "traditional" roles reversed. He became the primary caregiver to our children and assumed home duties when the business demanded my attention.

At times we found ourselves in awkward situations — such as the occasion my husband noticed a tea-towel in his hand *after* he opened the back kitchen door in answer to a neighbour's knock. Making necessary accommodations in role sharing made our marriage extremely non-traditional for the 1950s. The concept of role sharing was not accepted very enthusiastically by our Pennsylvania German Mennonite community at that time.

While attending my first annual meeting of the Waterloo Mennonite Credit Union, (now Mennonite Savings & Credit Union of Ontario) the chairman had a motion on the floor and was begging for a seconder. When a female voice finally responded, a startled look spread over the chairman's face and he hesitated momentarily before acknowledging the female supporter of the motion. Obviously the deafening silence of women in the hallowed halls of finance had been rudely shattered!

Changes in cultural symbols for women in the religious life of the Ontario Swiss Mennonite community have been varied. Early in life I became aware that the women in my Mennonite church family were expected to symbolize non-conformity to the world by our dress. It has been observed by a Lancaster Mennonite historian that the period from 1925 to 1950 was the most conservative period of uniform dress in their group.¹ This would also apply to Ontario. However in Ontario it would apply mainly to *women's* apparel.

The wearing of a white net head dress at church meetings had been an old accepted custom.² However, the wearing of a "plain" black bonnet for outdoor head gear was not usually mandatory in Ontario until the 1920s when it became a test of membership throughout the Mennonite Conference of Ontario.³

From the 1920s until 1960 considerable time and effort was expended by conference leaders to uphold a prescribed nonconformity in dress. After a group of conservative leaders and their supporters left the Mennonite Conference of Ontario to form a Conservative Mennonite group, the controversy shifted from uniform dress to hair styles. Could a



In the Marketplace, ca. 1958

Christian woman have her hair cut and styled according to worldly fashions? Many of my generation feel that they can. It ceased to be an issue.

During this time of focus on women's clothing and hair styles it is interesting to note the *quiet* progression of women's activities in the Mennonite Church. Most Mennonite women's organized activities emerged as a "Sewing Circle". The sewing circle presented a unique opportunity for women to become involved in the mission program of the church.

Early in the 20th century, the first city mission workers in Ontario included several single ladies. The mission was located in a poverty-stricken settlement of newly-arrived British immigrants on the eastern boundary of Toronto. Calls for clothing and bedding supplies were sent to the women in the Mennonite congregations and the need for organized Sewing Circles became urgent. "A sewing circle in every congregation, and every woman a member of the sewing circle" became a frequently repeated slogan.

The sewing circle embodied the supporting role of women as subscribed to by both church and community. Sewing circle activity took place either in the homes of the sisters or in the basement of the church on days when no other program was scheduled in the church building; thus the Sewing Circle did not appear to violate the injunction of St. Paul, "that the women be silent in church". One male member of our community was overheard making the wry comment "it is common knowledge that our women

were publicly *silent* but privately *heard*". (They were not silent at home!)

Church leaders found it very convenient to have an organized group of women who were prepared to respond so willingly to needs such as providing meals for all-day conference meetings. But as noted previously the role of women in the church was viewed as a supporting one only. I well recall an episode during preparations for Mennonite Church General Conference sessions held in Kitchener in 1935. A well known bishop was appointed convenor of Food Services. All went well as long as he confined his efforts to arranging the facilities for cooking and serving. But he found himself in deep trouble the day he meddled with the menu submitted by the sewing circle ladies in charge of planning meals. Like all good Pennsylvania-German cooks they had included pickle on the menu for all their noon and evening meals. The good bishop quite unlike most of his contemporaries was a practising nutritionist and he declared "that since pickle had no nutritional value there would be no pickle purchased for conference meals!" The complaint of one of the women, "Imagine serving meats and cheese *without pickle*," remains vivid in my memory.

When I began attending the annual meetings of the Ontario Women's Sewing Circles around 1940, several back rows of benches in the auditorium were usually occupied by brethren. They had various reasons and excuses for their presence at a Women's Sewing Circle Meetings — some had to bring their wives who had never been taught to drive a car, some had to serve as car parkers. They thought that women who did drive cars required the assistance of car parkers to get the maximum use of the parking lot.

These meetings usually included a meditation/address and prayer by one of the ministers in the area. On this particular day a missionary sister home on furlough from Argentina was our guest speaker. Her topic focused on her work with women in the Argentine Mennonite Church. She took her place on the platform behind the pulpit. After making one sweeping glance over the audience she commenced to express deep disappointment that since there were men in the audience it would be inappropriate for her to share certain experiences which she had prepared specifically for a women's meeting.

Henceforth, men attended an annual Sewing Circle Meeting only upon invitation. However it was 1961 before the sisters had the courage to end the custom of electing two brethren to audit their books. Incidentally the first woman

delegate attended the 1959 sessions of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario. Until that time participation by women at conference was limited to the annual report submitted by an officer of the Ontario Mennonite Women's Organization.

During World War II the sewing program of the Ontario Mennonite women moved from sporadic attempts to meet crisis situations at home and abroad, to a continuous program of sewing clothing and bedding supplies which were then stored at the Ontario MCC clothing depot in Kitchener, in anticipation of an emergency. This idea had been suggested by veteran MCC worker, Lydia Lehman.

To insure that all clothing and bedding made by the various sewing circles were of suitable size and quality, a Cutting Room service was established. The need for a large inventory of yard goods required more funds than the sewing circles had at their disposal. At this point the Non-Resistant Relief Organization provided an interest-free loan to enable the women to purchase a sizeable inventory of dry goods from wholesale companies in Toronto. "A brother" was also appointed to assist the women with their purchasing.

The Cutting Room in Kitchener at that time served all women's groups of the Historic Peace Churches in Canada. Due to receiving a generous sales-tax refund from the Ontario government that was based on the large turnover of material used for charity, a sizeable profit was realized annually. Within ten years a tidy sum had accumulated.

It did not make good business sense to the ladies in charge of the Cutting Room to continue carrying an outstanding loan of \$3300. on their books while showing a substantial profit. To the astonishment of the Non-Resistant Relief Committee members the entire loan was repaid in 1960. When MCC Ontario built the Kent Avenue quarters in the 1960s, the Cutting Room Committee loaned MCC \$2000. interest free. The Cutting Room Service continues to be a successful operation under the capable supervision of a com-

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mittee of women appointed by the Women's Mission and Service Commission.

The organization known as Womens Sewing Circles became Women's Mission & Service Auxiliary (WMSA) during the 1950s. The new name indicate its status as a support group to the Mennonite Board of Missions & Charities. In 1971 the women were invited by the General Board of the Mennonite Church to become a Commission relating to the Board of Congregational Ministries. This organization is now designated as the Women's Mission & Service Commission (WMSC).

This recognition by the Church of the changing cultural symbols for women is noteworthy and no doubt gave a spark of hope to those gifted women who sensed a call to present themselves for service in areas of Christian nurture and leadership. One could say that by 1970 Mennonite women were finally receiving a long awaited approval "to come beyond the sewing room" and to participate more fully in the mission of the Church.⁴

Changes for women in the Ontario Swiss Mennonite community have been considerable since the turn of the century when for the first time it was recorded that "three sisters" attended a business meeting of a local congregation thus indicating their desire to participate more fully in the life of their congregation. However, women members on a committee frequently found themselves relegated to the position of secretary as their committee's "girl Friday."⁵



The "devotional covering", a white net head dress, ca. 1965. (CGC Archives photo)

- 1 Joanne Hess Siegrist, "Friendship Gatherings of Lancaster Mennonite Women, 1890-1950", *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, XI, No. 2, p.4.
- 2 Indicated as a prayer-head-covering in the seven ordinances listed by Daniel Kauffman in the *Manual of Bible Doctrines* (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1898)
- 3 A resolution of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario to make the wearing of a plain bonnet by sisters a test of membership met with considerable resistance from a large number of members and the pastor at Kitchener's First Mennonite Church. Conference silenced the pastor and in 1924 those not in agreement with the action of conference withdrew and organized the Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church.



The MCC clothing depot, ca. 1955 (CGC Archives photo)



In the Mennonite Credit Union Boardroom, 1983

- 4 Beginning in 1911 efforts were made by several sisters under the leadership of Clara Eby Steiner in Ohio, to organize all sewing circles under the umbrella of a Mennonite Women's Missionary Society which would promote the total program of the church. In 1922 the Ontario Sewing Circles were called the Ontario Branch of the Mennonite Women's Home & Foreign Mission Committee. By 1927 this organization was disbanded in favour of a committee of three sisters appointed by the General Mission Board. These sisters were the contacts for sewing needs of Mission stations, thus Mennonite Women's organizations reverted to Sewing Circles, 1928-1955.
- 5 Paul Erb in his report of the 1969 sessions of the Mennonite Church General Conference held in Turner, Oregon, noted "that Lorna (Mrs. David) Bergey of Ontario is probably the first woman to have been elected to a General Conference committee".

When attending her first meeting there was the usual election of officers. The "sister" on the committee was nominated as secretary. To the surprise and bewilderment of the committee she declined the nomination.



Bonnet ca. 1865
(CGC Archives photo)



Two "Hat Bonnets", ca. 1910
(CGC Archives photo)



Bonnet ca. 1918 (taken 1990)
(CGC Archives photo)

(CGC Archives photo)
Bonnet worn ca. 1935

"Evolution of the bonnet in Ontario"



Worn by "Old Order Mennonite" Women
ca. 1890-1950
(David L. Hunsberger photo)



"Plain Bonnet" ca. 1950
(David L. Hunsberger photo)

Writing Women into Mennonite History

by Marlene Epp

(Based on a talk given to the Ontario Mennonite Historical Society, November 4, 1989)

Recently I came across an article written in 1949 by a woman who was compiling the biography of her father, an important Mennonite leader. In that article she recommended that the church's historic and publishing committees urge ministers' wives to keep diaries, "just in case their husbands might some day be famous." I would echo her counsel regarding women keeping diaries, but for quite different reasons. After all, the woman who keeps a diary may herself some day be famous. And if she's not, her life story will nevertheless provide glimpses into the world in which she lived.

As researcher and assistant writer on volume three of the history of Mennonites in Canada, I, together with author Ted D. Regehr, am faced with the seemingly immense task of giving a balanced and fair treatment to the many themes and issues which appear in the Mennonite story between 1940 and 1970. One area of balance which has until recently been neglected in most official Mennonite history, is that of women's part in shaping the story.

Why should one study the history of women at all, some people are quick to ask. We don't talk about the history of men, do we? However if one thinks about the way in which Mennonite history — and this goes for all history — is written, we can acknowledge that it has tended to be written by men, about institutions and events over which men had control, and about people who were leaders, which tended also to be the men. It is not only women who have been neglected. In church history the perspective of the layperson is often not considered. The farmer has received less mention than the minister, the sewing circle member less than the missionary. All these groups deserve greater examination if the historical record is to be complete. While much work has been done,¹ there is still a great deal to do.

One can think of women's history in a number of ways. It can be a re-interpretation of history from the female perspective — a study of the wars, the institutions, the migrations from the vantage point of the women who did not sit on the relevant committees nor made the final decisions, but nevertheless had opinions and were influenced by the outcome of those decisions. Ruth Unrau,

author of *Encircled*, says that women were not absent when history was being made, despite what the record may imply. "She was there when the church divided, she was there when a conference had its first meeting. While they prepared food for the church leaders, women listened and made judgments."²

One does not have to depart from traditional topics of historical interest in order to find out about women. Ferne Burkhardt, in her recent history of the House of Friendship, took what could have been a traditional story about a well-known institution and turned it into an exercise of discovery. She highlights the important work of Ilda Bauman, who was at the center of the rescue mission work from its beginnings in 1939. Her participation in the visitation and overall management of the mission is shown to be as important as the more celebrated work of Joseph Cramer. Congregational histories also have potential for addressing the experience of women. In his history of First Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Reg Good shows that the 1924 division with the Stirling group was a problem of church polity, but at the level of the laity was also a conflict that affected the women more than anyone else — whether to wear a bonnet or a hat.

Women's history can also seek to discover and describe the spheres of activity that have traditionally been unique to women. This approach recognizes that women have historically functioned primarily within the household and that his sphere of home and family has been underestimated in the writing of history. Topics such household technology — what on the surface may seem mundane and everyday yet in a very significant way changed the life of the homemaker — need more study. The introduction of electricity to homes, the arrival of the refrigerator and automatic clothes washer all transformed life in important ways for homemakers. In the time period of volume three there are some fairly dramatic changes in this area. For instance, in 1941 only 20 percent of rural farm areas had electricity, 12 percent had inside running water, and only 8 percent had flush toilets. Since 87 percent of Mennonites were still rural at this time, this meant that household technology was still in a relatively primitive state. This would change substantially after World War II.

The topics of childbirth and childrearing are also important ones for Mennonite women since in the past, with

families of 10-15 children not at all unheard of, this embraced almost all a woman's adult life. I've always been just a little amused by the Birth Control Committee appointed by the Mennonite Conference of Ontario in 1944. The conference may have suspected, and rightly so, that the use of some form of contraception was a factor in the decreasing family size among their constituents. This all-male committee of three concluded in their 5-page report that the use of birth control was an evil greater than gluttony, drunkenness, self-abuse, and prostitution. They went on to assert that birth control encouraged immorality and was associated with a variety of "women's diseases", though I wonder exactly how much these three men knew about women's diseases. Whether they were right or wrong, the interesting thing is that women had no input, at least formally, on this committee and we are left with the feeling — surely women would have had something to say about this! It will take different historical approaches to find out exactly what they thought.

The search for women in history is not without some unique obstacles to overcome. The sources simply do not jump off the shelves into your lap, neatly organized and classified. At first, women seem invisible in the making of history but this is because their insights or accomplishments usually went officially unrecorded. An obvious problem in locating primary written source material is that archival holdings are rarely catalogued under women's history or related topics. The personal papers of women — the few that exist or have been considered worthy of preservation — such as correspondence, diaries and journals are generally found in family collections under the husband's name and organized according to subject matter relating to his significance.

Because our historical sources are biased towards public figures and that which is written down, we must develop new and creative approaches in our discovery of the past. The researcher essentially must become a detective with a magnifying glass, reading between the lines of the official history and sifting out what little bits of information are hidden there.

Expanding our notion of what constitutes a historical source can help immensely in this type of research. Photographs can be useful, particularly in describing the changes in Mennonite dress over the past century. We can read con-

ference minutes to ascertain what church leaders were saying about what people *should* be wearing, but family photographs can tell us what people *actually were* wearing. Things like recipes, songs, cooking and cleaning equipment and wearing apparel, normally assigned to museums, can also be used as historical sources to interpret in particular the life of women in a community. Oral interviews are also an important tool for the historian doing research on women.

Another dilemma is that in the historical record married women are identified primarily by their husband's name which can quickly create problems of recognition. Using my own name as an example, I could appear first as Marlene Epp and perhaps two years later as Mrs. Paul Born. For those who didn't know anything about me, I might be categorized as two different people. In the most recent issue of *Mennonite Family History*, Lorraine Roth tells of some of her dilemmas over women's last names and makes the discovery that it was not uncommon for 19th century women, in particular widows, to revert to the use of their maiden names.³ Elaine Sommers Rich seems to have solved the problem when she refers to her cousin as "Mary (Sommers Gingerich, Mrs. Irvin) Erb"! However one looks at it, the naming business can require a bit of puzzle-solving.

In my research for Volume 3, there are a variety of areas in which the experience of women could be and should be highlighted. I should add that my investigations often produce more questions than answers. For instance, World War II was a significant event in the history of Mennonites, however research has concentrated almost exclusively on the struggle for military exemption and creation of alternative service for young Mennonite conscientious objectors. Well-known writer Katie Funk Wiebe once remarked: "Because the destiny of the Mennonites revolved around the way sons were involved in [conscientious objection] and not the way the women experienced the truth of scripture, women's contribution was not as significant."⁴ And Magdalene Redekop writing about her mother says, "My father did not quiz prospective daughters-in-law, as he did sons-in-law, on their attitude to pacifism."⁵

Surely the war also affected the lives of Mennonite women and surely they also struggled with what it meant, in a tangible sense, to be a nonresistant people. For those women whose husbands or sons were in alternative service, besides the emotional toll, there were sometimes



Socializing around a quilt, 1978 (CGC Archives photo)

economic difficulties. The small remuneration received by COs compared to those in military service sometimes created hardship for their families and it wasn't until well into the war that the churches and the government addressed themselves to this problem. Minus the support of a father, son, or husband, some households had difficulty staying afloat. Like many other Canadian women, Mennonite women entered the workforce in greater numbers. Others depended on such survival mechanisms as taking in boarders or moving in with family members. Some COs, in making requests for leave from camp in order to return home, outlined situations where mothers, sisters, and wives were attempting to run the family farm on their own.

It is really no wonder that when universal Family Allowances were introduced in 1944, many Canadian women welcomed the extra income, however minimal, which was specifically for children and the maintenance of the household. Though the cheque undoubtedly went into the general family coffer in many cases and wasn't necessarily designated for special needs, some women held on to this small sum as their sole bit of financial independence. The following anecdote is one Manitoba woman's experience:

Susan had been baptized in the Old Colony Church in Blumenfeld. But upon her marriage to Isaak, she joined the Reinlaender Church where his parents were members. Soon a family of four children had to be fed and clothed. Susan was anxious to apply for the Family Allowance benefits which the government makes available to all mothers.

But her husband's promise to his father that he would never accept aid from the government was stronger than Susan's wishes. That promise was respected even though it meant severe austerity in running the household.⁶

The Family Allowance Committee of the Ontario Conference, again all-male, advised members against accepting family allowances, although subsequently the Conference passed a motion allowing individuals to be guided by their consciences. Perhaps the mothers in the Conference were less ambivalent about this program. One might also argue that other financial safety-nets such as life insurance and old age pension, historically rejected by Mennonite leaders as being "of the world" might also have been seen in a different light by the women — and particularly the widows — of the church.

Though they were never compelled to be conscientious objectors to military service — women were never conscripted — they did express their nonresistant faith in another way, also very concrete. And that was in the form of providing material relief. Many women viewed the sewing of clothing and quilts, and the knitting of socks and bandages, whether for war sufferers or for their own COs in camps, as their unique opportunity to make a worthwhile contribution to their country despite their church's non-participation in warfare. As Clara Snider said, in describing the material assistance and moral support given to COs in camps: "We are representing a common cause and stand for the same principles . . . United we stand, divided we fall."⁷

In fact, the 1940s and 50s have been described as a "golden era" for women's organizations, because there was simply so much to do. Wartime relief, not to mention the needs of the post-war refugee population, and the expansion of overseas missions following the war meant that sewing circles and missionary societies were kept busy sewing, knitting, bundling and raising funds at a grassroots level.

The importance of the women's organizations has not been fully estimated, however at least in the past it served in many ways as a parallel church for women. One woman described her involvement in sewing circle as "a much needed outlet for . . . pentup spiritual emotions" which could not be expressed in a formal church setting.⁸ It was in the context of the sewing circle that women "ministered" to those in need by making clothing and other items of physical comfort and also were "ministered to" by other women in the group. Thus, relief work in the context of women's organizations has been throughout history an important example of women's contribution as part of a nonresistant church.

Another fascinating and in many ways tragic story of the World War II era concerns that group of Mennonites, about 8,000, who immigrated to Canada from the Soviet Union via war-torn Europe. Most of the refugees had fled the Soviet Union with the retreating German army in 1943 and the greater proportion of this group were women and children. Following the famines of the 1920s and 30s in the Ukraine, the purges of the Stalinist regime, and the deportation of potential German collaborators at the outset of the war, there remained few able-bodied men in the Russian Mennonite colonies. Those who had been left were either too old or too young to a threat or had somehow managed to escape the authorities. What was left was a decidedly female population. Estimates have placed the percentage of Mennonite families without a male head at 50 by 1940.⁹ In one village alone, 96 of 127 families were without a father in 1942.

The story of Anna is not unusual. Her husband was arrested and taken by the Soviet secret police. The next day she miscarried her first child and went to live with her mother, her father having died. Of four brothers, only one was still at home. The young families of the other three came to live with them, as well as Anna's sister with her two children who had also lost their father. They were thus a family of six women, one brother, and an unknown quantity of children. Anna and her sisters eventually became known as "the family with a tablecloth" because,

throughout the events which transpired over the next few years during which they were displaced from their homes and eventually deported to Siberia, one of the few possessions they managed to keep with them was a tablecloth.¹⁰

The story of Susanna and Tina Toews is another similar account, though they succeeded in coming to Canada. These two middle-aged sisters departed from their home in Russia in 1943 and began a 2½ year journey through the Ukraine, Poland and Germany to Holland. At one point in their trek they travelled with two 75-year-old grandmothers, a 19-year-old girl and three small children.¹¹

Experience of rape, murder and compromise were not unusual to any woman's experience. To guarantee the safety of one's children, to obtain a hope for emigration to the west instead of deportation to the east forced some women to use their own bodies and dignity as collateral. One such story is of Tina Enns, who, after falling into the hands of a Soviet patrol, was taken with her two children into the employ of a Russian major as seamstress and housekeeper to his wife. Before long, however, Tina was forced to give sexual compensation for the major's promise to help her reach the west. Her sessions with the major continued twice a week for about two months, when he was transferred and Tina given documents declaring her German citizenship.¹² There may be many stories like this.

Among the Mennonites who arrived in Canada in the decade following the war were family units comprised of mothers, aunts, children and grandmothers. According to the book *Mennonite Exodus*, of Mennonite immigrants to Canada between 1947 and 1952, there were 1,077 women whose husbands were either dead or missing compared to only 177 men whose wives had met such a fate.¹³ In Paraguay there was one village of immigrants called the *Frauentorf* or woman's village because the oldest male was a boy of twelve. Establishing new lives for themselves and their children meant, for many immigrant women, remarrying. However, this posed a problem for churches if it was not known with any certainty whether husbands were dead or alive. Already in Europe, potential immigrants to Paraguay had to undergo an MCC eligibility test which included "moral screening" and which, in many cases, passed judgment on individuals who had entered into "common law marriages" when legal partners were missing. It was at least understandable that the exigencies of war would have compelled individuals to enter into such alliances,

whether for the sake of emotional comfort or basic economic survival.

The impact of this group of female immigrants on the Canadian Mennonite churches has not yet been ascertained. For instance, what did it mean for women, who were the head of the household and sole economic provider and who had brought their families through all sorts of dreadful experiences, that in many churches they did not yet have voting privileges.

It was during the post-war era that the issue of women's involvement, or lack of it, in the formal structures and processes of their churches began to surface. And it could be that the presence of many female-headed households caused this question to emerge in some congregations. Yet if one looks at the wide spectrum of Mennonite congregations across Canada, there does not seem to be much of a pattern to the manner in which church polity changed to include women. Certainly during the 1950s one sees a transition in the ministry and church organization to allow more involvement of the layperson generally. As well, in most congregations there is a growing number of councils and committees needing to be filled, thus creating opportunities for non-ordained persons to serve in an official capacity. So these developments undoubtedly helped pave the way for women as well to become participants in church decision-making. Furthermore the presence of many women in higher education, mission service and the professions made their lack of participation in their own congregations seem rather contradictory. One minister couldn't help but notice this and observed: "the professionally independent women who constituted a bloc of the church's most loyal supporters, who paid their dues and channeled their funds into projects of the church and yet had no voice in its councils."¹⁴

Each congregation seemed to have dealt with the issue in its own way. At First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon the issue surfaced in the late 1940s, about the time when the post-war emigration from Europe was beginning to expand some Canadian churches. In 1947 one man suggested that women be allowed to attend the brotherhood meetings. This was defeated. However the following year, after serving supper to the men, women were allowed to sit in for the giving of reports. In 1949 the concern was again raised that widowed and single women who were members had no one to speak for them. Despite several petitions from the women's societies of the church, it wasn't until 1964 that the con-

stitution was amended to allow women to attend and vote at congregational meetings. The fear over taking this step is understandable when one considers that of a total membership of 478,198 were men and 280 were women, with 112 of these single women.¹⁵

I learned not too long ago that my grandfather, a minister in British Columbia, almost lost his job in the early 1950s when a dissenting group in his church opposed the move towards all-inclusive congregational meetings. He was supportive of women's involvement, believing that a woman's presence could have a positive influence on an "impetuous" husband, and furthermore felt that the participation of the sisters would be helpful to the many immigrant women in the raising of their older children.¹⁶

In Ontario the practise also varied greatly. While at Stirling Avenue Mennonite women were included on the church board soon after the congregation came into being in the 1920s, in other parts of the Mennonite constituency change came much later. I'll readily admit that it wasn't always the men who were at the forefront of opposing these changes.

The post-war era is generally considered to be a time when woman's status in society increased. She became more educated, was more likely to be found working outside the home, and even in the church was starting to have an official voice. This is all true. But there is another side to the coin. As society and Mennonites within that society became more urban, and became more professionalized, certain roles which had historically been the domain of women ceased to be that. Such community occasions as weddings and funerals began to conform to the styles of society and were more and more subject to the advice of profes-

sionals, rather than events in which the whole community became involved, in particular the women.

For instance, the baking for the wedding meal was not shared among neighbouring women to the extent that it once was, nor were invitations passed from house to house. Wedding gowns and bouquets were purchased from department stores or specialty wedding shops, and at one reception, bologna and store-bought cookies were considered a treat.

Similarly, funeral preparations came under the jurisdiction of a professional undertaker, almost always male, and thus ceased to be what had commonly been the domain of older women. The greater accessibility of hospital care and physicians, while improving the quality of health care in many respects, nevertheless also meant the end of a career for many women healers — midwives, charmers, chiropractors, etc. We need more historical studies which demonstrate how women did indeed serve important community roles in the past and how women's role changed when these areas of service passed to men.

The work of writing women into Mennonite history is exciting and challenging and there is much work to be done. The woman's diary which speaks so much about her famous husband also, if one is willing to read with open eyes, says a great deal about herself.

1 A number of biographical collections on Mennonite women have appeared in recent years: Mary Lou Cummings, *Full Circle: Stories of Mennonite Women* (1978); Katie Funk Wiebe, *Women Among the Brethren: Stories of 15 Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Women* (1979); Elaine Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness, 1683-1983* (1983); Ruth Unrau, *Encircled: Stories of Mennonite Women* (1986). In progress is a collection of stories about Ontario

Swiss Mennonite women by Lorraine Roth. Women's organizations are also receiving historical treatment: Sharon Klingelsmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church, 1900-1930," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54, 3 (July 1980), pp.163-207; Gladys V. Goering, *Women in Search of Mission: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Women's Organization* (1980).

- 2 Unrau, *Encircled*, p.6.
- 3 Lorraine Roth, "Use of Maiden Names — Women's Liberation in the Nineteenth Century?" *Mennonite Family History* 8, 4 (October 1989), p.147.
- 4 Katie Funk Wiebe, "Mennonite Brethren Women: Images and Realities of the Early Years," *Mennonite Life* 36, 3 (Sept. 1981), p.27.
- 5 Magdalene Redekop, "My Mennonite Mother," *Mennonite Reporter*, May 1, 1989, p.8.
- 6 Irene Friesen Petkau and Peter A. Petkau, *Blumenfeld: Where Land and People Meet* (1981), p.177.
- 7 Clara Snider, to Workers of the Nonresistant Relief Sewing Organization, Dec. 16, 1942, John Coffman Letters, CGC Archives.
- 8 Elsie Neufeld, "Unity in Women's Work," *Canadian Mennonite*, May 16, 1958, p.4.
- 9 George K. Epp, "Mennonite Immigration to Canada after World War II," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1987), p.110.
- 10 The story of "Anna" is contained in Gerhard Lohrenz, *The Lost Generation and Other Stories* (1982), pp.129-152.
- 11 The story of the Toews sisters is told in Susanna Toews, *Trek to Freedom: The escape of two sisters from South Russia during World War II* (1976)
- 12 Gerhard Lohrens, *The Odyssey of the Bergen Family* (1978), pp.92-3.
- 13 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Community Revolution* (1962), p.453.
- 14 Peter D. Zacharias, *Footprints of a Pilgrim People: Story of the Blumenort Mennonite Church* (1985), p.158.
- 15 Esther Patkau, *First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon, 1923-1982* (1982), pp.104-5.
- 16 David F. Loewen, *Living Stones: A History of the West Abbotsford Mennonite Church, 1936-1986* (1986), p.61.

I would like to become a member of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. I will be informed of all Society events, will be eligible to serve on the various committees of the Society, and will receive *Mennogespräch* as part of my membership.

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