

Global Mennonite Brethren History Project
U.S. Conference Section
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Beginnings

Mennonite Brethren men, women and children left Russia and came to the United States like so many other immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, poor but hopeful that in a new country they would find freedom and prosperity. For Mennonite Brethren, freedom and prosperity meant the opportunity to own land, develop their own communities, build churches and worship freely with like-minded Christians, escape the threat of mandatory military service, and raise and educate their children as they saw fit. They brought with them a loyalty to the German language, a supply of Turkey Red wheat, and a lively experientially-based faith shaped by renewal experiences in Russia and contact with pietists from the European continent. It was a faith strongly focused on the necessity of rebirth and committed to evangelism yet still anchored in the rich theological heritage of the sixteenth century Anabaptist movement and the writings of Menno Simons.¹

These early M.B.s hoped to live undisturbed in the vast regions of the American West that had been opened to homesteading with the laying of the railroad and the forced resettlement of native American peoples onto reservation lands. They planned to recreate the best features of the community life they had experienced in the close-knit Mennonite villages they left behind in the Ukraine. Though their families had lived in Russia for nearly a century, they did not think of

¹Historian Cornelius Krahn characterized the early M.B. movement as desiring to be neither “Pietistic, nor Baptist, but rather Mennonite. They wanted to be and remain historical consistent Mennonitism, a pure Mennonitism that was based not on birth but upon rebirth.” Quoted in J. A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers. Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, 1975, p. 36.

themselves as Russian and continued to use the German language to help form a natural barrier against assimilation into the surrounding culture.² They planned to do the same in their new American home but, like so many other immigrants who came to America in record numbers, including many other Mennonites,³ they found it nearly impossible. From the time of their arrival in 1874, up until the present, the story of Mennonite Brethren in the U.S. is one of ongoing struggle to maintain the uniqueness of their theological identity in the face of increasing cultural and religious assimilation. That struggle has been especially difficult because M.B.s have a strong desire to be faithful to Christ's great commission to go into the world and preach the gospel. Successful evangelism and church planting, however, has challenged the ability of American M.B.s to relate to and incorporate new church members from other ethnic and religious backgrounds while still maintaining the strong sense of community and theological identity that has characterized Mennonite Brethren congregations.

The realities of life in a new country called for immediate adjustment. It soon became apparent that the village system they were used to could not be effectively replicated on the American frontier. The land was divided differently in the U.S. and most settlers found themselves living on their farmsteads rather than in villages or towns. Where they could cluster geographically they established churches and soon Mennonite Brethren congregations were

²Though they used the German language, this was primarily an accident of history. The Mennonites who came to Russia at the invitation of Catharine the Great in 1788 were an ethnically mixed group who shared the common experience of life along the Vistula River in Prussia. The earliest Mennonites in that region were Dutch but were later joined by Mennonites from other parts of Europe. Over time, they adopted the German language as their own.

³Approximately 40 million people came into the United States between 1800 and 1920. Mennonite Brethren in America were part of a larger Mennonite migration as well. From 1874-1880 an estimated 10,000 Mennonites came to the United States. M.B.s represented a small fraction of that number.

gathering for worship in Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Minnesota. The distance between these communities varied greatly. Some were less than 30 miles apart, but others were many hundreds of miles apart. The availability of land, the lure of prosperity in the western regions and the absence of restrictions on resettlement meant that some Mennonite Brethren were exceedingly mobile, finding it difficult to establish permanent homes. This impacted the formation of local congregations which would begin, flourish for a time, and then close as people came and went. In only a few decades several thousand M.B.s were scattered from Minnesota to Texas and as far west as Oregon and California.

As a way of nurturing fellowship, joining in shared mission work, and guarding Mennonite Brethren identity, the people formed a conference of churches in 1879 which included the small number of M.B. congregations which had been established in Canada. This organization served as the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches in North America for more than a century. As a body of believers the conference supported both domestic and foreign mission fields, established a program of itinerant ministries to the various M.B. outposts, adopted a confession of faith, and later supported Tabor College to prepare workers for the church. Through the work of the General Conference Board of Missions, which would eventually give rise to Mennonite Brethren Missions and Services, now MBMS International, M.B.s in the United States and Canada helped spread the gospel around the world, establishing Mennonite Brethren churches in India, Africa, Asia, South America and Europe.⁴ In the United States they established mission work among native Americans as well as among Spanish-speaking people in south Texas.

⁴The story of the General Conference and the beginnings of Mennonite Brethren mission work have been told elsewhere. This chapter will focus on the more recent history of M.B.s in the United States.

The North American Conference membership was small and the geographical distribution of churches was vast. The young Conference quickly put together a plan which established an itinerant ministry among the various M.B. settlements. The itinerant ministers would conduct evangelistic services, consult on church matters and generally seek to encourage M.B.s in their faithfulness to God. This ministry helped nurture the establishment and well-being of congregations. It also helped guard M.B. theological identity as these early itinerant ministers were drawn from the lists of trusted church and conference leaders.

Still, M.B.s, who had expected to establish relatively self-contained Mennonite communities, quickly found themselves rubbing shoulders with people from other ethnic backgrounds and faith traditions. Where they could, M.B.s sought to evangelize, especially among other German-speaking immigrants. But other groups, especially the Seventh Day Adventists, viewed the M.B.s as a mission field and recruited them for their own churches. In some instances church conflicts over discipline or theology provided a reason for people to leave the M.B.s and join other groups, especially the Baptists whose strong biblicism resonated well with M.B.s. During the early twentieth century the American fundamentalist movement grew increasingly influential and many M.B.s found themselves drawn to its conservative cultural and theological views. Some M.B.s began looking to that movement for direction on how to read the Bible. Many were also influenced by the rapid spread of dispensational theology and the popularity of C. I. Scofield's reference Bible. These influences took root in many M.B. churches and subtly encouraged adaptation to popular American evangelical trends in theology and practice.

For many years the ongoing use of German as the primary language for worship and conference business provided some guard against the world around them but as children began to

be educated in American public schools and business needed to be conducted in English this boundary line began to weaken. The advent of World War I with its anti-German sentiment hastened the process, and though the German language continued to be used until World War II, there was growing comfort in the use of English at home and in the church, especially by young people. Parents and church elders were often concerned about the loss of the German language and so German schools were established to teach young people how to read and understand high German.

World War I raised a greater challenge than that of language. American involvement in this great conflict tested both M.B. commitment to nonresistance as well as the assumption that M.B.s would be able to escape mandatory military service in the United States. When the U.S. began conscripting civilians for military service they allowed conscientious objectors to serve in noncombatant positions but they did not allow them to abstain from military service altogether. Some church members found it possible to serve under these conditions but those who did not often suffered persecution. As a result of this experience Mennonite Brethren, who had taken their theology of nonresistance somewhat for granted in the early years of the General Conference, began to place more emphasis on this Anabaptist distinctive, even strengthening their formal confession of faith to more clearly state an M.B. commitment to nonresistance in times of war. Over the next several decades committees were put in place to promote Jesus' teaching of love and nonresistance within the wider fellowship of churches. When World War II broke out Mennonite Brethren were somewhat better prepared. While some church members chose to join the military either as noncombatants or even regular soldiers, many M.B.s participated in the Civilian Public Service program which had been established as an alternative

to military service.⁵

Any lingering attachment to the German language was set aside during the war years. Most M.B.s were eager to show their loyalty to the nation that had welcomed them. By the 1940s many M.B.s were among the second generation of those who had originally migrated to America and they were increasingly at home in the U.S. They attended public schools, spoke English, dressed in American styles of clothing, sang American gospel songs and listened to American radio programs. Increasingly, the annual evangelistic services that were so much a part of M.B. tradition were conducted by preachers who were not M.B. but who were a part of the American evangelical tradition. When choosing to pursue higher education, many students and their parents seemed to prefer the nondenominational Bible schools over the conference's own schools. The influence of American evangelicalism, which tended to be highly patriotic, and the advocacy of pacifism by some more liberal church groups, meant that some M.B.s began to consider nonresistance unnecessary or even evidence of a weakening Biblical faith instead of essential to Christian discipleship. M.B.s also found it easier and easier to move to towns and cities where there were no M.B. churches. For some, this provided an opportunity to start new congregations and the Conference expanded through this kind of church growth, but others found it much easier or more desirable to join churches from other denominations and so the overall growth of the denomination was relatively small.

There was, however, much to be thankful for. Mennonite Brethren families had established themselves in this new country by building homes, farms and businesses. They had

⁵Civilian Public Service (CPS) was a program approved by the U.S. government but funded by the various historic peace churches. Participants worked in mental hospitals, various agricultural settings as well as in forestry projects. The work in mental hospitals proved especially important and a number of mental health ministries were begun by Mennonites after the war.

organized churches which were served by lay ministers and started local Bible schools and a college for their young people. Outreach ministries had begun, especially among the poor and with other ethnic groups, and though some of the smaller churches had closed many others had grown to be sizeable congregations with active church programs. Singing and harvest festivals were held, women's missionary societies were formed and young people organized Christian Endeavor societies.⁶ Many congregations held annual mission sales in order to raise funds for the support of foreign missions. Annual evangelistic meetings were held to help prompt salvation experiences among young people. Baptismal services and the practice of foot-washing reminded members of their commitment to Christ and to each other.

During this period the General Conference was the primary agency through which mission and relief work was conducted. It was also the organization which supported the publication of denominational newspapers such as the *Zionsbote*, a German-language paper, and later the English magazine, *The Christian Leader*, which was begun in 1937 as a youth-oriented periodical. These magazines helped keep M.B.s in touch with what other congregations were doing and provided a way for Conference leaders to teach and exhort the membership. Sunday School curriculum was published and conference leaders encouraged churches to use these materials as a way of teaching and preserving M.B. perspectives on Christian faith and life, though many congregations seemed to prefer using nondenominational material such as that provided through Scripture Press.

⁶“Christian Endeavor” has been the common English translation of the German word *Jungenverein* used to describe M.B. young people's societies. A more literal translation would be youth association. Christian Endeavor was actually a nationally known organization that had been founded in the late nineteenth century to nurture Christian faith and promote church attendance among young people. The use of the term Christian Endeavor for M.B. societies suggests that M.B.s modeled their young people's groups on this nondenominational organization.

In 1909 the General Conference had been organized into regional districts. Given the great distances over which M.B. churches were spread it seemed advantageous to foster closer ties and joint work on a more local level. Eventually four districts were established; a Northern District encompassed the churches in Canada, while churches in the U.S. were divided among the Central, Southern and Pacific Districts.⁷ The local districts promoted home mission efforts such as city missions and Sunday schools, and gave regional oversight to the churches. Unfortunately, representation on various General Conference boards and committees did not always adequately reflect the membership within a particular district. By the late 1940s Canadian M.B.s were becoming concerned about what they perceived to be a lack of representation and attention to their needs, especially since a second wave of immigration during the 1920s had significantly enlarged M.B. presence in that country. Canadian leaders began to promote the formation of national conferences to work underneath the General Conference. Following the General Conference convention in 1954 two national conferences were formed and subsequently took on a variety of ministries which had previously been managed by the General Conference. These included Christian education, home mission work, youth work, and higher education. The General Conference continued to provide theological oversight through the work of the Board of Reference and Counsel, as well direction for foreign mission work through the Board of Missions. They also..... VAL

⁷The exact configuration of these districts took some time to establish but eventually the Northern District was made up of the Canadian churches; the Central District included the churches in Montana, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Minnesota; the Southern District included Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas and Colorado; and the Pacific District was made up of churches in California, Oregon and Washington. M.B.s no longer have churches in Arkansas, and the Texas churches are now a part of the Latin American Mennonite Brethren Conference (LAMB). Arizona and Utah have since been added to the Pacific District. For a brief time there were congregations in Idaho and Michigan but these were short lived.

A New Era

At a specially convened meeting in 1957 of what would soon become the U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, delegates faced a considerable challenge. The U.S. churches now had sole responsibility for a variety of ministries that were located in the United States but which had previously been supported by both American and Canadian M.B.s. The U.S. districts were used to relating directly to the General Conference and delegates were uncertain about adding a layer of conference organization that was sure to have an economic impact on the churches. At their meeting they voiced a concern that they not become “over-organized,” but only a year later U.S. M.B.s had fashioned a conference structure that followed the longstanding model of the General Conference. It made provision for conference officers, six standing boards and three committees.⁸ A conference evangelist, Waldo Wiebe, had also been appointed.⁹ The challenge of organization, especially what has often been perceived as “over-organization,” has plagued the U.S. Conference since that time.

The new national conference also inherited existing tensions between the American districts. Increasing cultural and theological differences had begun to characterize the various districts. Many M.B.s had moved further west, especially during the economic depression of the 1930s, and where once the Southern District was the most populous, now the Pacific District was the most heavily settled. The Pacific District was growing more urban and thus subject to increasingly pluralistic forces. Like M.B.s in Canada, church members in California, the most heavily populated region of the Pacific District, had often felt isolated and under-represented on

⁸Identify?

⁹This is basically a continuation of the itinerant ministry and is directed primarily at renewal in the local church.

ORAL

General Conference boards and committees.

- tied to specific contexts

- personal

various interests of the districts while working together on

- immediate

LITERATE

The new structure needed to balance the

- detached from contexts

impersonal issues of common concern without

- delayed

“infringing” on the rights of the respective districts.

At first, much of the U.S. Conference energy went toward the management of its schools under a unified Board of Education. Tabor College, founded in 1908, was the oldest of the M.B. colleges in North America and had long enjoyed General Conference support. Now, under U.S. Conference oversight, it was given permission to seek accreditation as a four-year liberal arts college. Pacific Bible Institute (PBI) had been founded in 1944 by California M.B.s who had wanted to offer an M.B. education closer to home and who were concerned about what some perceived to be a trend toward liberalism at the College. It had acquired General Conference support but under the new national conference structure its future seemed uncertain. Given the anxiety about whether the young U.S. Conference could support two colleges, delegates reduced the PBI program to the level of a two-year junior college.

The colleges were not the only concern of the new Board of Education. There had been growing uneasiness about the theological diversity that was present throughout the U.S. As M.B.s moved towards a professional pastorate and away from the older model of shared leadership by elders and lay ministers, many churches began hiring pastors who had studied at other denominational seminaries. U.S. M.B.s, worried about what was being preached in their pulpits and concerned about maintaining a distinctive Mennonite Brethren identity in the face of increasing theological diversity, had begun to develop a graduate-level theological program. They had hoped it would be adopted and supported by the General Conference but under the new national conference structures this program was left to the Americans. Believing it to be vital to the health and future of M.B. churches, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS) was

established in Fresno, California in VAL DATE
DME 9## TRANSFORMING WORLDVIEWS

Monday: October 16

From the beginning, maintaining three educational institutions stretched the resources of
- Missional theology
American M.B.s. = case study
- Missiology as a discipline
- Chapter 1
spiritual vitality of the denomination and especially to the preparation of future church leaders, it

Tuesday: October 17

was also evident that many young people were choosing other schools. Congregations were
- reading reports
- Chapters 2, 3
regularly encouraged to support the schools through monetary gifts and especially by sending
- discussion groups: suggested revisions, implications for missions, implications for
students. Donated labor often helped develop the various campuses and their facilities. Women's
- recommendations

groups helped raise funds to furnish buildings and otherwise support the schools and their

Wednesday: October 18

students. Eventually Labor College achieved its accreditation and later Pacific Bible Institute
- reading reports
- Chapters 4: methods
was expanded to become an accredited four-year college as well, operating for many years as
- discussion groups
- recommendations

Fresno Pacific College before reorganizing as Fresno Pacific University in DATE. At mid-

Thursday: October 19

century, however, there was cause for concern as the U.S. churches struggled to manage and fund
- reading reports
- Chapter 5, 6 tribal and peasant worldviews
all three programs.
- discussion groups
- recommendations

There were other issues of common concern at the middle of the twentieth century. The
Friday: October 20

post-war years had been a time of prosperity for many Americans. Returning servicemen and
- reading reports
- Chapter 7: Modernity
women enrolled in colleges in record numbers, they married and had children, helping to create
- discussion groups
- recommendations

what became known as the baby boom.¹¹ Church attendance grew rapidly throughout the nation.

Monday: October 23

But there were also unsettling currents beneath the surface stability. The great American civil
- reading reports
- Chapter 8: post-modernity
- discussion groups
- recommendations

churches were still using the older model of lay ministers and elders and did
not feel the need for a seminary at that time. Two decades later they, too, had moved towards a

Tuesday: October 24

professional pastorate. In 1975 Canada became an official partner in the support of M.B.B.S. and
oversight of the school was moved to the General Conference level. The two national
- reading reports
- Chapter 9: glorified together
conferences have glorified together to support seminary-level theological education since that
time.
- discussion groups
- recommendations

¹¹The American baby boom VAL years, numbers

Wednesday October 25 Beginning as men and women of African descent sought equal opportunity
- reading reports

and treatment. Chapter 10: The Bible as a condition. Rock and roll music could be heard. By the 1960s
- discussion groups

there were even commercials about “liberation” and advocating for equal pay and opportunities.
- class reports

Television sets began to be common in the homes of many Americans. Some young people were

Thursday October 26 Drugs and more permissive moral standards. Divorce seemed to be on the
- reading reports

rise, even among Christians. Chapter 11: Transforming political life the United States was becoming further
- discussion groups

involved in the war in Viet Nam even as it continued to participate in a cold war with what was
- class reports

then the Soviet Union. Violence erupted as some people opposed the civil rights movement,

Friday October 27 Many opposed American military action in Viet Nam. In the West, a farm workers
- class reports

movement began to challenge established relationships between farm owners and laborers.

Many Americans, indeed many Christians found these events to be very unsettling.

M.B.s were not unaware of the challenges being faced but they were often unsure about how to respond. It was easy to reject the growing drug culture and moral permissiveness, less easy to guard against the pervasive influences of television and popular music, especially among M.B. youth. For much of their history M.B.s had tried to maintain the boundaries of their faith and their churches by staying somewhat apart from the society around them but it was becoming increasingly difficult, and for many, undesirable. They were happy to participate in the larger society and especially willing to be a part of the evangelical subculture which exists in the U.S. By now, the U.S. M.B. conference was a member of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and the National Sunday School Association (NSSA), and many pastors and congregations participated in local ministerial associations and evangelistic crusades. American evangelicals were finding new confidence in the public arena and many U.S. M.B.s wanted to be a part of this larger movement.

Still, the names on the church rosters continued to primarily reflect the surnames of the early M.B. immigrants to the U.S. Furthermore, while they had been generous with money and personnel for mission work overseas, American M.B.s were less certain about how to relate to people of different cultures in their own country. Outreach ministries among other people groups such as Hispanics, Native Americans, Japanese and even Jews had seldom resulted in self-supporting congregations with full membership in the Conference, nor were many individuals from outside the M.B. tradition fully incorporated into local M.B. churches. Many M.B.s were uncertain about how to respond to the civil rights movement, and since many church members continued to be involved in agriculture, the farm workers movement of the 1960s, which had its base in central California, presented a direct challenge as farm owners and laborers battled over wages and working conditions. M.B.s struggled to know what the “proper expression of social concern” might be and looked to Conference leadership for guidance.

Some church and conference leaders saw this as a time of great opportunity. There was an energetic group of leaders throughout the conference and in the local congregations, many of them with experience in the Civilian Public Service program which had nurtured leadership skills and exposed them to new ideas and diverse people. A U.S. Board of Reference and Counsel went to work to give theological direction to the churches, but it focused its work primarily around matters of polity and practice. The Board produced material for baptism classes, established ordination procedures and guidelines for conducting weddings, put out a statement regarding ministerial ethics when making pastoral changes, began formulating a position on divorce and remarriage, and together with the General Conference, led the U.S. conference in broadening its understanding of baptism and church membership to welcome those who had received believer’s baptism even if they had not been immersed. This later decision was

especially important as it represented some softening of attitude towards fellow Mennonite groups which practiced sprinkling or pouring as well as making it easier for people from other evangelical backgrounds to join Mennonite Brethren churches. Longstanding conversations with another group of Mennonite churches, the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (KMB), finally resulted in a merger between the two groups and brought new churches and new ministries into the Mennonite Brethren fold.¹² Given these changes and the growing sense of confidence in the U.S. Conference, the time seemed ripe for the young conference to become more aggressive in evangelism and church growth and to become more involved in addressing social concerns within the U.S.

The minutes of the U.S. Conference meetings during the 1960s reflect the mood. Noting that M.B.s had often sent missionaries to countries where there was not an existing group of M.B.s, the Board of Evangelism suggested that in the U.S., M.B.s had not “been practical or faithful enough to proceed on the assumption that the ‘Gospel is the power of God unto salvation’ for all men.” Through their membership in organizations such as NAE, M.B. leaders had contact with other denominations with strong ethnic roots. Many of these were finding ways of reaching beyond their cultural boundaries and were experiencing significant growth. Why shouldn’t the M.B.s? From the Board’s perspective, it was time to begin planting churches at home. There was much discussion and thought about how to proceed. Some suggested that changing the denominational name might aid in planting churches, especially in places where existing perceptions of conservative Mennonite groups were already present. There was discussion about adopting a common logo for use on church road signs and a design was created,

¹²VAL do dates and a bit of background here.

though never adopted, featuring the name, Mennonite Brethren Church, above an open Bible.¹³

The program that most captured attention, however, was a venture called the Decade of Enlargement, a program that grew out of a national evangelism campaign by the National Sunday School Association.

The Decade of Enlargement (1965-75) was adopted by the Coordinating Board of the U.S. Conference and given much initial energy by Elmo H. Warkentin, Executive Secretary for the Board of Evangelism and Christian Education. It was an ambitious program aimed at helping local congregations capture a vision and develop skills for evangelism. Its goal was for every M.B. Sunday School program to “double in a decade.” The program was especially aimed at developing local church leadership. Lay training for evangelism was put in place, training sessions were held for Sunday School teachers, and young people were encouraged to participate in national organizations such as Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ. Local congregations began men’s fellowship and outreach breakfasts which functioned as a sort of counterpart to the fellowship and mission orientation of the Women’s Missionary Societies. Congregations experimented with national evangelical programs such as Friendship Evangelism and Fellowship Evangelism. They began visitation ministries. Bible club programs were established for young people and Vacation Bible School programs were conducted during the summer school recess in order to nurture M.B. children and reach out into the communities around the church. Extensive surveys were conducted with local congregations to evaluate

¹³After extensive survey the matter of a denominational name change was dropped but congregations were encouraged to present themselves in as positive a way as possible in any advertising they might do and it was agreed that churches were free choose any name they wished as long as they made it clear that they were a part of the Mennonite Brethren churches. Over the next several decades both new church starts and existing congregations have often chosen names that were less obviously “Mennonite.” Congregations have frequently chosen to call themselves a “Bible Church.”

resources and programs. At a national level, *Words of the Gospel*, a radio program produced in central California, became the centerpiece of a media campaign of evangelism which eventually grew to include television programming and other media formats.

Though there was a strong initial commitment to the Decade of Enlargement program it did not result in the anticipated growth and the language of “double in a decade” soon faded away. Between 1963 and 1973 the overall membership increase was between one and two percent. Conference leaders cited “insufficient organization” and a “lack of commitment at the grass roots level” as reasons for the lack of significant growth, and began to search for other methods of outreach and church growth.

The program had not, however, been without effect. Many congregations had participated in the church evaluations and other programs encouraged by conference leadership, many of them sponsored by nondenominational organizations. In terms of their local programs and emphases, many U.S. M.B. churches were looking more and more like their evangelical counterparts. One notable area of difference continued to exist as conference leaders worked to provide resources for educating church members about peacemaking and to provide counseling for selective service registration. Together with the strong kinship ties that continued to characterize M.B. churches, as well as the formal alliances with inter-Mennonite agencies, these differences were enough to set M.B. churches slightly apart from other evangelical churches.

One other area of concern for national Conference leaders was the conference structure itself. Reorganization at the General Conference level had resulted in all country-specific ministries being handed down to the national conferences. In addition to mission work in North Carolina and south Texas, formal relationships with inter-Mennonite organizations such as Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), Mennonite Mutual Aid (MMA), Mennonite Health Services

(MHS), and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), were now the responsibility of the U.S. Conference.¹⁴ U.S. M.B.s had responded by forming the Latin American Mennonite Brethren (LAMB) District among the churches in south Texas and creating the North Carolina District to serve the congregations that had been part of an earlier KMB work. The creation of these two district conferences in 1968 was an important symbol of the national conference's desire to work more equitably with congregations that had previously had "mission" status. They also presented new challenges. M.B. congregations were now spread across the country and represented three distinct cultural groups,¹⁵ a reality that challenged representation on Conference boards and further stretched financial resources as the total number of church members remained relatively small. VAL #

It was with some sense of relief that negotiations with the Canadian Conference resulted in a shift of the Seminary program to General Conference ownership and management in 1975.¹⁶ This did not, however, alleviate a growing financial crisis. For American M.B.s there was increasing recognition that education, evangelism, publications and youth work—all being done on a national scale—were spreading Conference resources thin, both in terms of personnel and finances. This became even more evident when the General Conference Board of Missions and

¹⁴The U.S. Conference continues to appoint representatives to the boards of these inter-Mennonite agencies.

¹⁵The work in south Texas was primarily among Hispanic people. It was initiated in 1936 by M.B.s in the Southern District and given early leadership by Harry and Sarah Neufeld. The congregations in North Carolina were an outgrowth of work begun in 1899 by KMB missionaries among African-Americans.

¹⁶The U.S. Conference had long hoped that a joint program could be established, and, from the beginning, Canadian students had been a regular part of the student body. Financially, the seminary had taken a disproportionate amount of the U.S. education budget and the colleges, in particular, felt the discrepancy.

Services decided to phase out the domestic Voluntary Christian Service Program, leaving it to the national conferences to continue the program if they so desired.¹⁷ NO special concern was the state of higher education in the U.S. For many years the Seminary had received the bulk of the education funds. During that time, enterprising supporters of the colleges had tried a variety of ways to raise funds. Numerous real estate development deals were put in place as a way to provide income for both the schools and for investors. When some of these land deals failed, relationships became strained and the colleges ended up in further financial difficulties. Delegates to a special convention held in 1979 decided it was time to make the colleges regional schools. In much the same way that the General Conference had been unloading various ministries to the U.S. and Canadian national conferences, the U.S. Conference moved oversight of the colleges down to the district level.¹⁸

Once again the U.S. Conference was at a crossroads. Having transferred responsibility for the schools to either the General Conference or the District Conferences, leaders searched for a way to unite local congregations around a shared national vision for ministry. In many ways U.S. Conference leaders were caught in the middle. They had long advocated for the priority of the local church, viewing their mandate as the coordination of programs such as higher education, peace education, youth services, publications and an increasingly ambitious media outreach. While congregations made use of these programs, their financial loyalty was first to

¹⁷Volunteers generally worked for two-year terms in a variety of ministry-related positions. Their expenses and a small stipend were paid by the program. The program helped nurture young people in ministry and leadership skills. The U.S. chose to adopt the program with Elmo H. Warkentin serving as an interim director until Bob and Wanda Kroeker, former missionaries to VAL were hired as directors of the program in DATE.

¹⁸Tabor College went to the Central, Southern, South Carolina and LAMB districts; Fresno Pacific College to the Pacific District.

their own local ministries. Pastor's salaries, housing, church buildings and maintenance all took substantial funds in addition to monies set aside for Sunday School materials, church libraries, local outreach programs. They eagerly supported youth ministries—from private Christian high schools to an active camping program. Beyond the local church, congregations were most connected to the work they shared within the local districts such as the planting of new churches, or to the programs of the General Conference where foreign missions was lodged. This all had financial implications for U.S. Conference ministries as dollars tended to stay either at home in local congregational or district programs, or go to the General Conference. The problem came to a head in a difficult set of meetings that came to be known as the Deer Creek Massacre.

In March of 1982 the boards of the U.S. Conference met together at Deer Creek Bible Camp located in the Colorado mountains to discuss the state of the U.S. Conference now that the schools were no longer at the center of U.S. Conference ministry. Leaders hoped to once more direct the vision of the conference toward evangelism and church growth. Henry J. Schmidt, chair of the Board of Evangelism, a former conference evangelist and then professor at MBBS, presented a paper about barriers to church growth, and Werner Heidebrecht, a well-known pastor in the PDC, proposed a new strategy of evangelism. What the delegates to this special meeting did not expect was to engage in a massive overhaul of the U.S. Conference structure and ministries. Just two years earlier a restructuring effort had resulted in the formation of a Board of Church Ministries (BCM) to serve as the primary Conference leadership board.¹⁹ In the wake of well over a quarter million dollars of debt, the Board, spurred on by the U.S. Board of Trustees,

¹⁹Restructuring has been an ongoing theme throughout the U.S. Conference history as ministry needs and economic realities have been accommodated. In 1980 the Board of Education was essentially disbanded, though they continued to meet for a time after the schools were moved to district ownership. The Board of Church Ministries also absorbed the work of the former Board of Reference and Counsel. VAL check this, when did BFC quit?

decided to sell property holdings, reduce staff and budgets, and disengage from any commercial activities. Two ministries were especially hard hit. Since 1904 the M.B. Publishing House had produced material and helped fund the ministry of the Board of Publications. Now, it was to be sold. Likewise, the assets connected with the radio program, *Words of the Gospel*, were to be sold. Though the program was airing on forty-six stations, a study commission report suggested that it was primarily a teaching ministry rather than an evangelistic ministry. More significantly, it had incurred significant debt. With reduced staff and budget its future was uncertain.

The changes were difficult to accept and delegates to the next convention engaged in spirited debate about what had occurred, questioning the way in which decisions had been handled. The Board of Church Ministries defended their actions as necessary in order to preserve both *The Christian Leader* and *Words of the Gospel*. Divesting themselves of commercial ventures, they argued, would allow them to refocus energy toward evangelism and church planting. In the end, the delegates endorsed several important recommendations including an agreement that there would be no deficit spending while the Conference worked to retire to the debt and that the *Words of the Gospel* program would be shut down.²⁰ The delegation also gave permission for leaders to explore an ambitious program of ethnic evangelism, discipling, and church planting but instructed leaders to keep the U.S. Conference structure “strong and simple.”

Though the decisions made at Deer Creek and the convention that followed were difficult, they ushered in a new era for American M.B.s. The national conference was to serve as an umbrella organization holding local churches and districts together. At the center of their shared work was an ambitious program of church planting in large American cities and among

²⁰*Words of the Gospel* and its much-loved music ministry finished nineteen years of ministry in 1984.

various minority groups. The emphasis on church growth and evangelism was not unique to M.B.s. Many denominations, both those from the Anabaptists traditions and the larger evangelical tradition, were studying the best ways to establish new churches and win converts to Christ. American churches were changing as pastoral staffs multiplied and specialized. Contemporary music was gaining increasing acceptance and challenging traditional music and worship formats. More and more women were in the workplace and this impacted congregations as well as denominational structures. For M.B.s, there was a gradual movement toward including some women in congregational and denominational offices, though there was disagreement about the appropriateness of such action. Many local congregations found that the traditional women's societies were not attracting younger women. Some established special women's ministries to nurture the spiritual lives of church members. Convention formats changed to emphasize spiritual renewal. Loyal Funk was hired to work with both district and national efforts in the development of ministries among other ethnic groups. MBBS added new training programs for church planters and missionaries.

MUSA - give HJS background as. Henry J. Schmidt had been appointed in 1971 as a Conference Evangelist.

. J.A. Froese quote?

women, the 50s, growing conservatism, organized WMS,

Val - connect theologically w/ fund/modernism when you get to current situation re anabaptism

These two desires have often resulted in conflicting impulses as Anabaptism has sometimes been regarded as a deterrent to evangelism, and evangelism as a threat to Anabaptism.

in the summary - note the youth confs as largest mb gatherings dating back to 1975

In terms of organization - the old pattern of gen conf and districts - US as a middle organ. Had difficulty bringing loyalty and cooperative work, in part - the ongoing emphasis on the local church and the district - it's a sort of competing impulse (Decade of Enlargement goals)