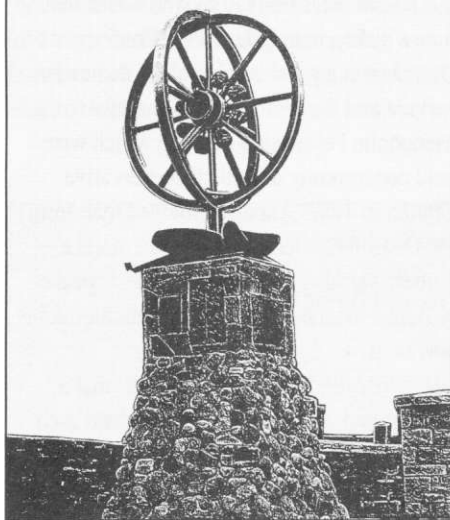


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The Conservative Mennonite Movement in Ontario

By Andrew C. Martin

Part I: Birth and Development

This is the first segment of a two-part series aimed at understanding what Stephen Scott has named the Conservative Mennonite movement. This movement, which began simultaneously in the later half of the 1950s in both Canada and the United States, was in direct opposition to the changing theological and sociological modernizing of the "Old" Mennonite Church.¹ These dissenters saw themselves as a scattered remnant preserving the true spirit and teachings of the Mennonite Church. What they did not recognize was that many of their deepest convictions, which had been formed in the "revived" Mennonite Church birthed in 1889, were also informed by North American philosophical suppositions, namely Protestant fundamentalism. The Mennonite Church that came to birth at the end of the nineteenth century was a result of a complex social milieu that was demanding a new theological response of which fundamentalism was a significant component. Little more than half a century later, the experience of World War II not only dramatically changed America, it also witnessed a major change in Mennonite self-understanding as they were again caught-up in the vortex of ever-changing societal pressures.

The issues at stake in the development of the Conservative Mennonite movement, like the earlier birth of the Mennonite Church, also had parallels to what was taking place in the broader fundamentalist movement. Thus the Conservative Mennonite movement can only be understood in the context of earlier developments in the Mennonite Church and also more broadly in society. In particular to the later issue, we will see in what way Protestant fundamentalism helped to inform the Conservative movement.² We will look at fundamentalism in greater

detail in the second installment of this article, but for now fundamentalism was a cross-denominational movement in America that had its roots in revivalism and came to dominance in the early twentieth

century. It was a fierce reaction against liberalism and some of its common themes were millenarianism, holiness, and victorious Christian living, all which were founded on a complete confidence in the Bible as "inerrant" and abundantly clear in its literal meaning.

What began in the 1950s as a small protesting-restitutionist movement of scattered churches in "Old" Mennonite communities throughout North America, has today grown into a complex variety of subgroups of fellowships connected by a core theology. Ordained men and lay people began to leave the Mennonite Church, withdrawing their membership from the various District Conferences that made up the Mennonite Church General Conference.

These people began new independent, distinctive plain churches that held to non-conformity in dress and to the seven ordinances and various restrictions first articulated by the writings of the notable bishop, author and editor, Daniel Kauffman. This group's aim has unabashedly been focused on

maintaining the teachings and standards of the Mennonite Church as they had been articulated during the previous decades. However, the extent to which they took certain ideas shows their dependence on fundamentalist



Andy Martin



Bethel Conservative Mennonite Church
(Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo)

~ Continued on page 2 ~

thinking. Conservatives understand themselves as the Mennonite faithful sometimes to the exclusion of all other Mennonites. Some of their distinctive teachings are the practice of the women's head-covering, distinctive plain dress (generally the "plain" coat for men and the "cape" dress for women is required), no television, no musical instruments in the church, and no toleration of divorce or remarriage. In all of these things, "non-conformity" (distinctive separation) from the world is the overriding concern.

Conservative Mennonites do not have one organizational structure, rather some prefer a more congregational approach while others use the conference model that was common in the early twentieth century. However in both of these models, there is a major emphasis on the importance of church hierarchy and there are bishops who not infrequently exert considerable central power. There are numerous associations where multiple churches or church fellowships come together to support a mission agency, winter Bible school, publishing house, or to hold an annual meeting for admonition and encouragement. In the beginning, in contrast to the Conference from which they withdrew, they were often known as the "non-conference" churches, and some certainly distanced themselves from that model. Although there are many subtle variations between Conservative groups, the difference between Conservatives is one of degree rather than substance. They essentially all hold to the same core theological beliefs but some of the groups are much more rigid in their application and enforcement on practical issues such as dress and social activities. This as we will see can lead to significant conflicts.

A major difficulty in writing about the Conservative Mennonite movement is that there is no benchmark study of Conservatives. Whereas Old Order Mennonite and Old Order Amish groups have been the topic of a vast research, the Conservative segment of the Mennonite church is one of the least researched Mennonite groups and thus one has to basically start from scratch in examining and describing this group. However, Conservatives have published prolifically to meet and promote their own teaching needs, providing a large amount of material available for research. Many of these sources are in the

library or archives at Conrad Grebel University College. Almost all Conservative publications are written for spiritual inspiration and formation and are a ready source of theology in spite of the fact that they shun systematic theology as a worldly academic discipline.

One book that examines the conservative wing of the Mennonite church was written by Stephen Scott and published by Good Books and I have borrowed Scott's use of the term "Conservative Mennonite movement." Scott divides conservative Mennonites into five subcategories, but I only use two—ultra-Conservatives and moderate-Conservatives—to help differentiate between two major segments of the Conservative movement. Because Conservatives are separatistic and have a tendency toward being schismatic, there are well-defined boundaries between groups and there is no fellowship or communication across all Conservative churches.

As we have already noted, the birth and development of the Conservative Mennonite movement is a phenomenon that can only be understood in the context of the North American Mennonite Church and in its exposure to the social and philosophical developments in the greater North American context. The movement born in the late 1950s was a distinctive process shaped by the pressures of a changing world, not the least of which was enlightenment, modernism, and its child, fundamentalism. However, I must also state that I endeavor to take seriously the intentional and sincere desire of this group of people to live out their faith in the way they understand it. I was born, baptized, and married in this segment of the Mennonite church and a large part of my study comes from a personal desire to understand the theological motivations of my early development. I cannot claim to be unbiased, but I try to take this movement seriously, to let its theology speak for itself, as well as offering a theological and philosophical critique.

In this first installment of a two part series we will look specifically at the development of the Conservative movement in Ontario and the theology of the wider Conservative movement. The second article will examine the earlier historical development of Protestant fundamentalism and how it came to inform the formation and development of the Mennonite Church. I will also present in more detail how this laid the intellectual foundation for

the Conservative Mennonite movement and which also mirrors developments within the larger Protestant fundamentalist movement. We now turn to an overview of the birth and development of the movement in Ontario.

The Conservative Mennonite movement began in 1956 with three churches, one in Ontario and two in Ohio, one in Hartville and one in Benton. Valentine Nafziger a minister in the Amish Mennonite Conference, that later became the Western Ontario Mennonite Conference (today part of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada), withdrew with a number of families from the Riverdale Church in Millbank, Ontario and founded the Bethel Conservative Mennonite Church also in Millbank. Nafziger, along with the two Ohio churches, were the first to withdraw and organize what became known as the Conservative Mennonite Fellowship. The purpose of Bethel's beginning are expressed in a thirty-year anniversary book. In comparison with other Conservatives this writer was very restrained in his critique:

Bethel Church had its beginning during a time in history when current religious thinking and trends indicated a direction some of us did not care to go. It appeared as though the moorings and stability of what we formerly thought to be Biblical was gradually moving into a gray area, leaving some of us with a feeling of insecurity and an awareness of certain areas of apostasy among us.

The reference to the Bible is key as this is frequently expressed as the primary foundation for their faith and practice. It is also noted from this source that Moses Roth who was at that time a bishop in the Mennonite Conference of Ontario was a guest speaker at the dedication service and the first annual Conservative Mennonite Fellowship meeting which were held concurrently at Bethel Conservative Church in 1957. Another ordained man from the Ontario Conference, deacon Clarence Huber, was also an occasional guest speaker at Bethel even before the new church building was built.

However, it was not until 1959 that a small group of ordained men withdrew their membership and formed the Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario—CMCO.

There were two bishops, Moses Roth and Curtis Cressman, two ministers, Elmer Grove and Mose Baer and three deacons: Andrew Axt, Clarence Huber and Alvin Gingerich. Moses Roth and Curtis Cressman were both influential bishops in the Ontario Conference and had been deeply involved in Conference activities. Interestingly Cressman was part of the progressive education of the early 20th century Mennonite Church, and after he was ordained in 1916 he went off to Hesston College, a Mennonite Church school, for two years. During his ministry in the Ontario Conference, Curtis Cressman was elected to many important posts within the Ontario Conference and the larger General Conference including the top moderator position.

Moses Roth, on the other hand, was a greatly influential preacher and evangelist having bishop oversight of rural missions in Ontario for many years. According to one retired pastor from the Ontario Conference, Moses was one of the most influential and gifted "Bible preachers" in the Ontario Conference. Elmer Grove is another example of a man who was trained in a Mennonite institution obtaining a bachelor's degree from Eastern Mennonite College. He was teaching school in Virginia when Moses Roth contacted him about moving to Baden to be a pastor at what was then a mission outreach. The reason I highlight the education of these men is that today this would be completely unheard of in the Conservative Mennonite movement, pointing to a more deeply entrenched fundamentalism. Today higher education for clergy, certainly theological training, is unheard of in Conservative groups and education is frequently understood as a major

threat to the faith. Also, to by-pass the voice of the church in calling a person to ministry would also be unthinkable in the Conservative churches today.

From World War II on there were significant cultural pressures being exerted on the Mennonite Church and the gains that had been made in non-conformity issues during the 1920s and 1930s began to slip in the post-war years, including such things as cut hair for



Curtis Cressman (Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo)

women, long wedding gowns, wedding rings, jewelry and life insurance. The influence of greater cultural involvement during and following the war had exposed many Mennonites to other Christians and given them a taste of involvement outside their own church.

Bishops Roth and Cressman were concerned about the laxity in church discipline for a long time before their eventual split from the Ontario Conference and

they had raised various issues in their respective churches and in the broader Conference. They were committed to maintaining the dress codes and non-conformity of the previous decades, however other churches and leaders were not convinced that enforced non-conformity was the answer. For instance, in 1954 Cressman was elected to a "Constitution Revisions Committee" where he found himself disagreeing with the new statement that the committee wrote and thus he presented to conference a lengthy personal statement looking for stronger wording and enforcement on various issues. Here he found himself as the lone voice in a large conference. It is not that there were no leaders sympathetic to Cressman's ideas, but for the most part they did could not see themselves legalistically setting and enforcing rules in a church where a majority of laity were swiftly changing. Not only that, the Ontario Conference had never

taken a hard-line approach to defending rules across the Conference and thus there had always been considerable variances in dress and practice. By the 1950s these differences were becoming more apparent, particularly in the city churches. Also the power of laity had grown so that their voices were heard and most leaders knew that enforcement would simply drive many out of the church.

It is also interesting to note that Cressman was not as strongly sectarian as would quickly become the norm in the Conservative Mennonite movement. For instance, as late as 1957, Bishop Cressman was the delegate to the Mennonite World Conference in Karlsruhe, Germany, where he took part with European Mennonites who were clearly more "worldly" in their dress and social involvement. However, in his report to the Ontario Conference, Cressman had some significant reservations about the event. Cressman in his work with the Ontario Conference was also the author of a letter to the Prime Minister of Canada in 1940, formally welcoming and lauding the King and Queen on their visit to Kitchener and pointing out its Mennonite beginnings. The fact that Cressman took part in these events speaks loudly about his openness to moving outside his immediate church. By contrast, as the Conservative movement continued to evolve, the possibility of involvement outside the church became increasingly restricted in most places.

There are numerous examples both in the Ontario Conference and in the General Conference that show the involvement of the Mennonite Church in the broader church and world. For instance, in education Mennonites were greatly influenced by such early bastions of fundamentalism as Moody Bible Institute. Roth and Cressman were caught in a conflict of competing ideologies as the theological fundamentalism of the 1920s and 1930s was waning and the new theology spawned by the

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historical work of Harold S. Bender and his students was pushing the Mennonite Church into increasing engagement with society and ecumenism.

In a letter dated July 31, 1959, the six ordained men laid out their concerns and problems with the Ontario Conference. (Alvin Gingerich's name was not on this letter, but apparently came in a separate letter.) The first and foremost issue of concern for the dissident leaders from Ontario was non-conformity. Their concerns included business and political involvement, life insurance, "immodest and ornamental attire, by both brethren and sister, as well as the ministry," jewelry, and cut hair for women. All seven ordinances as earlier defined by bishop and editor Daniel Kauffman were named as wrongly modified and/or discarded. According to this letter, "open" communion was being practiced by some churches, feet washing was becoming optional, the prayer veiling was being discarded, the Holy Kiss was "practically non-existent," anointing by oil was seldom administered, candidates were being baptized who were not modestly attired and divorce and remarriage were being compromised. There was one final concern regarding changes in church office. This most likely refers to the growing practice of congregational discernment rather than using the lot for choosing a pastor, as well as the implementation of pastoral overseers instead of bishops. It is interesting that the cape dress, radios, bonnets, education, and even television were not mentioned, for these quickly became key issues in the Conservative Mennonite movement.

The appeal to the Ontario Conference by the six men was founded on the "distinctive, historic, and Biblical faith and practice," meaning that these men felt they were not asking for anything new. They understood themselves as trying to maintain those standards that had formerly been upheld by the church in the previous decades. These ordained men understood worldly cultural patterns to be "dominated by the enemy of the Cross of Christ." They affirmed "that Biblical principles need to find an application to every cultural pattern," but they charged, no longer were even the principles being upheld. This accusation was based on the Word of God, the "Scriptural position" grounded in the "the higher authority of the Word."³ Compared

with the strident commentary that would come later from other Conservatives, these men were prudent in their criticism.

In answer to that first letter, the Conference leadership met with these ordained men numerous times, but the one side was insistent



*New Hamburg Conservative Mennonite Church
(Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo)*

that the church rules had to be enforced while the other side saw this as legalistic and potentially disintegrative. In a letter the Conference executive committee appealed to "the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and repent of our sins" and called on the six brethren to "repent for the sin of disunity...[and] for misrepresenting Conference." Because the men's request for church letters was "contrary to the New Testament teaching" the Conference did not grant them.

In spite of the fact that the Ontario Conference no longer had the desire to enforce all the points of non-conformity, it is interesting that they still held to a firm view of Scripture. It is also noteworthy that there had always been diversity within the Ontario Conference so that there had virtually always been people or ministers in some of the churches who did not fully conform to what was expected. In this regard, it does appear that these men were pushing for a level of enforcement that had never been practiced across the Conference. In fact the Conference had never held to a strictly spelled-out code of dress. Compared to codes of conduct that would be tightly enforced by most Conservative churches, the Ontario Conference had a much more loosely worded statement. The Ontario Conference and the seven dissatisfied men were reading the same Bible and both appealed to its authority to support their positions. Both sides could identify the sin of the other. Ironically the

Conference representatives were still using considerable centralized power in trying to get the dissidents to conform, in spite of a theology which was putting more emphasis on the local congregation.

Finally in a letter dated November 9, 1959,

the six wrote:
"We wish, as of this date, to terminate our responsibility to the Conference and request the Conference at its annual meeting to give consideration to granting us our Conference letters."

According to

Catherine Hunsberger's research these men intended only to resign from their conference duties, but the conference leaders took it to mean that this included their pastoral duties and the men discovered that the conference was putting other leaders into their churches. This apparently left these men feeling like they were pushed out. Although there was one more meeting in May, 1960, there was no resolution to the issues. Without a doubt there were misunderstandings and feelings of hurt, confusion, betrayal and frustration on every side. The issues were not simple and the pressures on both sides are only clearer from the perspective of nearly fifty years. Hopefully, through an examination of the development of fundamentalism in the early twentieth century and its influences on the Mennonite Church, we may see more clearly some of the larger issues that both sides were wrestling with.

On November 19, 1959, the group of dissenting ordained men and other lay members (primarily from Cressman and Roth's churches) met in New Hamburg to organize officers and teachers for Sunday School and three days later they met again for their first worship service. Around 70 people attended the first service. This group continued to meet for another year until a new church was built and the New Hamburg Conservative Mennonite Church was born. Within a few months a second place of worship was being explored and on August 7, 1960 the first service was held at the newly opened Heidelberg Conservative Mennonite Church. These were the first two churches in the Conservative Mennonite

Church of Ontario (CMCO). In the first year at Heidelberg there were 43 members (approximately 13 were from Markham-Waterloo Conference or Old Order). Moses Roth was the pastor and bishop of this church while Curtis Cressman was the pastor and bishop of the New Hamburg church. The fact that Cressman did not enforce the wearing of the cape dress in his church while Roth did, was nothing extraordinary to these men for they were used to much greater diversity in the Conference churches.

However there were other forces outside of the Ontario movement; Conservatives who had withdrawn from other conference districts would demand even greater uniformity in dress. In December of 1959 a group of eighteen ordained men who were all dissatisfied with the "drift" of the Mennonite Church had converged in Ontario from Pennsylvania and Virginia to see if they had some common ground. Some of the issues they discussed were, "church offices, women's role in the church, visiting speakers in churches, educational programs, literature programs, missions, the unequal yoke, insurance, television and radio, musical instruments, special singing, slides and motion pictures, tobacco, entertainment, sports, weddings, and funerals."⁴ A much larger meeting of ordained men and laity convened in March, 1960, in Nappanee, Indiana, and in August of the same year, an

official document was drafted in Lima, Ohio. This was the beginning of the group that came to be known as the Nationwide or Continent-wide Fellowship and it evolved into a large annual meeting held in various communities in Canada and United States.

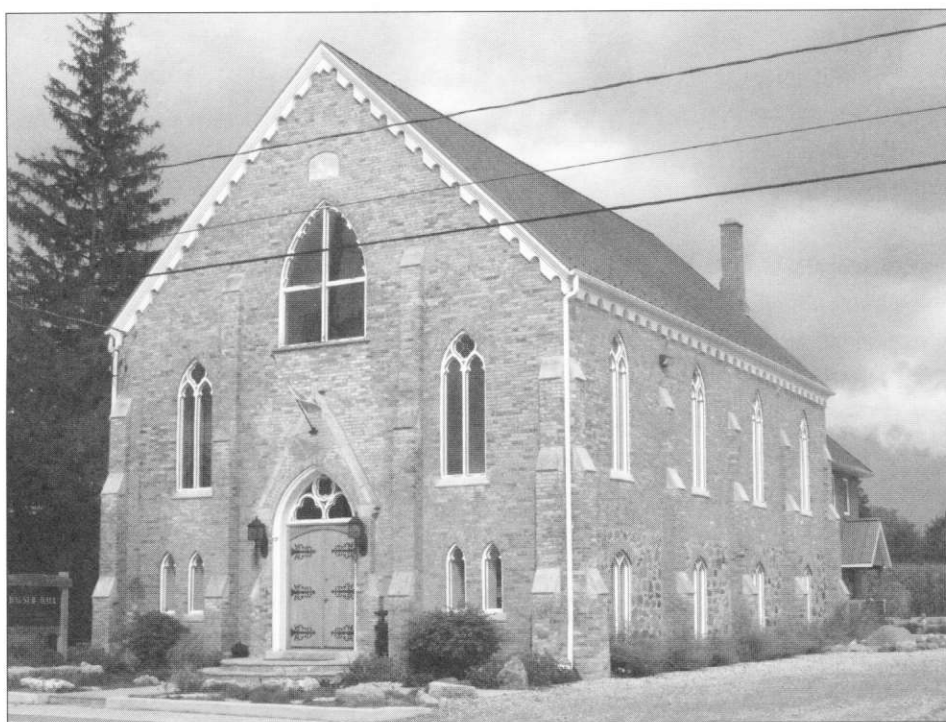
Already in the first decade of the Conservative Mennonite movement there were numerous conflicting views about regulations and the control of regulations. Diversity had always existed within the Mennonite Church General Conference and some of the Conservative churches came from the most progressive parts of the Mennonite Church such as in Ontario, Ohio and Indiana-Michigan conferences, while others came from the most conservative districts like the Lancaster and Virginia Conferences. By the 1970s, there was mounting pressure to bring greater conformity to the Conservative movement. One contentious issue was the radio, which was banned in 1973 by the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church (a split from the Lancaster Conference in 1968). Also the influence of the two founding bishops was gone with the death of Curtis Cressman in 1971 and the silencing of Moses Roth from his ministry in 1968 which effectively removed his influence to the sidelines of the Conservative movement.

There were some influential bishops from the United States who were apparently determined to enforce a more stringent standard on things such as the cape dress, the plain coat

and the prohibition of the radio. (None of these three things had ever been fully enforced in the Ontario Conference.) Also at issue was the style of leadership. Those who were promoting more restrictive standards felt there was a need for strong leadership to enforce congregational conformity, while some in Ontario were more comfortable with a congregational decision-making approach. These two forces collided in Ontario with those who wanted to remain with the way things had been done since the birth of the CMCO and those who felt more rules and enforcement were necessary. The ultra-Conservative side felt that the others were headed toward certain worldliness and apostasy while the moderate-Conservatives felt that a more rigid stance was a move toward legalism. Finally in 1976, three ordained men, Leighton Martin, Earl Koch and Mose Baer withdrew from the Conservative Mennonite Church of Ontario (CMCO) formed some fourteen years earlier. Baer was part of the first dissenting group of ordained men, Koch left the Ontario Conference and was subsequently ordained, and Martin had joined the CMCO from the Markham-Waterloo Conference. The Heidelberg (Martin) and Zion (Baer) congregations kept their buildings and most of their members, while those who withdrew from the New Hamburg church (Koch) established Grace Mennonite Fellowship Church.

As a ten year old child I remember well the emotional tensions of this acrimonious split. While words were measured for the most part, the feelings ran deep and rumbled in the community for many months and years. After such a split the possibility of any church interaction between factions was pretty much lost. Over the years there has been a continual migration of people between Conservative churches and eventually some entire congregations have moved their alliance from one group to the other. After leaving the CMCO, the Heidelberg, Zion and Grace congregations formed the Mid-West Fellowship with a number of USA churches that had similar experiences and perspectives.

These two groups are examples of what Stephen Scott labels as ultra-conservatives (CMCO) and moderate-conservatives (Mid-West). Although the moderate-Conservatives have held to a less legalistic



The former Heidelberg Conservative Mennonite Church.

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enforcement than the ultra-Conservatives, in my experience they eventually moved to more hierarchical authority and more rule-making to prevent what they understood to be the relentless slide toward apostasy and worldliness. The balance between rules and enforcement in many of these congregations depends on the individual congregation, its leadership and the perceived threats to its core beliefs. Many times this is measured or understood not in terms of orthodox theology, but in outward measurements of non-conformity dress rules.

Rod and Staff Publishers and Christian Light Publications have been around since the beginning

of the Conservative movement and today are clearly divided into ultra and moderate groups. The ultra-Conservative literature has a tone that is more strident, however from my own experience this dogmatic tone, while not as common, is still frequently present in the moderate-Conservative literature. This "tone" and its specific language was inherited directly from fundamentalism. In fact one leading study of fundamentalism has suggested this is its predominant indicator. We can see the degree of confidence Conservatives have in their theology in a tract printed by the ultra-Conservative Rod and Staff Publishers.

*More important than being called
Mennonites is the fact that we are*

*Christians who obey the entire Gospel
....We are willing to be different
because we are serious about getting to
heaven....We are different because we
love Jesus. He gave his life for us, and
we want to live our lives for Him. He
has a right to tell us what to do in every
area....We are different because we
believe the Bible—every word of it....We
are also different because we believe
it is wrong for those who profess to
be Christians to live in sin...the Bible
teaches that we must continue to make
a conscientious and sincere effort to
walk with God every day....Our church
has compiled a list of expressions*

Book Review

By Fred Redekop

Consider the Threshing Stone.
David Rempel Smucker and Eleanor
Rempel Woollard. Pandora Press,
2008. 179 pages.

Jacob J. Rempel writes in one of his reflections of his life, "One morning it became clear to me that I should write something." *Consider the Threshing Stone* is the writing and reflections of Jacob J. Rempel (1886-1980) who was born in the Ukraine, who lived through the Russian Revolution, who immigrated to Canada in 1924, and who died in Virgil, Ontario. Most of his reflections were written 40-50 years after the events had happened. He wrote most of them in the 1960's when he decided one morning to finally write down these important memories.

The main body of the book consists of Rempel's reflections on the early part of his life. The first chapter is about his childhood, the second chapter is about his Alternative Service on a Russian medical ship during WWI, and the third chapter is on the events that took place in the Ukraine from 1918-1924.

A strength of the book is the pictures and the maps. They are well distributed, alternating between family photos and photos that tell the broader Russian Mennonite

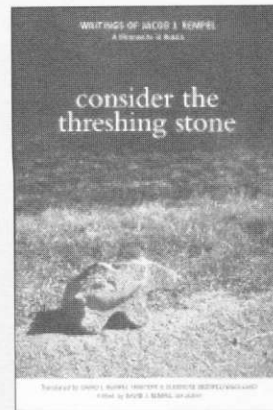
story. The footnotes and the appendices also offer much information to link the diaries to the broader story and put it into its greater historical context. I think these "extras" invite the reader to explore the Russian Mennonite story in greater depth.

Why is it important to tell Jacob J. Rempel's (also known as JJR) story? One of the most important aspects is to tell the Alternative Service part. Rempel served on a medical ship from April, 1915 to December, 1917. He travelled on the Russian ship, *Equator*, stopping in the various ports on the Black Sea. I believe this kind of service was instrumental in the voluntary service ideals exemplified in organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Disaster Service. I think it is important to inspire the next generation to serve in this way as well.

A second reason to tell the story is to record the painful stories. One of the appendices chronicles the murders of five members of a Tiessen family. Rempel's first wife was Maria Tiessen and she is related to the people who were murdered. The book offers two reports of the murders, one a diary entry and another a newspaper report. These reports speak to the randomness of the

attacks and the violence of the perpetrators. It is important to hear this story.

Throughout his writings, "Opa" is always reflecting on these events in light of his strong Christian faith. I believe it is the reason he feels so compelled to tell this story. It is to bring glory to God. So although the book tells a compelling story of life in the Ukraine in the early part of the last century, it is really about witness to the Gospel. The two authors of this volume write on page 11, "These events in Jacob J. Rempel's life serve to increase a believer's profound conviction of God's providence." The Gospel is as important to my "Opa" as any part of his history. In the Gospel of Luke 1:1ff, the writer states that he wants to write an orderly account of the events that you have heard, so that you might believe. I think my Opa (Jacob J. Rempel was my maternal grandfather), wanted to write this orderly account of his life, so all might believe.



*Thank you David and Eleanor for
recording our Opa's story, so that the
world may hear.*

of how a Christian can realistically express Biblical Christianity in the twentieth century....When you look at us, we hope it will make you think of God and help you to see Jesus as the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world....So if you are serious about getting to heaven, come and worship with us.⁵

The first source of authority for all Conservatives is the Bible and how it is read and interpreted is directly influenced by fundamentalism. If Mennonites in the 18th and 19th centuries read the Bible as wisdom literature, Conservatives read the Bible as divine laws to be taken and applied literally to every aspect of their lives. They frequently verbalize that the Bible has the answer for every problem. They hold the words of Scripture to be the literal words of God, free of any human intervention or thought, and they believe that anyone who is honest and sincere will read the Bible just like them. Conservatives look on any teaching outside of their church with suspicion, yet there is acceptance from some to listen to and read fundamentalist teachers, evangelists and writers. Conservatives are very suspicious of human reasoning, yet without serious engagement with the academic world they do not realize that their own reasoning is likewise a human reasoning, clearly aligned with certain developments in enlightenment rationalism.

Whereas Mennonite leaders in the early twentieth century understood themselves as directly adopting fundamentalist theology and sources, Conservatives have been largely unaware of these influences. They frequently refer to the distinctive, historic, and biblical faith and practice, as if it is a pure continuous linear theology from the early church through Anabaptism to the Conservative church without any sort of evolution or outside influences. Conservatives shun the historical process as an evil philosophy that can be made to say whatever one wants it to say. This is the allegation of one Conservative writer:

The liberal Mennonite historians write history to agree with the product of their movements. They consider the Anabaptist vision to consist of the peace movement and of giving food, clothing, and other aid to the needy.⁶

There are no trained Conservative historians that I know of, yet there are a number of them that have a significant knowledge of



Grace Mennonite Fellowship Church, near New Hamburg (Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo)

Anabaptist-Mennonite history. However, they are unapologetic about their selective reading and do not apply modern historical methods to their research. They largely follow the historical writings of Mennonite academics up to the 1950s but mostly they do not identify with the theological conclusions of Harold S. Bender informed by his influential *Anabaptist Vision*, nor do they engage with the writings of modern historians. What they write historically is for the inspiration of the church, thus the less-than-inspiring is left aside.

It is the aim of Conservatives to live without sin and to that end they try to address all the important sins that are to be shunned. As Stephen Scott has noted, the Conservative Mennonites' aim is total Christian consistency.

[They] meticulously and articulately address every conceivable area of doctrine and practice in their effort to follow the full counsel of God.... Although they believe there are true Christians in other denominations, conservative Mennonites are generally convinced that no other religious group comes closer to the true biblical faith than they do.⁷

Confidence in the central truth of their teachings reaches both ways so Conservatives can write that "most Mennonites today range from being traditional and not very spiritually-minded to being tolerant, broad-minded, and spiritually careless."⁸ Regarding Old Orders one writer has this to say:

[They are] willing to conform to an outward standard but who, too often,

were lacking in spiritual life. These members were often materialistic and shallow-minded about spiritual things and cared little for the things of God. This group pulled themselves into a shell and ignored the Bible commands to reach out to the world around them. They became ingrown and self-centered...⁹

The reason Conservatives can be so sure of such a judgmental position is based on their clear theology informed by a literal reading of Scripture. This Conservative writer appears to be unfairly judging the Old Orders based on his revivalist suppositions without understanding the historical background of Mennonites. Not all Conservatives are this critical of Old Order Mennonites, but their tone, in keeping with fundamentalism, is generally more strident and critical than Old Orders. This is because of their very different philosophical backgrounds. Old Orders are more pre-modern and less sure about how they can know God and his ways, whereas Conservatives with scientific rationalistic confidence can clearly know God's will. Old Orders on the other hand have more room for mystery and transcendence and are less convinced that the Bible speaks literally and clearly.

Conservatives hold an interesting mix of spiritual and ethical concerns. On the one hand they understand Christianity in spiritualist terms, focusing on the pietistic experience and seeing heaven and the after-life as the most important thing. Because of that, what happens here on earth is of little consequence, at least as far as making the earth a better place socially and ecologically. However like most Mennonites, Conservatives do not completely ignore the ethical and they are involved in many active deeds of charity and goodwill, both within their churches and in the broader community. They are scrupulous about respecting and obeying civil law and they do not believe that the church or church members should exert any pressure whatsoever on the government. For this reason they strongly oppose any voting or political activism. Even the Old Order Mennonites seem to be more apt to oppose the government when there are laws that infringe on their beliefs. The focus of the Conservative ethic is mostly wrapped up in their non-conformity of dress and

abstinence from social pleasures and is informed by their understanding of the gospel. According to moderate-conservative Lloyd Hartzler:

*Only the power of the Gospel will penetrate to the root of man's need. And if the church becomes involved in community or national reformation attempts, she will lose her power to snatch souls from the grasp of sin.*¹⁰

Thus the most important thing is saving the soul from hell. All Conservatives believe that "God's Word gives principles for godly conduct in society, for order in the Christian home, and for the organization, structure, and purity of the church." And they are confident that "these distinctive beliefs and teachings are based on specific teachings in the Bible, not on ideas of an individual or on extra-Biblical writings."¹¹ Because non-conformity and dress regulations are founded on the Word of God they become synonymous with the Bible.

The way Conservatives equate the Bible and dress regulations is characteristic of fundamentalism, so that orthodoxy can be judged, based on the Christian's acceptance or rejection of the established dress standard. With this uncomplicated approach, Conservatives declare that "the Bible promotes a distinctive, uniform garb for the people of God."¹² And to bolster that claim they paradoxically assert, "nothing that cannot meet the standards of the Word should be discarded immediately."¹³

In addition to the assumed biblical mandate for non-conformed dress, there are also multiple other meanings that support and promote its enforcement. Plain dress, especially for women, expresses anti-fashion values and gender distinctions; it performs as a sacred symbol, reflecting emotional security and expressing submission, helping to maintain a unified church. It is a witness to the world, promoting harmony and virtuous behavior and protecting from harm. It is "simply" beautiful.

To support non-conformed attire, the Eastern Pennsylvania Church declares that "someone calculated that the subject of dress is mentioned over 1400 times in the entire Bible." Because critical thinking is something to be shunned and because such a claim is premised on simple reason, they feel no need to substantiate their sources with a reference.

Thus without any critical thought about the context of the biblical text, they sincerely conclude that such a claim confirms God's major concern for the way they dress and this is another means by which to establish in the minds of lay people the importance of dress. Sermons frequently use such psychological ideology to support church rules. Because bishops and other ordained men are chosen by God through the use of the lot, their words have incredible power and to oppose or even question them can be taken as outright disobedience to God.

While many of these perspectives are more predominant in ultra-Conservatives they are also frequently used by moderate-conservatives. For example Lloyd Hartzler writes that the traditional Mennonite "cape dress" is a descendant of the Greek garment derived from the Greek word, translated "apparel," in 1 Timothy 2:9 which had a second piece of cloth over a woman's body to hide her shape. A reason for this distinctive dress is to be a "consistent witness to the world," for it is reasoned that "the ungodly desperately need this testimony as a reminder of God and holy living, as well as a rebuke and an example."¹⁴ With this indisputable observation some believe that:

*clothes never stop talking about you; if they are immodest and fashionable, they argue that your heart is vain, hard, wayward...if your clothes are modest and plain, they speak of a heart set to win God's blessings, a citizenship in heaven, and a love of God's Word.*¹⁵

Similarly, based on never having heard of a plain sister being molested, the belief of supernatural protection of clothes is also sometimes suggested. This interpretation is particularly clear for Conservatives in the wearing of the head covering and supported by I Corinthians 11:10, "For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels" (KJV).

In an effort to maintain the biblical mandate of non-conformity, Conservatives all teach the importance of developing it at an early age in children. Because clothes show what is in the heart, even so "adornment of children's clothes expresses pride in the heart of the parents." By the same token because clothes are a constant witness to others, even non-Christians, they bring "an obligation to behave in Christian manner and only go to

appropriate places."¹⁶ Beth Graybill, who has researched dress patterns of women in the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church, observes how "uniform clothing enlists all onlookers as 'norm enforcers.'" As one woman expressed, "If I find myself going over the speed limit and oh! I remember that I have a covering on, you know [laughs], what, what are they going to think of Christ?"¹⁷

Ultimately the lack of dress compliance, or lack of compliance with any rule, indicates that a person is defying the church and has moved away from God. Of course, Conservatives do not intend rules to be the most important focus; they teach that rules and regulations are not an end in themselves, and not a means of salvation. They have no intention of being legalistic, declaring that the central point is the message and truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This creates a powerful apologetic for clothes founded on the biblical mandate and not on human rules.

The energy which Conservatives put into preserving a unified standard reflects a desire to present a clear testimony of Christ to the world and the relinquishment of individual ideas is the sacrifice they willingly pay for unity, witness and purity. Ironically, clothes for Conservatives take on a sort of sacramentalism (even more so than the sacred rites of the church such as baptism and the Lord's Supper) so that clothes and the women's head covering are objects that take on an efficacious power for church unity, stability, witnessing, communion with God, and perhaps even salvation. The issues surrounding dress are frequent topics expounded on from the pulpit and a survey of the published literature shows that many more words are published regarding social and dress conformity than the sacred rites of the church. In fact with the approach of communion, the emphasis is put on the importance of conformity to church rules, most often fixated on clothing details. Clothing rules are frequently understood as the central issue of unity in the church and one's allegiance to the church can easily be seen by one's conformity to the church standard. For this reason laity and leaders are highly sensitive to even the smallest changes in dress, such as a man leaving his top button open during worship or a woman adding some small ornamentation to her dress.

A huge amount of time and effort go into creating ways to support and promote the teaching on non-conformity. Conservatives, with the fundamentalist philosophy of their

forbears, understand non-conformity to be the cornerstone of their faith.

*Every move we make—how does it line up with what the Bible teaches on separation? Our automobiles, our shoes, our hairstyles? When the girls have a big blob of hair down over their ears, and make sure that their ears are covered, supposedly to make them look nicer, there is something wrong with our idea of separation. Anything that is done on the basis of pride is bypassing God's principles of separation. A teenager in our circles who has hair growing on his neck about as thick as my thumb is not separation minded, and his father and preacher are losing the concept fast.*¹⁸

This tirade against lack of conformity firmly puts the blame on parents and leaders. It is also a good example of the psychological coercion and humiliation used to support the desired outcome. Mervin Baer, the author of these words, was one of the leaders influential in demanding greater non-conformity that led to the split in 1976.

In many ways the Conservative movement exceeds the sectarianism of the Old Orders. Whereas Old Order groups actively support such organizations as Mennonite Central

Committee, Conservatives have started their own organizations so that they will not need to mix with apostate organizations. They see the goals of MCC as very much in conflict with their theology. Also, I believe, Conservatives' clothing mandate is more scrupulous than the Old Orders for it is founded on doctrine and scripture whereas for Old Orders it is tradition. For instance Old Order women have historically never felt the need to wear head coverings to the degree that Conservatives do. Mennonites historically wore the "hat" as it was traditionally called, but not until society began to see women in public without their heads covered did Mennonites begin preaching about the need for the head covering. And only at the end of the 19th century did the "cap" find biblical support in I Corinthians 11. John S. Coffman, the first Mennonite Church evangelist, began to call the head-covering an ordinance and Daniel Kauffman's subsequently published doctrine would become foundational for Conservatives on par with the Lord's Supper and baptism. Interestingly, Bishop S.F. Coffman, a son of J.S. Coffman, later reported that his mother only wore her head-covering to church as was the custom. Conservatives are also much more scrupulous about not using alcohol than the Old Order groups. In part the greater technological acceptance of Conservatives requires them to develop a more

comprehensive theology than the Old Orders to resist further acculturation.

In this first installment, I have laid out some of the internal issues of the Conservative movement in its birth and development, making comparisons to other parts of the Mennonite church as well as offering my own critique. I have pointed to only some of the larger outside issues at play, and in the next installment will investigate in more depth the historical issues and broader societal pressures that were informing the movement. In particular, fundamentalism informed and dominated the theological agenda in the Mennonite Church in the early twentieth century and influenced the birth of the Conservative Mennonite movement.

Part II: The Effects of Fundamentalism on the Conservative Mennonite Movement

I would be happy to receive feedback from readers. Please send comments and questions to andy.martin035@sympatico.ca

¹ By the "Mennonite Church" sometimes referred to as the "Old" Mennonite Church, I mean those Mennonites of largely Swiss background who were the first Mennonites to come to N. America and in 1889 organized the Mennonite Church General Conference, becoming the largest organization of Mennonites in N. America.

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Celebrating the 75th anniversary of the Ontario Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches in 2007

*By Ed Boldt,
Conference Historian and Archivist*

On June 16, 2007 at the Waterloo Mennonite Brethren Church, a large congregation came together to celebrate 75 years of God's goodness and faithfulness under the theme "Fanning the Flame: One Church, One mission, One Choice." The Mennonite Brethren Conference of Ontario began with five small churches and 287 members in 1932 and has grown to 35 churches and a membership of over 5,000 today, actively involved in activities varying from education and missions to camping and seniors support.

The preparations for this momentous occasion were co-ordinated by Henry Wiebe,

former conference moderator and a special committee. The internationally known Dr. Tony Campolo gave the key-note address. Supporting him were a large and enthusiastic number of staff and volunteers in music and drama. A mass choir, directed by David Dirks, a worship team led by Lyn Roy and a drama team who presented aspects of our history, co-ordinated by Sandra Reimer and Heike Walker all helped give voice to the thankful celebrations. Musical interludes by Marilyn Reist and Paul Fehderau, words from the present day conference moderator, Vic Thiessen, the conference minister,

Mark Johnson, and the Waterloo Mennonite Brethren Church pastor, Paul McIlwraith, as well as a fine visual presentation by John Penner, all contributed to make the celebration a success. The participants, celebrating under the theme verse from Philippians 3:12 which encouraged all, "To press on and take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me," could now launch out on another period of service to God in the province of Ontario among our growing Mennonite Brethren churches.

² For more information and background on all these areas see my thesis: "Creating a Timeless Tradition: The Effects of Fundamentalism on the Conservative Mennonite Movement" MTS thesis, Conrad Grebel University College and University of Waterloo, 2008. It can be downloaded at:

<http://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/items-by-author?author=Martin%2C+Andrew+C>.

³ *Mennonite Conference of Ontario: Annual Report*. Floradale, ON, 1960, "Letter No. 1," 19-20.

⁴ Stephen Scott, *An Introduction to Old Order and Conservative Mennonite Groups* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1996), 167.

⁵ Scott, 199, quoting from a Rod and Staff Publishers tract entitled, "People Call Us Mennonites."

⁶ Lester Bauman, *The Little Flock* (Crockett, KY: Rod and Staff Publishers, 1999), 101.

⁷ Scott, 199.

⁸ David Null, *Introduction to Mennonite Doctrine and Practice* (Crockett, KY: Rod and Staff Publishers, 2004), 9-10.

⁹ Bauman, 100.

¹⁰ Lloyd Hartzler, *The Christian and The State*, (Harrisonburg, VA: Christian Light Publications Inc., 1993), 5-6.

¹¹ Null, 9.

¹² *Instructions for Christian Living and Church Membership* (Ephrata, PA: Eastern Mennonite Publications, 1984, 5th printing 2000), 66.

¹³ Mervin J. Baer, *Marching On* (Crockett, KY: Rod and Staff Publishers, 2001), 134.

¹⁴ Lloyd Hartzler, *Personal Appearance in Light of God's Word* (Harrisonburg, VA: Christian Light Publications, 1972), 14-15.

¹⁵ William McGrath quoted by Karen M. Johnson, *Christian Modesty in the 20th Century* (distributed by, Crockett, KY: Rod and Staff Publishers Inc., 1993), 15.

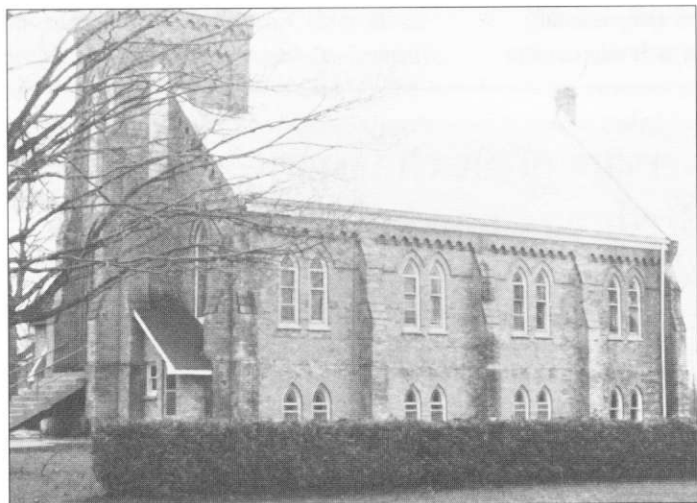
¹⁶ Johnson, *Christian Modesty*, 13 & 43. Also see: Beth E. Graybill, "To Remind Us of Who We Are: Multiple Meanings of Conservative Women's Dress," in *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History*, eds. Kimberly D. Schmidt, Dianne Zimmerman Umble and Steven D. Reschly (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 66; and Hartzler, 12.

¹⁷ Graybill, 66.

¹⁸ Baer, 160.

Opportunities at Nairn—Past and Present

By Ruth Smith Meyer



Nairn Mennonite Church (Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo).

The winds of revival were sweeping across the Amish-Mennonite Conferences churches in the Tavistock-East Zorra area in the 1940s, raising an interest in missions and outreach. A number of families, touched by this spirit, began to look at outlying areas where they could become a church relevant in the world of their day. They contacted the Minister of Agriculture inquiring about

areas with available farmland. The Nairn area was one of those suggestions.

A group of Amish Mennonite families from the Tavistock/Wellesley area, led by Alvin Roth and Wilfred Schlegel acted on this lead. The St Andrews Presbyterian Church in Nairn had been closed in 1947, after having served the

community since 1870. The availability of this building was a feature which drew the group to this area so it was purchased by the Amish Mennonite Mission board for \$1,500.

After initial repairs and cleaning, the congregation worshipped there for some time, before a great deal of the beauty of the structure with its high vaulted ceiling, open beams and stained glass windows behind the pulpit were sacrificed for practicality. The

ceiling was lowered, the pulpit area enclosed and new class rooms added to the second story behind and above the pulpit. Many more renovations took place over the years.

Nine families initially made the move to the Nairn area in the year of 1948. By 1951 eight more families from the home area had joined them. They were an industrious group full of vision and zeal. Even before their homes were all built, they began to reach out with their Sunday School and Summer Bible School Programs. The latter had sixty-seven children enrolled that first year. For many years, the Gingerich Bus Lines, owned by one of those first settlers, picked up interested children from the neighbourhood bringing the attendance to much greater numbers. Even today, the area churches continue their financial and personal support so that it has become the Nairn Community DVBS and is still well-attended.

In the first years, an adult winter Bible School was held. Women's Sewing Circles, Boys' and Girls' Clubs, and Young People's Literary Meetings were begun, but the vision

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didn't stop there with the conventional 'church' activities. With projects such as crops of turnips and corn supplemented by donations, a farm was purchased to help give young men a start in farming. Although it never was used much in that way, it soon became known as the "Mission Farm" and the crops it grew were sold to support mission projects of many different kinds in diverse places. It was finally sold to help build the new church in 1996.

Pea and bean projects of 1949 were used to plant one hundred acres of wheat on a rented farm, some of which needed to be first cleared. The 1950 crop realized \$3,400 and the Nairn group set their eyes a little further a-field. A three-story duplex in London was purchased as a Rescue Mission for homeless men. Alvin and Madeline Roth were chosen to go to London to supervise this work. That Goodwill Rescue Mission continues today with a much enlarged vision and program as Mission Services of London and is a well-established service in the community. This work also spawned the Valleyview Mennonite Church.

Also in 1950, an Ailsa Craig Rest Home for elderly women was purchased. Simon and Ida Bender and family had a small apartment on the main floor where they lived and from which they ran the home. They were on duty 24 hours a day. Several different families took their turns managing the home. In the seventies, this home was sold and a new facility on the main street was built. The new facility now houses 83 long-term residents, seniors apartments and an Adult Day Program. Today, it is run by a board made up of members from the church and representatives from the community.

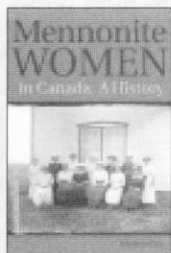
In 1952, the Nairn Church bought a farm between Ailsa Craig and Nairn in hopes of making it a home for men from the Mission to experience a life away from the city. This venture was not a success, but in 1955 Mennonite Central Committee started the Craigwood Boys Farm. This has since been turned over to a community board and operates now as Craigwood Youth Services.

For many years, Nairn Mennonite Church had a constant supply of new members or participants supplied by the many workers who came to Craigwood as house parents, social workers and other staff. Some of these stayed in the community even after they

New Books

Mennonite Women in Canada: A History.

Marlene Epp. University of Manitoba Press, 2008, 408 pages.



Epp explores the role of women across the broad spectrum of Mennonite groups in the many parts of Canada, examining how women's roles have changed in the family and in the church. This book was commissioned by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.

Lost Sons. Judy Clemens. Herald Press, 2008.



In this fictional account, Clemens brings to life the story of Clayton Kratz, a Mennonite working for MCC who disappeared in Ukraine 85 years ago. Her story is set in modern-day Indiana and also explores issues of war and peace and the relationship of Mennonites and today's military families.

The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia:

A Mennonite Memoir. Connie Braun.

Ronsdale Press, 2008, 214 pages.

Using old photographs, Braun recounts the tragic story of her father's life from his birth in Ukraine under Stalin's regime, through the difficult war and refugee years to his arrival in Canada.

The Carol of Christmas: The Life Story of Christmas Carol Kauffman.

Marcia Kauffman Clark. Digital Legend Press, Honeoye Falls, NY, 2008, 300 pages.

This is the life story of Christmas Carol Kauffman written by her daughter. Kauffman, a Mennonite, wrote Lucy Winchester in 1945 and many other short stories and books including Search to Belong, Hidden Rainbow and Light From Heaven.

118 Days: Christian Peacemaker Teams Held Hostage in Iraq. Tricia Gates Brown, ed. Christian Peacemaker Teams, 2008.

Twenty-three writers have contributed to this collection of stories about the kidnapping of four CPTers in 2005. It provides an inside view of the event, including personal comments from those who experienced the kidnapping firsthand.



Merrill Hunsberger, far right, stands in front of the original Hunsperghof near Krauchthal (about 20 km from Berne), Switzerland, with the present owners and several traveling companions in September, 2007. This is his ancestral home where his forbearer, Jakob and siblings Hans and Uli Hunsberger (Hunsperger) lived until ca. 1726. Court records indicate that Jakob purchased approximately 250 acres in Franconia Township, Pennsylvania between the years 1734 and 1741. Information from <http://www.hunsberger-genealogy.com>.

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no longer worked there. When MCC turned Craigwood over to the community board, the workers no longer were recruited through Mennonite circles.

Throughout the years, Nairn has remained active in the community and creative in its outreach although perhaps not with the same zealous productivity of the first years. While the congregation began with Mennonite families, by 1993 a survey found that 46% of members were new to the Anabaptist tradition. Counting those who attended but not members, 50% were from non-Mennonite background. Indeed, many traditions are represented in the congregation. Now, in 2008, it is even more community based.

In 1975 an addition was built, adding a hall, washroom facilities and entry as well as four added Sunday school rooms. This addition relieved the pressure for added space, but did not take into consideration the need for accessibility. In the next several years, this need became more and more evident, and because of the many levels of the building, ramping or elevators were not practical or adequate. When the invasion of bats became a concern, inquiry about extermination revealed that it was a major undertaking. Extensive renovation and requirements of modern building codes echoed the wisdom

of those recommending a new building. The decision to take that route was made in 1988. It was also agreed that 70% of the funds should be raised before actual building began. That time arrived in 1996. In June of that year an open house and service of Celebration and



Nairn Mennonite Church

Closure was held. Many people from both the Presbyterian and Mennonite communities, as well as the community at large attended to say their farewells. The congregation continued until the end of July, to meet in the old building while the new one took shape further back on the lot. In August, the old brick structure was demolished, but not before some of its features were saved to incorporate into the new. Some of the furnishings were also made available to those in the community with vested interests because of past associations.

On December 1, 1996, the official opening of the new fully accessible facility again drew a large crowd, and the blessing of the church and community was extended to the congregation. The wall leading to the

sanctuary features bricks from the old building and the doors are flanked by two of the stained glass windows from St Andrews Presbyterian days. The pulpit and chairs from those days are also retained, as is the chestnut wainscoting now refinished and adorning the office space.

A pew from the old church stands in the foyer.

There have been many times of struggle, times of anguish and at the present, low attendance and an aging congregation are a painful reality. Although many have gone from Nairn to other places of service, the congregation still looks into the community and sees possibilities. Several area churches of other denominations

have closed and there are many living in this bedroom community for London.

Ailsa Craig Presbyterian Church is one of those who had to close its doors recently. Several of its members found a church home at Nairn again. Now Presbyterians and Mennonites worship comfortably together in a place where both share a history and await another wind to sweep through to guide and help them find a way to continue a faithful witness. Perhaps there are those among the readers who would feel nudged by that wind to come and help.

Spring bus tour

On June 7, 2008, the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario held its annual meeting at the Grace Mennonite Fellowship Church near New Hamburg. This was followed by a presentation by Andy Martin on the Birth and Development of the Conservative Mennonite Movement in Ontario. After lunch, Earl Koch, the minister, talked about the history of Grace Mennonite. We then travelled by bus to the Morning Star Christian Day School in Millbank which is operated by the Milverton Conservative Mennonite Fellowship



The Morning Star school is the former Millbank Public School.

located in the former Millbank Public School. We also visited the Bethel Conservative Mennonite Church in Millbank, where Ken Brenneman, the minister, and Howard Lichti, the deacon, described their history and answered questions.



The interior of Bethel Conservative Mennonite Church which celebrated its 50th anniversary last year.