

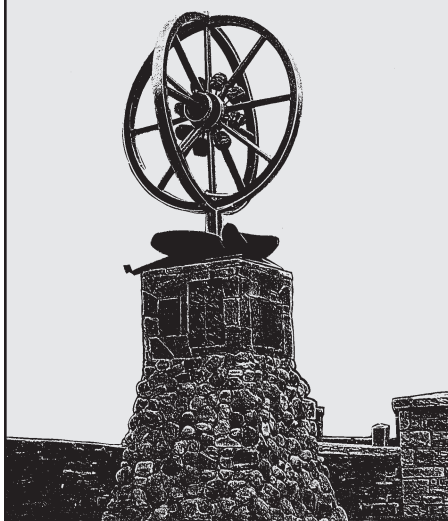
# Ontario Mennonite History

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## Fall meeting includes Indigenous / Mennonite stories

By Barb Draper

Mim Harder led a KAIROS Blanket Exercise at the fall meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario held at Conrad Grebel University College. This day-long event, entitled "Living History: Indigenous and Mennonite stories of Encounter," was held on Oct. 27, 2018. It was jointly sponsored by the historical society, Grebel, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario and the Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies.

The blanket exercise tells the story of the Indigenous peoples of Canada from pre-contact days to the present. As everyone gathered on the various blankets scattered on the floor of the room, Harder commented, "You are now a First Nations person, living on the land."

To show how Indigenous people died from disease or were dispossessed of land, more and more people and blankets were removed from the floor. A policy of assimilation through residential schools resulted in loss of family connections,

of language and culture. The blanket exercise ended with a recognition that Canada needs to work at repairing relationships with Indigenous people.

After lunch, Clarence Cachagee talked about his story and how it took him 45 years to be able to say, "I am a beautiful person." As a child he was put into the care of the Children's Aid Society and a family from Mannheim Mennonite Church with five children of their own raised him. He was never abused but he suffered as a foster child, feeling lost and broken. Today he is working hard to stop inter-generational trauma.

Clarence is working with Seth Ratzlaff to put his story into a book, a project that brings him hope. Although he had a difficult life, he does not want to blame his foster parents who showed him love and visited him when he was incarcerated. Clarence's message was one of hope in spite of the trauma and pain of the past.



*Mim Harder, who led the KAIROS Blanket Exercise, grew up in a Mennonite home in the Markham area.*



*Clarence Cachagee began his presentation by drumming which he said is a form of prayer.*

# Indigenous and Mennonite stories of encounter

By Laureen Harder-Gissing and Marlene Epp

This land acknowledgement statement and stories of encounter were read at the opening of the fall meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario on Oct. 27, 2018 at Conrad Grebel University College:

*Conrad Grebel University College is situated on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee peoples. The College, and the University of Waterloo, was built on the Haldimand Tract, the land given in treaty in 1784 to the Six Nations that includes 10 kilometres on each side of the Grand River from its source in Dundalk Township to its mouth at Lake Erie.*

*The Mennonites were the first permanent white settlers in the area we know today as Waterloo Region. In the early 19th century, the initial settlers were led to the Grand River, with its surrounding fertile soil and forests by a guide from the Mississauga of the Anishinaabe peoples who lived here and understood the land. In 1805 Mennonites from Pennsylvania purchased 60,000 acres of land – Block 2 of the Haldimand Tract – in present-day Kitchener-Waterloo.*

*Mennonites now live, and continue to settle, on the full length of the Haldimand Tract. The land was given in treaty to support the Six Nations in perpetuity, but this did not happen. Our work at reconciliation with Indigenous peoples includes decolonizing our historical narratives, our minds, and our hearts. This is an ongoing process, and we have a long way to go. We do this in humility and gratitude to our Indigenous neighbours, past and present.*<sup>1</sup>

Mennonite settlers may or may not have been aware of the political, commercial and military interests affecting this land and its Indigenous peoples. “So long as colonial administrators viewed the Six Nations as valuable military allies, they protected the Six Nations’ land base.” But by 1795, the state’s interests

turned to colonization. The money that Mennonites paid for [Block 2] “was supposed to have been held in trust [by the government] for the use and benefit of the Six Nations. But it was not.”<sup>2</sup>

The stories of positive relationships between Indigenous peoples and Mennonites in the Grand River Valley have traditionally been told from the Mennonite side with few questions about why Indigenous people disappeared in the later 19th century.

Samuel S. Moyer wrote that his mother, Barbara, as a child, would play with Indigenous children, and the families would share venison and bread. On cold nights, they would sleep in front of the family’s fireplace. Lorna Bergey reported that her grandparents, Norman and Susannah Shantz, lived on a farm in Wilmot that was annually visited as late as 1900 by Indigenous people wanting to harvest ginseng. After the birth of Norman and Susannah’s eldest daughter several Indigenous women

gave the family a handwoven doll cradle. Elizabeth Sherk recalled the fall council meetings of Mohawks across the Grand River from her home early in the nineteenth century.

Ezra Eby described in positive terms how Sam Eby spent time among Indigenous people and “taught them many good things...” The memory of Indigenous writers was much less positive. Eby had established a still soon after he arrived, and traded alcohol to Indigenous people.

In the early years of the Mennonite settlement at the Grand River, the Mennonites and Indigenous people appeared to mutually benefit from their contact. But increasing economic development by Mennonites and others served to deprive Indigenous people of access to their traditional lands and resources.<sup>3</sup>

In the 20th century, some Ontario Mennonites were involved in church-run residential schools. The Northern Light



*A walnut tree and plaque commemorates the first Mennonite settlers in Waterloo in a garden at Conrad Grebel University College. In 2017 a colourful plaque was added to acknowledge that this land originally belonged to Indigenous peoples. (Photo by Barb Draper)*

Gospel Mission, begun by American Mennonites, established mission outposts in the Red Lake area. "In 1962 at Poplar Hill, with government financial assistance, the Mission opened the Poplar Hill Development School, a residential school for Indigenous children. Although many of the Mission's volunteers and staff came from the United States, it attracted long-term support both in money and personnel from Mennonites in [southwestern] Ontario."<sup>4</sup>

Mennonite Central Committee Ontario began to be involved with Indigenous communities in the late 1970s. One of their first projects was an agricultural program at Cape Croker. Over the years, MCCO Indigenous

Neighbours has organized constituency visits to Indigenous communities and arranged for Indigenous speakers in churches. Advocacy work included supporting the efforts of Indigenous communities to pursue land claims and fishing rights. MCCO responded to the death of Dudley George at Ipperwash in 1995 by placing observer teams at the conflict site and advocating for just solutions.

MCC Ontario's involvement in northern Ontario began after Mennonite Disaster Service volunteers spent the summer of 1976 assisting with Kashechewan flood cleanup. By 1979, summer gardening projects were underway in northern communities such

as Attawapiskat and Moosonee/Moose Factory. In the 1990s, an MCCO North office was established in Timmins.<sup>5</sup>

In 1986, some Mennonites formed Christian Peacemaker Teams, groups of nonviolent volunteers committed to being present in areas of violent conflict. Ongoing CPT projects in Ontario have focused on First Nations justice issues and have involved periodic delegations to stand in solidarity with local Indigenous communities.<sup>6</sup>

These are just a few stories. Wherever Mennonites have lived in Canada, we find stories of the living history of Indigenous and Mennonite encounters. We have so much to learn.

<sup>1</sup> "Land acknowledgement," Conrad Grebel University College, accessed March 11, 2019 from <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/about-grebel/land-acknowledgement>. The entire italicized text is the College's land acknowledgement.

<sup>2</sup> E. Reginald Good, "Lost Inheritance: Alienation of Six Nations' Lands in Upper Canada, 1784-1805," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 99, <http://jms.uwinnipeg.ca/index.php/jms/article/view/834/833>.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel J. Steiner, "Mennonites and First Nations Relations at the Grand River," *In Search of Promised Lands* [blog], 2015. <https://ontariomennonitehistory.org/2015/04/06/mennonite-and-first-nations-relations-at-the-grand-river/>

<sup>4</sup> Samuel J. Steiner, "Ontario Mennonites and Aboriginal Residential Schools," *In Search of Promised Lands* [blog], 2015. <https://ontariomennonitehistory.org/2015/06/08/ontario-mennonites-and-the-poplar-hill-development-school/>

<sup>5</sup> Laureen Harder-Gissing, "Native Concerns/Aboriginal Neighbours Program fonds," Mennonite Archives of Ontario, 2018. <https://uwaterloo.ca/mennonite-archives-ontario/mennonite-organizations-and-institutions/mennonite-central-committee-ontario/native-concernsaboriginal-neighbours>

<sup>6</sup> Laureen Harder-Gissing, "Christian Peacemaker Teams (Canada) fonds," Mennonite Archives of Ontario, 2018. <https://uwaterloo.ca/mennonite-archives-ontario/mennonite-organizations-and-institutions/christian-peaceamaker-teams>

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# A Mennonite women's story about doubt and leadership

## Helene (Heese) Toews (1893-1983)

By Jakob Michael Stephan

*Jakob Michael Stephan received the J. William and Sarah Dyck Award for Russian Mennonite Studies intern at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario in 2018. Jakob, from Germany, completed the internship while a student in the University of Waterloo's Master of Arts in Intercultural German Studies program. This is a joint program with the University of Mannheim.*

When I started my internship at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario, I discovered the personal writings of Helene Toews, who presided as head of the Ontario Women in Mission from 1946 to 1961. Most of Helene's writings are in *Kurrent*, an old and difficult-to-decipher German script. One day I discovered a crumbling collection of papers inside a notebook entitled *Gottes Werke an meiner Seele* (God's Works Upon My Soul) that helped me find a starting point for my conversation. Helene wrote:

My soul was put into the body of a little girl that received the name Helene, short Lena, by God, her creation that occurred in March 1893. A girl? Why a girl? This question often baffled my brain...it always seems to me that I would have accomplished more as a boy ...<sup>1</sup>

Considering that Helene took on a leading role in the Mennonite community in the 1940s after her migration from the Soviet Union to Ontario, her question aroused my interest. By acquainting you with the life of Helene, I want not only to perpetuate the memory of an outstanding woman, but also discuss how she perceived herself in a position that was not attuned to the expectations of women in her time.

We might call "God's Works Upon My Soul" a "spiritual autobiography." It does not provide a detailed account of Helene's life, rather, she focuses on her psychological development, which was deeply connected to her relationship with God. Later, I found some passages of "God's Works" printed almost word for word in her published life account, "Woher? Wohin?" (From where? Whither?). The boundary between public and private was more complicated than I realized.

Helene was born in Chortitza, a Mennonite settlement in present-day Ukraine, in 1893. After finishing primary school, she became a student at the *Chortitza Maedchenschule* (girls' school) and finished her education at the *Weibliche Gymnasium* (secondary school for women) in Ekaterinoslav (now Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine). This was a thriving industrial town at that time.

The fifteen-year old girl had to leave her home in order to attend school. Thanks to the town's large Mennonite population, Helene was able to find lodging with a family of her community. She wrote about how she enjoyed attending Mennonite church services and weekly gatherings of the youth choir. David Heinrich Epp (1861-1934), her religion teacher and pastor, left a lasting impression on Helene: "I was allowed to sit at the feet of such a master and to listen to his speeches and doctrines."<sup>2</sup>

Helene experienced her first hardships as a young student. She fell in love with the son of her host family whose name she kept secret. She thought he was an intelligent and zealous young man who devoted his time to studying. Having confessed their feelings to each other, Helene regarded him as her fiancé. However, her hopes turned out to be premature. He put off Helene by his advances that made her feel uncomfortable:

He then confessed that he was in love with me. I was happy. He then hugged me for the first time. His hug was not chaste. I freed myself from the hug and went away. It was for me like a freezing water jet that poured out onto my warm feelings.<sup>3</sup>

Helene was longing for an equal relationship: "I said to myself, he only regards me as a woman, and not as a human, this is not a true love that wants to make the other unhappy."<sup>4</sup>

After Helene gave up the hope of becoming the wife of her first beloved, Bernhard Toews approached her and she accepted his marriage proposal. To my surprise, Helene did not recall a deep emotional attachment as a reason for her consent, rather, she stated that pity had inclined her towards this decision. She did not want to disappoint him in the same way she had been disappointed by her alleged fiancé.<sup>5</sup> The prospect of marrying Bernhard did not evoke Helene's enthusiasm. She considered loving him not as a matter of the heart, but as an obligation: "I decided to love him as much as I could when I married him."<sup>6</sup> This subordination of her own emotional needs to Bernhard shows how a traditional understanding of womanhood exerted an influence on her.

Before her wedding, Helene worked for one year as a teacher in the *Chortitza Mädchenschule*. This gave her an opportunity to follow her passion. She explicitly cites her great grandfather Heinrich Hesse (1787-1868), who established the *Chortitza Zentralschule*, as a reason for her delight in teaching. He served as a role model and inspired her to look for self-fulfillment outside the family and conventional roles for women.



*A gathering of teachers at the Chortitzer Maedchenschule.  
Helene Toews is in the front row, fifth from the right. Photo from Glueckliche, Sonnige Schulzeit.*

The years of marriage were not an easy time for Helene. Despite the dramatic political shifts surrounding her—the upheaval of the First World War and the Russian Revolution—and the demands of raising three sons, Helene did not elaborate on these events. She focused her writings on her troubled relationship with her husband, who was apparently addicted to alcohol and gambling:

Whenever he returned home completely drunk in the morning, where he found me still awake, he was dissatisfied with me. He then requested his goodnight kiss. At this point, the alcohol smell was disgusting to me to so that I refused to kiss him. He immediately fell asleep, but I tossed and turned sleeplessly in bed pondering about my situation. I did not speak to him for years, my throat felt constricted.<sup>7</sup>

The expectations of a wife caused Helene to endure the vices of her husband. Only her faith and attending Bible studies and church services gave her some solace. Her writings show how dedicated she was to her education. In addition to copying poems and religious texts of others (such as German evangelist Otto Stockmayer and Mennonite theologian Jakob Kroeker) Helene wrote her own reflections. She did not avoid questions that were controversial for the Mennonite community. She advocated, for instance, a liberal stance concerning the timing of baptism:

I am Christian in the first place. For me, any way of baptizing at any time is equally

correct and holy whether it takes place during childhood or adulthood as long as it happens with belief and heart.<sup>8</sup>

This excerpt gives us a hint at the depth and breadth of her theological reflections. Her faith was not confined to rational thinking, since she also told us about emotional devotion to God and even transcendental experiences. In 1922, Helene's youngest son fell ill from pneumonia and typhus, endangering his life to a degree that a doctor prepared her for his imminent death. In her distress, she asked God to take the child to Him. Upon this, she gave testimony of a vision:

I then stood up. The entire room was illuminated by a celestial shine. A brightness that did not blind but transmitted a marvelous warmth. This warmth was a balm on my wounded heart. I felt the presence of a celestial being in the room, but I only noticed the bright shine, did not hear a voice, but my heart received the certainty: Your child will be alive.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, her toddler survived. This vision shows that Helene's faith was not restricted to pure reasoning or attending church services, rather, she sought a personal encounter with God. The significance of this vision is underlined by the fact that Helene openly recounted it in "From Where? Whither?" in which she barely changed the wording from "God's Works Upon My Soul." In the public account, she only omitted that her husband had left her with the ill child alone. The problems with her husband seem to be something she could not speak about in public.

The Toews' immigration to Canada posed new challenges and brought new perspectives to Helene. They settled in Niverville, Man., in 1927, immediately joining the local Mennonite community. In contrast to her Mennonite communities in Russia, this one provided women with more opportunities for active engagement. She tenderly recalled "*Tante Bertha*" in her two biographical writings: a woman permitted to preach during the meeting for Bible studies. Bertha eagerly strove to direct the women in her congregation towards God. Bertha's active role might have inspired Helene's later involvement in the Mennonite community.

Niverville was not the Toews' final destination. The family suffered several hardships before they finally settled. In 1928, they established a settlement in Harrow, Ont., along with other Mennonite families, taking out a loan together to finance their farms. In the first year, a flood prevented them from harvesting in time so that the first crop lost its value.

The financial difficulties of the Depression forced the Toews to give up their farm and move several times within Ontario to find work. The family ended up in Vineland in the Niagara region in 1933. Writing about her immigration process, Helene becomes less concerned about her marriage than about her family's difficult economic situation:

If I would not know that everything will be good for those who love God, I would have never wished to come to this place. The word Vineland encapsulates much heart's suffering for me. We were very poor as we moved there.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, a more settled circumstance allowed Helene to commit more time to the community. The congregation elected her as Sunday school teacher, and she joined the local women's group. Moreover, she participated in the General Conference and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada at a time when women were generally forbidden to serve as a delegate for their church. This meant she had to afford all travel expenses by herself.<sup>11</sup>

Her spiritual biography ended abruptly during those days with an announcement that she would write down two of her visions. Did she stop writing altogether at that time? Or are there some sheets missing? Even though we lack a personal account of Helene's path to leadership, we can now make use of two speeches of hers to reflect upon her stance on the role of women in the Mennonite community.

After the death of her husband in 1944, Helene seemingly had time and energy to devote to the women's conferences. She gave a remarkable speech, entitled "*Die Fraue ohne u. durch Christus: Die wahre Bestimmung der Frau*" ("The Woman without and through Christ: The true Purpose of Woman"), at the annual Conference of Mennonites in Canada in Eigenheim, Saskatchewan in 1945. She argued that women could take on tasks of the *Reichgottesarbeit* (work of God's kingdom) outside the realm of the family.

According to Helene, woman was subordinated to men in the pre-Christian age, but Mary's reception of Jesus put women on equal footing with men. To support her argument, she drew from Biblical examples like the unmarried Mary Magdalene and examples from the involvement of women in the early apostolic church. She concluded, "The true purpose of women lies in working for the kingdom of God. This is the highest good we should all strive for, that human beings take up and act on the work that God gives us." Helene is suggesting that God did not take a particular sex into his service and men and women should be equal in the community. She put forward an elaborate argument exemplifying how "women's organizations...within the Mennonite Church functioned as a 'parallel church' where women could exercise leadership."<sup>12</sup>

In the following years, Helene worked with Marie Klaassen Lohrenz (1892-1962), who served as a missionary in India for 37 years, to organize women's groups in Ontario.<sup>13</sup> Their activities resulted in a meeting of the Ontario women's groups at the Canadian Conference in Beamsville, Ontario in 1946. On this occasion, Helene gave another speech stressing the importance for women to collaborate to serve God:

The scripture taught us to practice God's salvation industriously and to obtain God's salvation with fear and trembling. Nowhere will you learn these things better than in the community. There is something marvelous about the community that we are unable to grasp.<sup>14</sup>

She left no doubt that women have to work together to establish a positive relationship with God that will result in productive outcomes for the community. The restriction of women to domestic work would exclude them from the *Reichgottesarbeit*, which is a fundamental expression of Christian faith. For a Mennonite like Helene, faith cannot be separated from practical social endeavors like raising funds for missions by sewing.

Governing these ideas in her mind were not only theological doctrines, but also her own life experiences. Helene had persons like David Heinrich Epp and *Tante Bertha* to impact her spiritual development. She also had experienced suffering from loneliness and isolation—as seen in her spiritual biography—which could illustrate her understanding of the need for community.

Helene successfully led the United Mennonite Women Mission's Society of Ontario (later called Ontario Women in Mission) until 1961. This organization consisted of congregational women's mission societies (originally 10, and later 19) which collect money for missionary and social work abroad and at home. The societies were from Waterloo, Vineland, Niagara, New Hamburg, Toronto, St. Catharines and Port Rowan. One way to raise funds was to form weekly sewing circles and to sell the handmade pieces. One achievement of the organization that stood out to me was the raising of funds to open a retirement home, the United Mennonite Home, in Vineland in 1955. A home that is still open today.



During all these years, Helene did not forget her homeland. She maintained her ties with her school after her immigration to Canada. Her reunion activities resulted in the gathering of former girl's school students in Eigenheim, Sask., and in the publication of the volume *Glueckliche, Sonnige, Schulzeit* (Happy, Sunny School Time) consisting of memories, photos and short biographies of former students and teachers of the *Chortitza Mädchenschule*, in 1952.

Eight years later, she was one of the first Mennonite women to travel back to Odessa to meet her brother and his spouse, both of whom had remained in the USSR. She left us a detailed account of her 10-day long journey entitled "*Ein einmaliges Ereignis. Meine Reise nach Ruszland*" (A unique experience: My trip to Russia). In contrast to her spiritual biography, her travel writings are less concerned with her inner development and instead provide details of life as a tourist in the USSR and praise for Odessa's beauty.

Helene was an eager and passionate woman who strove for God and her community. Her gender posed problems for her as she struggled to find relationships in which she did not feel reduced because of her femininity. Her marriage did not resolve this problem, instead, Helene suffered from society's expectation to love her husband. Later, *Reichgottesarbeit* served as a way to find fulfillment outside the conventional woman's role.

In her "spiritual biography" she not only put forward the question as to why God created her as a woman but also gave us as a reason for her concern:

This question often baffled my brain... it always seems to me that I would have accomplished more as a boy...in the Reichgottesarbeit....I am interested in the Reichgottesarbeit, in the character and the structure of the church community.<sup>15</sup>

Again, she stressed the importance of the *Reichgottesarbeit*, just like in her later speeches. We do not know exactly when Helene wrote her spiritual autobiography, but she may have developed her thoughts in the course of her practical engagement and activities. As I have already shown, she pointed out in her public addresses that the call for the *Reichgottesarbeit* is directed towards every human irrespective of their sex. By this, the engagement in the *Reichgottesarbeit* can pave the way for equality between the sexes in the Mennonite community. She may have demonstrated herself that she stood on equal footing with men through her outstanding dedication to the Ontario women's organization.

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<sup>1</sup> God's Work 1.

<sup>2</sup> God's Work 2.

<sup>3</sup> God's Work 4

<sup>4</sup> God's Work 4.

<sup>5</sup> God's Work 5.

<sup>6</sup> God's Work 6

<sup>7</sup> God's Work 6

<sup>8</sup> God's Work 3

<sup>9</sup> God's Work 7

<sup>10</sup> God's Work 9.

<sup>11</sup> Harder, 28

<sup>12</sup> Epp, 155.

<sup>13</sup> Harder, 28.

<sup>14</sup> Purpose and Aims of the Sewing Circles and the Women Conference, 4.

<sup>15</sup> God's Work 1.

# Toronto United Mennonite Church Refugees

By Anne Konrad Dyck

The year 2019 marks the 40th anniversary of Canada's private refugee sponsorship program and Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC) was the first church in Canada to become involved in private sponsorship of "boat people" refugees from Vietnam and Laos.

How did this small congregation of about 100 members at the time, lead the way for groups across Canada to respond to the plight of the refugees escaping the chaos that followed the end of the Vietnam War? The "boat people" story had hit the headlines and, swiftly, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) stepped in to arrange a sponsorship agreement with the Canadian government to allow private individuals and groups to sponsor refugees. Early in March 1979, an adult Social Issues group, meeting during the Sunday School period at TUMC, took the first step.

The congregation was ripe for a new project and excited to be able to do something. The TUMC South-East Asian Refugee Committee was organized with Harvey Dyck as the chairman. Next thing we knew, a CBC-TV news crew was filming a refugee aid committee meeting in the TUMC "upper room" (a balcony in our former church structure) discussing ways and means to sponsor "boat people."

TUMC's first refugee family arrived in April 1979. Over the next two years almost everyone at TUMC was involved in the program. By the end of two years we accepted and settled 49 Southeast Asian refugees in 13 groups ranging in size from one person to families of up to seven members.

TUMC members also spoke to other churches and lay groups in the city, or to neighbours and friends who also got involved. In this way, TUMC became the formal sponsor for a further 22 refugees carried by several Toronto groups: a student and staff group at Wycliffe College; a Mississauga family; a University of Toronto group; and a group of schoolteachers. Three other Mennonite churches Berea Mennonite Church

near Drayton, Dunnville Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Fellowship in Brampton became TUMC partners.

MCC provided advice on accessing government assistance programs, in part by employing the invaluable Tinh Huynh (pronounced Ting Winn). Tinh, a Vietnamese man, fluent in English, acted as interpreter and consultant. He knew that the "abuse" a host saw on a child's back (round bruises like burned circles) was not abuse, just a hot coin pressure technique used in Chinese medicine. To our refugees, Tinh explained that Canadian people thought smoking inside a house was bad.

Tinh also worked with government-sponsored refugees. Along with TUMC volunteers, he went to the airport to meet refugees and took them to hotels. Later he helped them find apartments. He assisted in orientation, visited and explained how to navigate the city to find donated clothes or furniture or Chinatown. As interpreter, with TUMC volunteers, he accompanied refugees to Canada Manpower to help them find jobs, to doctors' offices and to schools to help them register their children. In short, he was of invaluable assistance.

At the outset, the aim of church sponsorship was not to overwhelm one family with loving care and encourage dependency, but to attempt to help as many desperate people as possible. Remembering the flight from oppression experienced by many of our own parents and grandparents, we wanted to save the lives of as many people as possible. This policy was explained to the refugees—that the house shelter was temporary and that the church group was assisting the refugees to adapt to Canadian life and to become self-sufficient as soon as possible.

TUMC's settlement program needed lots of help. An early task was



*Harriet Dick and her family hosted a picnic in the Dicks' backyard in Toronto. (Photos courtesy of Harriet Dick)*

fundraising and Bob Tiessen kept the financial matters in order. A big budget item was housing. Since hotels were costly and the first family of seven was large, the congregation and Refugee Aid Committee decided to buy a seven-room house to be used as a settlement house for temporary housing. The price is hard to believe today, but in May 1979 the TUMC congregation purchased a house at 424 Jones Avenue for \$35,000. The money came from interest-free loans given by TUMC members and friends. The house was to be sold and the loans repaid when all our refugees had secured their own permanent housing. (By the end of 1980, two years later, they had.)

Another nearby settlement house at 39 Poucher Avenue was purchased by the Brampton Fellowship also following the TUMC policy. It housed a family of five, a couple in their late 20s and a widower with a toddler son. A further young refugee couple was offered a free basement apartment by the Moreau family on Columbine Avenue. Bedrooms at the Poucher and Jones Avenue houses were private, but kitchen/dining and other areas were shared.

Most of our refugees were ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, but some were ethnically Vietnamese. We trusted that those cultural differences could be managed so all could get along with each other.

The seven-member Luong family was first to be settled into 424 Jones



Avenue which was soon shared by the Huang family, a mother, father and three children. The Luongs with five children, were given a base support of \$600/month. Of this, \$270 was considered rent, and a first payment of \$330 was given to the family. As Family Allowance came in and refugee members got jobs and earned money, these sums were deducted according to a set rate. In a short time the support money was freed to assist another family.

As it turned out, the Luongs were eager to earn and make their own choices for food, clothing and shelter. One month after their arrival both parents had been initiated, with language school for the mother and a factory job for the father, who spoke some English already. One son found a job and within six months the family income was \$1,000 a month, sufficient for them to move into an apartment of their choice. TUMC helped to find the shelter, provided furniture and household equipment and helped with the move. A new refugee family got 424 Jones.

Since our refugees came largely from urban backgrounds, we were confident they would soon succeed in making their way in Toronto, a city offering varied educational and job opportunities and growing Southeast Asian communities. We provided emotional support, housing, winter clothing, orientation to access health, school, government (children's allowance, OHIP) and initial individual financial services in the early difficult stage. Education and jobs got one group on its feet and made room for another group. In this way, refugees also helped each other.

People at TUMC were active in many practical ways. A June 15, 1979, TUMC *Update* reads: "JONES AVENUE SETTLEMENT HOUSE: A heartfelt thank you to the many who have helped by providing funding, household items, repairing windows, cleaning, painting, plumbing, fencing and sodding. There's more to do and Nicholas Dick will be phoning around for volunteers to help over the summer with electrical work, plumbing, painting and wall-papering."

As church supporters assisted with

orientation, taking refugees to schools, to ESL classes or doctors, training in use of the TTC (transit), on outings or shopping in Chinatown, they also spent informal time together. An announcement in Aug. 1979 invited volunteers to "a special picnic at Willowgrove Farm to meet the first 23 refugees we are working with and to welcome them. Members from the Dunnville, Berea and Brampton Mennonite Fellowships will be present, as well as the Evangelical Vietnamese Church."

At the same time the Refugee Committee reported "with gratitude" that \$30,000 had been committed to refugee work that year. By October 1979, the first arrivals, the Luongs, had moved from Jones Avenue into a three-bedroom apartment for \$300/month. The bare-bones approach allowed the Committee to settle 70 refugees altogether!

Darryl Fast, pastor at TUMC, and the church board worked with the Refugee Aid Committee to make the refugees feel welcome. The pastor of the Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church and his wife, Winfred and Jean Soong, helped with interpretation and welcomed refugees into their church—which some attended and joined. The Toronto Vietnamese Evangelical Church became a church home for some others.

As TUMC gained experience the refugee program broadened its scope. It assisted rural churches in their sponsorships, where the rural churches provided the funds. It also helped a local Vietnamese family to foster a set of four brothers.

In his 1979 annual report, Harvey Dyck noted that the church budget had not suffered in the least; that the settlement outreach had strengthened the spirit of co-operation among



*In 1983, a Vietnamese couple invited Nicholas and Harriet Dick to their wedding.*

members, had attracted new friends, had given children and youth a lesson in practical Christianity and helped broaden church members' perspective beyond a "me first" ethic.

With thousands of homeless refugees waiting in demoralizing camps, more thousands paying vast sums to risk uncertain boat escapes, and still more thousands ruthlessly hounded out of their countries, one may see why TUMC policy to try to assist as many as possible was the right policy.

Members of the TUMC Refugee Committee were: Ed Bergen, Emily Burgetz, Harriet and Nicholas Dick, Virginia Reimer, Anne and Harvey Dyck, Darrell Fast, Margot Fieguth, Rosemarie and Victor Heinrichs, Nancy and Henry Pauls, Marie Penner and Bob Tiessen. Coordinators for the settlement houses were Margot Fieguth and Emily and Bruce Burgetz for 424 Jones, and Harriet Dick, Virginia Reimer and Marie Penner for 39 Poucher.



*TUMC hosted a picnic for the refugees and volunteers at Willowgrove camp in 1979. It included a horse-and-wagon ride.*

# A “Patchwork Journey”

By Laura Enns

On May 1, the Brubacher House Museum opened for its 40th season. Thanks to generous support from the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, we anticipate another exciting year of community programs and events for all ages, celebrating local arts, culture, heritage, and ecology. Since 2017, the Brubacher House has welcomed seasonal Artists-in-Residence—local, emerging or professional artists and artisans—who are invited to create and share work inspired by the Brubacher House and its history.

Our Fall 2018 Artist-in-Residence, Julianna Suderman, was an undergraduate English and French student at the University of Waterloo and Conrad Grebel University College. In honour of National Novel Writing Month, she hosted “Patchwork Journey: A Collaborative Writing Event” at the Brubacher House on Nov. 16, 2018. At this three-hour event, students and community members were invited to join in writing a “patchwork” book of short stories on the theme of “Coming Together.” Participants contributed thirteen stories, which were edited, illustrated and “stitched together” by a team of Grebel students. On Nov. 23, we came back together to celebrate the completed book, titled *Thirteen Branches*. The image of an apple tree, inspired by the apple orchards that once stood around the Brubacher House, serves as a common thread throughout the book.

The following excerpt comes from the final story: “Where the Heart Is,” by University of Waterloo student Joanie Tian:

*In front of her is an intimidatingly modern building. It's large and square and low, and she isn't used to being intimidated by modernity. It was a staple back in the city where she grew up, but Waterloo can't be compared to that. She's felt nothing but familiarity since coming here, and it's so different from the cold detachment she's used to carrying with her at home, that anything with large glass windows and sleek grey cars parked outside brings a startling chill with it.*

*But this isn't the end of the road. Not in the poetic sense, but the museum isn't here. It's a little further out, just beyond what she can see. Sudden gusts of wind blow her hair in her face and the brightest things around her are the lights from the sophisticated tech company buildings on her right, but it's fine. Maybe it wouldn't have felt fine if she was making the same trek this time of year at home, but there's something about being in a new place that makes it easy to appreciate things instead of letting old, bitter thoughts take over. Snowflakes get shadows under street lights, her winter boots make a satisfying thump with every step; every breath of hers comes from a dragon's snout. This is what she left home for. Not these things, of course, but the acknowledgment of these things, and the smidgen of pride she gets from realizing she actually noticed these things instead of*

*mindlessly barreling through on her way to the next event.*

*Another minute, and she sees the museum before she sees the sign pointing to it.*

*They don't match, exactly. The museum is cloaked in darkness with the vague outlines of a tiny summer cottage, a narrow thin path carved out in the snow leading to the front door. The sign reflects light, a sturdy cobalt blue with white outlines and neat arrows. It's lovely in the dusk, and the whole scene could have been designed by the Brothers Grimm.*

*She makes her way to a tiny parking lot bordered on one side by a wooden fence. It looks homemade, sturdy and uneven with snow-capped tips. On another side there is, as far as she can tell, a sparse forest. Between the snow and the darkness, she can't make out much.*

*The museum itself is closed, although it isn't as late as the sky might suggest. Everything in her immediate vicinity is dark, and as she walks into the forest, she imagines arriving right back at the same tiny parking lot next to the homely museum, as if it's a tiny, self-contained part of the universe she never has to leave.*

*Snow falls onto her shoulders as she makes her way gingerly through the bushes, and every step in day-old snow comes with a crunch and a squeak. A little way past the foliage is a Tree, set apart and more imposing than the rest, but it doesn't communicate intimidation as much as it does strength and protection.*

*She tilts her head way up to see the frosted tips. It has an aura of enchanted intimacy that makes her think, “This is mine.”*

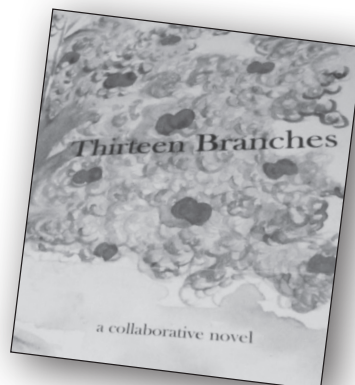
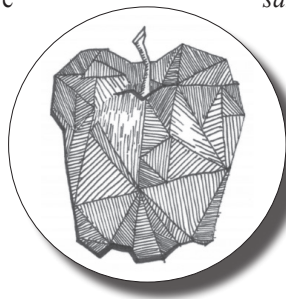
*In the city, nothing is sacred. Or at least nothing feels it. She would hear of urban places of escape, people composing poetry on rooftops or finding repose in abandoned factories, and she looked for pockets like that around her own neighbourhood, but there weren't any. There, places didn't change people.*

*Whether they were in an art gallery, or a mall, or a church, people brought with them their frustration and anger and loud, noisy defensiveness that contaminated the places. She blocked herself off from the complaining masses, held herself separate from places and people. Apathy was her way of quarantining herself, and she held nothing dear so nothing bad could get close to her.*

*But this place, she feels, is hers. A patch of darkness that's silent but not sullen, homemade and yet sturdy. A spot of meditative peace like she's never known before.*

*This isn't so much a home away from home as her first real taste of home to begin with, and in that dusky winter air, it tastes fresh and crisp and sweet.*

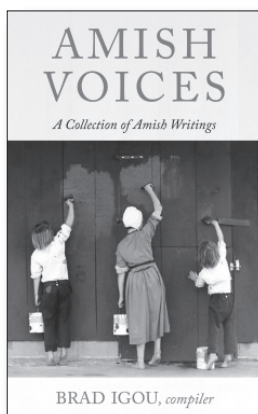
To read more of this, and other stories from *Thirteen Branches*, contact the Brubacher House at [bhouse@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:bhouse@uwaterloo.ca) to receive a free digital version of the book.



Apple illustration by Ariana Neceski.



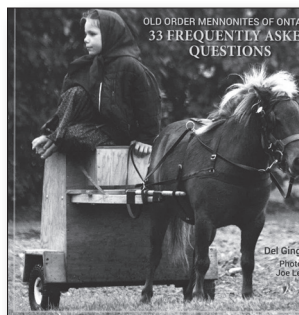
# NEW BOOKS



***Amish Voices: A Collection of Amish Writings.***

Brad Igou, ed. Herald Press, 2019, 239 pages.

Using 25 years of *Family Life*, an Amish periodical published each month in Aylmer, Ont., the compiler has put together a wide variety of comments by Amish writers reflecting on their way of life. Among the topics are marriage and family, youth, aging, discipline, clothing and “the world.”

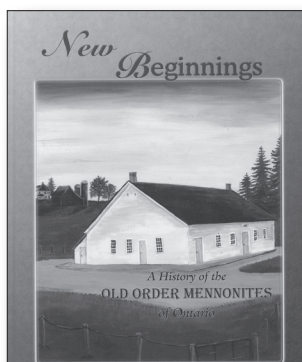


***Old Order Mennonites of Ontario: 33 Frequently Asked Questions.***

Del Gingrich. Privately published, 2018, 90 pages.

Del Gingrich, the long-time manager of The Mennonite Story in St. Jacobs has lots of experience in answering questions about

the Old Order Mennonites of Ontario. He and photographer Joe Lepold are both retired principals from schools that had many Old Order children. It is available at [mennonitestory@stjacobs.com](mailto:mennonitestory@stjacobs.com).



***New Beginnings: A History of the Old Order Mennonites of Ontario.***

Urias Weber. Vineyard Publications, 2018, 238 pages.

This hardcover book reviews the history of Old Order Mennonites with up-to-date descriptions of meetinghouses and new

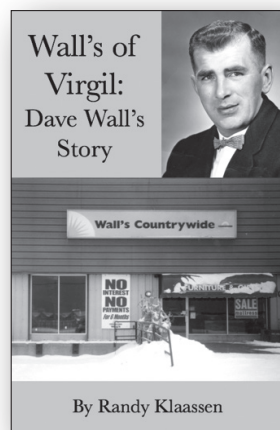
communities. Weber, who lives in the Massey area, has a writing style similar to Isaac Horst. Contact the Living Waters bookstore in Elmira ([www.lwcb.shop](http://www.lwcb.shop)).



***Partners: Pastures, Pastoring, Pastimes.***

Glenn and Mary Ellen Zehr. Privately published, 2019, 167 pages.

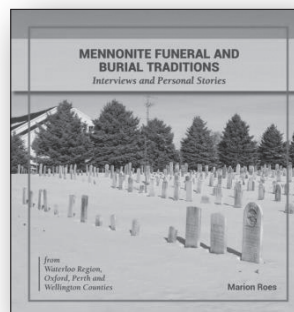
Glenn and Mary Ellen's memoir includes their childhoods, their years on the farm, how accepting the call to pastoral ministry changed their lives, and their retirement. They write with insight and humour.



***Walls of Virgil: Dave Wall's Story.***

Randy Klaassen. Published by the People's History Project, 2018, 142 pages.

For 60 years, Wall's Furniture Store was a fixture in Virgil, Ont. This is the story of Dave Wall who was not only a salesman, but also dedicated to his family and passionate about community. Call 905-468-5277 or email: [php.notl@gmail.com](mailto:php.notl@gmail.com)



***Mennonite Funeral and Burial Traditions: Interviews and Stories from Waterloo Region, Oxford, Perth and Wellington Counties***

Marion Roes. Privately published, 2019, 108 pages.

Using personal stories gathered through interviews and other research, Marion Roes describes funeral and burial practices of various Mennonites and Amish groups found in Waterloo Region and neighbouring counties.



## Vernon Brubacher (1928 – 2019)

Vernon Snyder Brubacher passed away at Innisfree House in Kitchener on Jan. 23, 2019 at the age of 90 years. He was born in Wilmot Township on Jan. 27, 1928, the son of Abner and Arminta (Snyder) Brubacher.

He is survived by his wife Eva, whom he married on Aug. 2, 1956, their three children, Jeff, Doug and Jan and six grandchildren.

After grade eight, Vernon worked at home on the farm where he was born. In 1945, two years after his father's death, the family moved to Vineland Station where, for five years, Vernon worked in a greenhouse operation to provide income and housing for the family.

In 1952, after his mother married Ralph Honsberger, Vernon went back to school, graduating from Rockway Mennonite Collegiate in 1953 and from Waterloo College (now Wilfrid Laurier

University) in 1957. Vernon taught at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate for five years, then studied at Goshen Biblical Seminary, Indiana, graduating in 1965. After returning to Ontario Vernon taught at Waterloo-Oxford District Secondary School until his retirement in 1987.

He was actively involved in church and community, serving on various boards and committees. He served on the board of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario for 19 years from 1993 to 2012 and as treasurer of MHSO from 1998 to 2009. He served on the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada board from 1986 to 2000, acting as the representative from Mennonite Central Committee Canada for most of those years.

Vernon was a member of Hillcrest Mennonite church in New Hamburg, where he served as assistant pastor (1965-1968). He also served as interim pastor at Hunta (Ont.) Mennonite Church, for two years (1990-1992).



### BOOK REVIEW

### Book explores range of Mennonite traditions

***Mennonite Funerals and Burial Traditions: Interviews and Personal Stories from Waterloo Region, Oxford, Perth and Wellington Counties.*** Marion Roes. Privately published, 2019, 108 pages. Reviewed by J. Laurence Martin

In the book *Mennonite Funeral and Burial Traditions*, the author, Marion Roes, describes the funeral traditions and practices of seven Mennonite groups in Ontario based on interviews, personal stories and quotes from several writers. Colourful pictures are strategically placed to illustrate the stories and help to create an attractive book.

The stories reflect the traditions of the following groups: Old Order; David Martin/Independent Old Order; Markham-Waterloo Mennonites; Amish Mennonites; Old Order Amish; Russian Mennonites; and Old Colony Mennonites.

For groups who are part of the Anabaptist tradition, being a caring community is an essential experience to be cherished. This book describes how these various communities express their care for members in both profound and practical ways as they experience the death of loved ones. For some groups there is visitation or viewing of the departed by friends and family in the former home of the deceased; and then on the day of the burial, close friends and family meet for an intimate worship service in the home before assembling with the larger gathering of the community in the cemetery and meetinghouse for the burial and a lengthy worship service.

In some groups, men of the community make the coffins and some make the white grave markers from a cement formula assuring uniformity of colour and size. Skilled women in several of the groups sew white shrouds to clothe the ones being buried.

In all groups mentioned, digging the grave with shovels by members of the community is an expression of care. The book describes these and other traditions in more detail.

Enjoying a fellowship meal following the funeral service is an occasion to provide support in a difficult time for all the groups mentioned. Some have the meal in the home and others in the church fellowship hall but for all the fellowship meal is important. There is a brief chapter describing these meals including some of the historic recipes.

The book describes the traditions of Old Colony congregations, who are a more recent group migrating to the area. This is a welcome inclusion to the Mennonite story of funeral traditions.

Another interesting aspect of the narrative is the inclusion of some of the ways that local undertakers respect the unique traditions of each group as they provide the required services. This should be no surprise as Marion Roes comes from a family long associated with the undertaking business. Her great-grandfather established Dreisinger Furniture and Undertaking in Elmira in 1904.

I would be remiss in not mentioning the significance of the bibliography for readers to explore further details, and the helpful index to assist readers to explore further. In keeping with the Mennonite sense of community, the author graciously gives credit and thanks to the many people she interviewed or who contributed in some way to the contents of the book. As you read this book you sense you are participating in a conversation with many people as they share their important stories.

