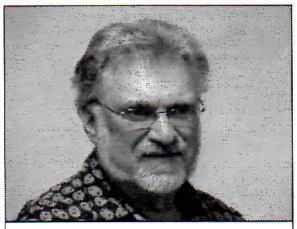
Newsletter

Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

Volume XV Number 3 October 2012



Jim Bowman

Discovering Alberta's Mennonite Pioneer Family

by Jim Bowman

During the summer of 2011, I worked as an archival consultant for the Museum of the Highwood in High River. The Museum's archival collection is rich, documenting a community whose written history dates back to the 1870s and includes colourful tales of First Nations, fur traders, ranchers, farmers, and oil workers.

The collection includes the fonds of the Bricker family, which, as best as I can tell, was Alberta's earliest Mennonite family. It is not a large fonds, only 4 cm in extent, but

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Submissions for the next edition should be sent to Dave Toews at dmtoews@gmail.com by February 1st, 2013

Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church Celebrates 50 Years 1962 – 2012

by Hilda Dueck

Hilda Dueck

After two years of preparations, the long anticipated LMBC 50th Anniversary weekend was finally upon us. In the historic Mennonite tradition of three holy day celebrations, Lendrum Church paused from June 29 to July 1, 2012 to reflect and remember what God has done in and through our fellowship over the past fifty years.

Lendrum's Beginnings

The early 1950s saw the movement of Mennonite Brethren people from the rural communities of LaGlace in the north, to Coaldale in the south, and particularly from nearby Tofield/Lindbrook to work and study in Edmonton. In the summer of 1956 a group began meeting on Sunday afternoons, often at the home of Peter and Anne Bargen, who played a key role in the formation and direction of the fledgling church. When the group contacted the Alberta MB Conference in 1957 for help in formally organiz

(Continued on page 3)

You are invited to attend the MHSA Fall Conference entitled:

The Joys and Challenges of Writing Mennonite History and Biography

This conference will focus on the work of three Mennonite writers who will share their experiences in writing Mennonite history and biography.

Our presenters will be:

Peter Rahn (author of *Among the Ashes: In the Stalinkova Kolkhoz [Kontiniusfeld] 1930-1935*);

Walter Braul (author of the forthcoming *Russian Mennonites, a Broken Path to Civility*); and

Wes Penner (author of *Growing Up, a Report on My Life, Faith and Spirituality*).

The conference will take place at 1 pm on Saturday, October 27 at First Mennonite Church (3650-91 Street) in Edmonton, AB.

10:30 am - Meeting of the MHSA Board; 12 noon - Brief AGM to consider matters resulting from changes to Bylaws; 1:00 pm - Fall Conference; 4:00 pm - Faspa. We look forward to seeing you.

Editorial Reflections:

by Lorne Buhr

Lorne Buhr

One need not look very far to encounter tales and sagas of Mennonites dividing one group from another. The topic comes along in various ways in issues of this newsletter. John B Toews writes about one of the less rancorous tussles in his article "Namaka: a Letter and a Story"

It seems to be the nature of religious belief that variations in theology are hard to accept or even to patch up. Sometimes this has caused hurt and division within congregations, conferences, and even in families. Not all divisions need be nasty. Mennonites have found many ways to work together. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) are two organizations which come to mind when thinking of cooperative collaboration. Both organizations try to help people in need.

At those times when we feel down-hearted about the divisions which have come and gone, or, have come and stayed, we do well to review the words penned by our erstwhile leader, Menno Simons. Menno tells us what the signs of true evangelical faith are.

"True evangelical faith cannot lie sleeping,

It clothes the naked;
It feeds the hungry;
It comforts the sorrowful;
It shelters the destitute;
It serves those that harm it;
It binds up that which is wounded;
It has become all things to all."

In Menno's original list there were seventeen signs of true evangelical faith. The list which is usually quoted now has seven. By doing deeds such as Menno suggests, we are also to be ready to give a reason for the faith which is in us, which comes from God.

Menno Simons

For over eight decades "True evangelical faith" has been practiced by Mennonite Central Committee, first founded to help destitute Mennonites in South Russia. From those beginnings MCC has maintained that need trumps correctness. Mennonites come under a big umbrella where we have learned to help one another and to help others in need by offering a hand up.

In some of our homes we see the words of Menno as a Spruch (Low German for verse on the wall). It is a wonderful reminder. Larry Nickel, Mennonite composer and musician living in British Columbia, has set the words of "True Evangelical Faith" to choral music. It is a very fine rendering which can inspire and guide us. And help us get beyond our differences. ❖

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Chairman's Corner

By Bill Janzen

Bill Janzen

It has been a quiet summer! The abundant rain and the beautiful gardens, parks and fields have enriched our summer activities. Now that the sun rises later and sets earlier, the leaves changing color and the tem-

Publications for Sale:

- Settlers of the East Reserve ($30)
- Einlage collection ($45)
- GRANDMA 6 ($35)
- Nuggets Of Gold ($15)
- Pushing Through Invisible Barriers ($30)

peratures falling lower, our activities return to those we were engaged with before summer arrived. I am looking forward to an active year at the Mennonite Historical Society.

We have a Board work day coming at the end of September, the Fall Conference at the end of October and hopefully a very active time at the Archives and Library. The summer has been fairly slow as usual with the exception of Jim, our archivist, has been very steady at sorting his way through volumes of materials and placing materials in the archives. Visitors have been few but interesting, queries on the Internet have been responded to.

So what lies ahead? The value of the materials stored in the library and archives is great! The donations coming in are also very valuable. The hours involved in preparing documents for the archives and library are many. The volunteer time is minimal. This raises a question that many organizations are facing about volunteers. Our need for a coordinator to prepare work for volunteers is great and no one seems to be anxious for the job so far. I hope that this will all change. I trust the Board will discuss this problem at the end of September and we will possibly talk about it at our Fall Conference in October.

I am pleased that after a year of diligent work, with the guidance of Colin Neufeldt, and Colin's legal work, we have been incorporated as the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta. We will have a brief meeting at our Fall Conference to consider some motions required to move forward as a Society. I hope you will all be there.
Looking for another good year!❖

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ing a church, Rev. Bernard Sawatsky and family were sent to Edmonton to establish The Gospel Light Mission, with its main focus being tract and Bible distribution and witness to the inner city destitute.

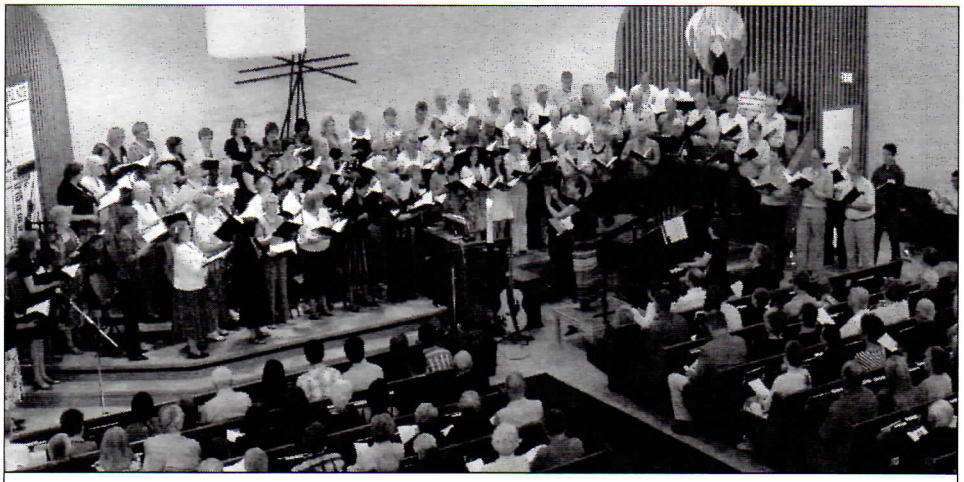
Two years later, on November 29, 1959, the Edmonton Gospel Light Mission Church, with 22 members, was chartered by the Alberta MB Conference. The same day, Rev. Sawatsky resigned due to health reasons. Interim pastor, Henry Thielman, commuted weekly from Calgary to serve the new congregation until August, 1960, when Peter and Mary Rempel were appointed pastor couple by the Conference. Several church leaders shared their misgivings about the viability of the group because of what they considered to be a renegade University element. But the Rempels were ready, and numbers grew. Services moved from Forest Heights Community Hall, where it was often necessary to clean up from its Saturday night uses, before the service could begin, to the more reliable environment of the James Gibbons School Hall.

Gradually, through much dialogue, a new vision was developed that would give Lendrum MB Church the particular mission that has guided it for fifty years. In 1961, four lots were purchased in Lendrum Place. The same year, after lengthy discussions, a motion by a senior member, Rev. Peter Geortz that all worship services would be conducted in English was passed unanimously. On November 4, 1962, the Lendrum MB Church of Edmonton with its 49 members was officially recognized and accepted into the Alberta MB Conference. The church hall was completed in the fall of 1963.

Lendrum's Mission

A Vision Statement, adopted by the congregation on October 3, 1999, expresses Lendrum's values, both past and present. We are a part of the global family of Mennonite Brethren churches. We are united by our historical Anabaptist roots and our common commitment to the MB Confession of Faith. And we affirm this Confession as a summary of our theological center and our core beliefs.

The Vision Statement also defines Lendrum's identity as people who love God, who love each other, and who love the world. Our motto is, "*So that in everything Christ would be made known in us and through us.*"



Lendrum Mennonite Brethern Church 50th Anniversary Celebration

Lendrum Mennonite Brethern Church

Fifty Years as a Church

This is the vision that has both blessed and challenged the church. As Rudy Wiebe writes in the Foreword of Jubilee, our 50th Anniversary book, "This is LMBC's basic understanding of church; a community of believers gathered together in Christ's name, with him in our midst; a contemporary fellowship of diverse individuals trying, as honestly as we can, to faithfully follow Jesus both in his teaching and his practice. This has not, of course, as Jesus implies, saved us from disagreement or conflict, even schism...." On the other hand, Lendrum has helped establish two other Edmonton congregations, and also supported four other churches including the Edmonton Chinese and Vietnamese Mennonite Churches. In Chapter 9 of Jubilee, the 32 page glimpse into "*Lendrum's Witness to the World*" is an indication of this church's heart for mission beyond its own walls. The other 8 chapters reflect Lendrum's mission of building a church family.

Lendrum's Celebration

There was an atmosphere of excitement and joy as hundreds of Lendrum's family members, both past and present greeted each other at the June 29 - July 1st gathering. The church was decorated, and activities for the children had been planned. About 600 photographs were on display in the church foyer and in fellowship hall. A slide presentation had been prepared and a video recording of the Sunday service was in the works. Two works or art were commissioned to mark the occasion: a metal sculpture entitled "*God with Us in Diversity and Unity*" a testament to Lendrum's 50 years, and a banner "*Make a Joyful Noise*", celebrating Lendrum's long and treasured history of music making. A Lendrum cookbook, and the 50th Anniversary book, Jubilee were also commissioned.

Founders who attended anniversary:**Back Row: L-R** George Loewen, Wally Sawatsky, Rudy Kornelsen, Don Neufeld, Henry Goertz, Dave Quapp, Hans Claassen
Front Row: L-R Velma Sawatsky, Heidi Kornelsen, Peter Rempel, Tillie Goertz, Mary Quapp, Frieda Claassen0

If fellowship could be measured in decibels, the enthusiastic conversations in the hallways and around the tables would have registered well outside the normal range. But the fellowship hall became quiet as heartfelt memories were shared during two informal "open mic" sessions. Saturday evening, at the catered banquet in a neighboring church, 280 guests were entertained with music, slides, and stories from several of the refugees that Lendrum has sponsored.

The culmination of the festivities was the Sunday morning

50th Anniversary Service of Celebration, planned by Kae Neufeld, former pastor and present moderator at LMBC. The congregation of some 350 people, an 85 voice choir of past and present singers, along with organ, piano, guitar and brass ensemble, joined to praise God together.

A piano and organ prelude set the tone for the service, ending with "*Great is Thy Faithfulness*". In a call to worship, the choir, piano, and brass ensemble broke out in "*A Jubilant Song*". Then Psalm 145, with it exultant praise of the Lord's goodness was read by Eunice Schmidt. After a warm welcome by interim pastor, Lorraine Dick, it was the congregation's turn to add it's voice to the celebration. And what a voice it was!

The service flowed from the Call to Worship, through a time of Scripture readings offered by former moderators, a prayer of thanksgiving by Lendrum's first pastor, 85 year old Peter Rempel, still an active church member after 52 years. This was followed by a choral prayer, "*Dank Sei Dir Herr*", and a congregational responsive prayer and the song, "*Now Thank We All Our God*".

The sculpture was unveiled, followed by greetings from neighboring churches and the Alberta Conference. A piano and organ duet played "*O God Our Help in Ages Past*" during the offertory.

During the "*Hearing the Word*" segment of the service, three homilies by former pastors Waldo Pauls and David Dyck, and current pastor, Justin Majeau, were interspersed with two songs by the choir and a children's song lead by former pastor Chris Friesen and his wife Louise.

A brief memorial service remembering those of the Lendrum church family who have died was lead by former pastor Michael Pahl. Then the choir sang the choral benediction, "*The Lord Bless You and Keep You*".

Lendrum's Future

LMBC has gone from being a homogeneous group of Mennonite Brethren people with rural roots, to being a richly diverse urban family. As the church looks to the future, we hear the words of the Apostle Peter, "As you come to him, the living Stone... you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 2:4,5 NIV

Footnote:
A more complete account of Lendrum's story, including the personal stories of some members of the Lendrum family, is told in the 254 page book Jubilee: Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church Celebrates 50 Years (1960-2012). It will be available at the end of October can be ordered from the church office. (Telephone: (780)434-4268; e-mail: lmbc@compusmart.ab.ca) ❖

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it includes significant documents of the family: their military service exemption certificates (they were engaged in farming during the World Wars); certificates of land title; income tax returns; Mennonite Aid Union fire insurance policy (1918); school report cards; and Alberta Citizens' Registration Covenant (indicating that they were probably Social Credit supporters in 1936). It documents the activities of Elias Bricker; his sons Edgar and Arch-

Elias and Catharina Bricker installing a clothes line pole behind their home in Calgary, ca. 1918. [Photo courtesy of the Museum of the Highwood, High River]. This is the only picture of them known to be in a public collection. Not that they partially adhered to the "Mennonite dress code".

ibald (who homesteaded at Mere, Alberta, near Alsask, Saskatchewan, 1914-1935), and finally, Edgar's son Reed Bricker, 1923-1991?, a lifelong bachelor who inherited the original Bricker farm, and was an active volunteer with the Museum of the Highwood.

Former Mount View Church now, in 2012, a residence

In 1889 Elias W. Bricker, 1853-1939, was part of a group of Mennonites from Waterloo County, Ontario, who were invited by the CPR to consider settling along the route of its subsidiary, the Calgary & Edmonton Railway. Elias was the only one of the group to file for land along the branch line which was proposed to run from Calgary to Fort Macleod. His choice was either very astute or very lucky.

Elias sold his farm at Elmira, Ontario, and in 1891 settled on NE 7-20-28 W4M, a quarter-section traversed by the nearly-completed C&E Railway, with a corner of the land touching the Highwood River, and just north of the townsite of Aldersyde. (1) The Brickers were industrious and enterprising, and eventually the farm expanded to four quarter-sections strategically located just east of Aldersyde. The village, though never as big as Okotoks or High River, became an important junction point in 1910 for a new railway line that extended to Lethbridge via Vulcan.

Elias was married to the former Catharina Snyder, 1854-1944, and they had nine children, Aaron, John, Edgar, Archie, Harvey, Martha, Clara, Mary Ann, and Esther. (2) They were joined by Elias's brother Menno Bricker and by Catharina's nephews Albert Bricker Snider and Jack Snider. Besides farming, they established a small brickworks, using clay from the banks of the Highwood River. They operated the cream separator patronized by local farmers (a neighbour remembered that it was powered by an old horse hitched to a treadmill, who disliked the job so much he tried to hide whenever he saw neighbours approaching with cans of milk). (3) Albert and Jack Snider operated a successful well-drilling and threshing business in the area. From 1907 to 1914 Elias derived additional income from his function as postmaster of Aldersyde.(4)

The Bricker/Snider extended family were the only Mennonites in the area for ten years. Though isolated, they never wavered from their faith. In February 1901 they were visited by S.F. Coffman, a young minister from Vineland, Ontario. With several more Mennonite families expected to settle in Alberta, he had been sent by the Mennonite Conference of Ontario to organize congregations in the Okotoks/High River area and in the Carstairs/Didsbury area.

Coffman was well-liked for his willingness to offer practical help to the settlers, as well as for his open-minded attitude toward religion. He stayed in the Bricker home for most of the year while conducting services at the local Maple Leaf School. By April, nine men and women met and signed the founding constitution of "the

Mennonite Church near Okotoks, Alberta, N.W.T.", soon to be renamed Mount View Mennonite Church. In September, having been given special authorization to do so, he ordained Norman Stauffer, a young carpenter, as minister of the church. (5)

Construction of the Mount View Church went quickly. In February 1902 church member Silas Good donated an acre of land for a meeting house and cemetery. Though delayed by spring road conditions, a solid church measuring 28 feet by 48 feet with 12-foot-high walls was built by volunteers at a cost of $600 and was opened in July 1902.(6)

About 20 Mennonite families were members of Mount View Church. (7) Most of the families came from Waterloo County and other locations in Ontario, and a few came from the U.S. Most were adherents of the (Old) Mennonite Church, but a few had been members of the Stauffer Mennonite Church, a small, conservative branch. Unlike the Russian Mennonites who largely settled in Canada in large colonies, they were mostly small family groups scattered over a wide district west of Okotoks and High River. It should not be surprising to find that much of the next generation assimilated and intermarried with the surrounding non-Mennonite population.

Elias and Catharina Bricker retired to Calgary in 1918. Elias devoted much of his time to distributing religious tracts, and is said to have attempted to visit each household in the city at least once. (8) Norman Stauffer was appointed Bishop of the Alberta-Saskatchewan Mennonite Conference in 1911, and continued to serve as the minister of Mount View Church until his death in 1927. Ministers who succeeded him were Isaac Miller, Owen Hershberger, and Harold Boettger. Deacons who served the church were Abram Wambold, Menno Gingrich, and Howard Stauffer. (9)

The church apparently was without leadership after 1952. In 1958 it closed and the property was transferred to the Northwest Conference (formerly Alberta-Saskatchewan Conference) of the Mennonite Church. The meeting house was unused for many years but in 1977 it was sold and became a very well-maintained and unique private residence.(10) The conditions of sale required that the owners maintain the adjacent cemetery, which remained property of the Northwest Conference. In recent years, the title to the cemetery was transferred to Trinity Mennonite Church, which intends to operate it as an active cemetery. The cemetery can be visited at 128215 – 434 Avenue East in Foothills Municipal District, about one mile south and four miles east of Aldersyde townsite.

Footnotes

(1)Reed Bricker, "The Bricker Family", *A Century of Memories: Okotoks and District, 1883-1893*. Okotoks: Okotoks and District Historical Society, 1983, pp. 132-133 and endpaper map.

(2)Ted D. Regehr, "Bricker, Elias (1853-1939)", *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online,* www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/B7485.html viewed June 12, 2012; "The Bricker Brothers", *Leaves from the Medicine Tree.* High River: High River Pioneers' and Old Timers' Association, 1960, p. 243.

(3)"From the Memoirs of Ada Rowland", *Leaves from the Medicine Tree,* pp. 349-353.

(4)Library and Archives Canada, "Post Offices and Postmasters", www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/post-offices/001001-100.01e.php viewed September 3, 2012.

(5)T.D. Regehr, *Faith, Life and Witness in the Northwest, 1903-2003: Centennial History of the Northwest Mennonite Conference.* Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2003. Other sources suggest there were eleven signatories to the church's constitution. The first two chapters of Regehr's book are really the definitive history of the Bricker family and Mount View Mennonite Church.

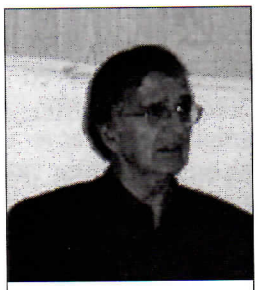
(6)Myrtle Miller, "Mount View Mennonite Church", *Gladys-Dinton through the Years.* Blackie, Alta: Gladys-Dinton History Book Committee, 1964-1991. Pp. 47-48

(7)Miller, op. cit., lists 20 families. The record of burials in Mount View Cemetery lists 72 individuals bearing 22 different surnames. See: Foothills Pioneer Index: *Mount View Mennonite Burying Ground, Established 1902.* Calgary: Traces, 1991. (The compilors are Lucille Dougherty, June Duxbury and Mary Kearns Trace). Local history publications held by the Museum of the Highwood identify the following surnames in association with the church: Bechtel, Beeler, Boettger, Bowman, Bricker, Byers, Cressman, Eby, Garber, Gingrich, Good, Graber, Gremm, Guengrich, Hershberger, Miller, Otterbein, Reist, Shantz, Snider/Snyder, Stauffer, Wambold, Weber, Wenger, Wideman. Family histories have been photocopied from the local histories and will be deposited in the MHSA archives.

(8)Regehr, "Bricker, Elias (1853-1939)"

(9)Miller, op.cit.

(10)"Mount View Mennonite Church", *Sunshine Tales: Over 100 Years of History from the Rural Area Surrounding the Sunshine Trail South and East of High River.* High River: Sunshine Trails Book Committee, 1998. Pp. 94-95.❖



John B. Toews

NAMAKA- A LETTER AND A STORY

by John B.Toews

A Letter

Namaka, Alberta, Box 21
December 14, 1934

To: The Provincial Conference Of The Mennonite Brethren Of Alberta, Canada

Dear Brothers and Sisters (*Geschwister*) in the Lord Peace to you!

Since the founding of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren of Namaka, Alberta, in 1927 we have repeatedly made efforts to more closely associate ourselves with the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren of North America, specifically the Northern District Conference. This with respect to the work of local and foreign missions. Yet significant (principielle) differences did not allow an affiliation of these two bodies. Therefore the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren of Alberta felt compelled to seek a conference affiliation elsewhere. At the last annual gathering of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren of Alberta at Crowfoot, Alberta on November 3 & 4, 1934, it was unanimously agreed to affiliate with Conference of the Defenceless Mennonite Brethren of Christ in North America (the so-called Brudertal Conference). Their Conference meeting at Mountain Lake, Minnesota during June of last year accepted us without reservation, agreeing to the terms we stipulated.

Photo taken 24 August 1958 on the occasion of Aron A. and Agnes Toews Golden Wedding Anniversary. The source of the photo is Herta Loewen,

These terms stipulated that we would still be known as the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church of Alberta and that, as previously, we would continue to regulate our internal affairs. We did not wish to be restricted in any shape or form by external regulations. We will continue to build [our] fellowship on the basis of Holy Scripture and the unity of all children of God.

This [new] conference affiliation shall in no way impact our harmonious brotherly love and unity with the congregations of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of Alberta and North America. Therefore the annual meeting of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church meeting in Crowfoot unanimously decided to continue to associate with the brothers and sisters of the [Mennonite] Brethren Churches and their conferences. We want to continue to work together in love for our Lord and Master and are willing and prepared to work together [on any project].

In brotherly love. Written at the request of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, your humble co-worker.

A.A. Toews

Leader of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Conference of Alberta and Chairperson of the

Missions Committee

And a Story

How could a German renewal movement originating in 1886 and known as the *Blankenburger Konferenz* relate to the concerns of a small group of Russian Mennonite emigrants living in Namaka, Alberta in 1934? Originally this German Conference was energized by the ideals of the so-called Evangelical Alliance, founded in London in the mid-nineteenth century. Though Blankenburg was broadly ecumenical, it remained conservative in theology. The yearly gatherings in Blankenburg, Germany stressed personal faith and everyday spirituality. Avoiding denominational differences it stressed the unity of all believers with an accompanying practice of open communion.

Speakers stressed faith experience not theological conformity. The Conference, thanks to its trans-denominational emphasis was often called the Allianzbewegung (Alliance Movement).

By the 1890s some Russian Mennonites were exposed to the movement through its publications or by actual conference attendance. In the early twentieth century Mennonite estate owners in the Molochna Settlement, Ukraine sponsored week long conferences featuring Blankenburg speakers. Little wonder that sharp debates over Allianz teachings soon impacted both Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches. The traditional polity of both groups had difficulty tolerating open communion practices or construing baptism as optional for a believing Christian. Somewhat ironically a movement advocating the unity of all Christians generated schism and in 1906 led to the formation of a new Russian Mennonite church calling itself the Evangelical Mennonite Brotherhood, but often referred to as Allianz. In 1908 similar sentiments caused another group to leave the Mennonite Church in the Zagradovka Settlement.

The attempt to transcend confessional boundaries became divisive. In the Russian setting the EMB experienced some difficulty in articulating its separateness. While the notions of open communion with all Christians and optional baptism were points of dissent with other Mennonites, constructing a church model substantially different from existing churches proved difficult. Yet long-standing Mennonite co-operation with respect to the forestry service and benevolent institutions made for a somewhat easier integration of the new group. Also with the advent of war and revolution, religious differences between Mennonites seemed less crucial.

Subsequent emigration in the 1920s meant a new land, language and culture. Both Mennonite and Brethren churches possessed easily transferable peoplehood networks that ensured survival in Canada. The shelter that Mennonite ethnicity provided for such numerically large groups was difficult to achieve for the small and geographically dispersed EMB in Canada. Now the group faced the critical questions of "Who are we?" and "Where do we belong?" Eventually the Allianz churches in Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta joined the Mennonite Brethren.

Namaka Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church circa 1938

In part the experience of the EMB in Alberta illustrated the perils of isolation and theological digression. In the confines of the old homeland the unity of all believers, open communion and optional baptism had already generated considerable discomfort among fellow Mennonites. It was even more problematic for Alberta EMB churches from like-minded co-religionists in Ontario and Manitoba.

Russian Mennonite immigrants settling in Alberta have left an exemplary record of inter-Mennonite co-operation both locally and provincially. Beginning in 1929 a provincial All-Mennonite Vertreterversammlung (Representative Assembly) met annually to keep each other informed and address common problems. Such issues might include the travel debt, health concerns or settlement difficulties. Co-operation in the religious field seemed equally reasonable and it was not surprising to find that representatives of the two Allianz congregations in Namaka and Crowfoot already reported to the first Alberta Mennonite Brethren Conference meeting in 1928 and again sent representatives to the 1929 MB Conference. The Alberta EMB leader, Aron A. Toews was elected a chairperson for the 1930 Alberta MB Conference. Furthermore the Allianz was represented by four delegates from Namaka, four from Crowfoot, and three from Swalwell Conference participants may have been somewhat surprised when the delegate from Swalwell, Nicolai Rempel, reported on the "exceptional position" (Sonderstellung) taken by that congregation: they wished to join the Brudertal Church, yet desired to continue working with the Alberta MB Conference. At the July, 1931 Conference held in Coaldale, Namaka was represented by eight delegates with EMB leader A.A. Toews in the chair. Nicolai Rempel now officially reported that the 14 member EMB congregation in Swalwell had joined the Brudertaler Conference. No EMB delegates attended the Alberta MB Conference in 1932 (or 1933) and the MB delegates voted to review their relationship with the EMB. Somewhat ironically

Namaka Mennonite Brethern Church circa 1938

an equally weighty issue at the 1932 gathering related to the question of Liebschaften (love affairs) and after lengthy deliberations it was decided that concourse between the two sexes was sin and was forbidden between male and female members of the congregation. For at least two years the EMB leader, Aron A. Toews, remained a member of the missions committee, a liason group mainly concerned with keeping in contact with scattered Mennonite and Brethren emigrant congregations. Relations were apparently restored by 1934 when the assembly not only met in the Namaka EMB Church but designated itself as having delegates from both the MB and EMB congregations. It came as something as a surprise when, late in 1934, the Alberta EMB churches announced they had joined the Conference of the Defenceless Mennonite Brethren of Christ in North America. Apparently "significant differences" did not allow for affiliation with the Mennonite Brethren.

Yet at the Eighth Alberta MB Conference meeting in Coaldale during July, 1935, representatives from both the Namaka and Swalwell congregations were present. EMB leader Aron A. Toews lauded the "brotherly unity" with Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren in joint visits to scattered congregations in Alberta. A day later (July 19) at an evening session the letter of December 14, 1934, was read to the Conference. Undeterred the MB Conference resolved to continue working with the EMB in mission matters, but noted that separate conference sessions would be held for strictly internal matters. In the Russian setting Mennonites of differing persuasions utilized the itinerant ministry as a most effective method of unifying adherents separated by vast distances. In Alberta the term internal missions (inner mission) was a possible variant of that strategy.

In subsequent years EMB delegates regularly attended the Alberta Mennonite Brethren Conference sessions with their spokesperson Aron A. Toews present as a member of the missions committee or as an active participant in its ministerial conferences. In the end the affiliation with the Brudertal Conference proved unsatisfactory even though it adopted a new name in 1937, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren. In the end the Alberta Allianz perhaps reverted to its primary Russian Mennonite identity or became frustrated by the geographic distance form its affiliate Conference. Then too it had long been cut off from the theological nurture of the Blankenburg Conference of the early 1920s. In any event the Alberta Allianz congregations joined the Alberta MB Conference during the 1940s, though with some reluctance. Perhaps it was difficult for a few to maintain a distinct identity under the wide open skies of Alberta.

Photo Credits: Photo of Rev. & Mrs Aron A Toews from GAMEO courtesy Richard Thiessen. Photos of Namaka EMB and Namaka MB churches courtesy Conrad Stoesz, Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.❖

Faspa talk about Mennonite potatoes,

by Cliff Boldt

And at the faspa table or shortly after, the adults would talk about the crops, calves or pigs that had been born, politics, the latest church gossip, and stories from the past. And we youngsters got graduate degrees in oral history. This is a faspa tale; call it potatoes 101 if you will.

There were a number of variations on the story of the source of the Schnüfheanna potatoes. These stories invariably started at the faspa table and continued in the barn where the men went for a smoke. Some of the details would change, depending on who told the story, but few would argue about a version different from theirs. For us young ones, it was kind of exciting to hear a new twist on a story we almost knew by heart and heard an occasional argument about a detail – *"daut haud mutta mee nicht fetalt"* (Mother never told me that). That would either end the discussion or the whole conversation would head in a new direction on a new topic, usually started by one of the siblings or an in-law who was a peacemaker.

My favourite version was sourced to my great-grandmother Siemens (nee Hiebert) who had come to the Manitoba Mennonite Reserve in 1875 as a young girl of 8 years. She had told her grandchildren that her mother had packed a large variety of seeds among the underwear in the cases for the trip from Russia to America. Included were the Schnüfheanna potatoes.

The first growing season in Manitoba, the potatoes and seeds were carefully looked at with any

weed seeds or rotten potatoes removed. The soil in southern Manitoba was similar to that of the Russian steppe from which the Mennonites had moved, and they thrived in the soil.

Later, as Mrs. John Siemens, and with 5 children, great-grandmother Siemens moved to the Langham area in Saskatchewan and a few years later to a homestead north of Hepburn. Once again, seeds of fruit and vegetables had come along, including the Schnüfheanna, and once again these potatoes thrived. Later on, English potatoes were adopted for feeding the family – from Seager Wheeler in Rosthern was one rumour.

As a youngster, a couple of my uncles raved about the flavour of the Schneufheina and how they preferred them to the English red Pontiacs. Sometimes a real competition began to see who had the earliest feed of potatoes or how many pounds a crop had produced.

One uncle claimed that Jreewe (cracklings) and fried Schnüfheanna were of a higher quality from any made with Enjlische potatoes. He even hinted that not using Schnüfheanna could be a sign that your Mennonite credentials were on the line.

Fast forward to the early part of the 21 century and a chance comment by one of my Saskatchewan cousins about these potatoes led to a 2 pound box being sent to my new home in Courtenay where I had established a raised-bed garden. And sure enough, I soon had a crop of these potatoes growing in my garden. To my friends I said these were Mennonite Heritage potatoes that originated in Russia. And like my elders around the faspa table of years gone by, I haven't hesitated to embellish and improve the story about how the potatoes had travelled from Russia to the Steinbach area of Manitoba to the Comox Valley.

Schnüfheanna potatoes

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Note:
Herman Rempel's Dictionary gives this description of Schneufheanna:
Schnüfheana - species of horn shaped potatoes common in Russia. Schnüfkje - n. snuff. Schnüfkjedoos - f. a snuff box. Schnurboat - m. a moustache. schnurkjse . http://ereimer.net/plautdietsch/pddefns.htm. schnüeanna potatoes ❖

Book Review

Lawrence Klippenstein

Nichols, Gregory L., A Study of Ivan. V. Kargel (1849-1937) The Development of Russian Evangelical Spirituality. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), pb., xiv +381 pp, 44.00 USD.

Reviewed by Lawrence Klippenstein

Till now Johann G. (Ivan Veniaminovich) Kargel frequently shows up in the annals of Russian Christianity, more particularly Protestantism but with a somewhat sketchy personal and career profile. Nichols has changed that situation dramatically. There now exists a great deal more clarity about Kargel's total ministry as well as his personality and character. It is now much easier to assess his spiritual and church-related importance also.

Born in the Russian Caucasus region (birthplace?) in 1849, likely from a German father, and an Armenian mother, originally from Bulgaria (names unknown?), Kargel converted to the Christian faith as a young man of 20. After baptism he was joined to the eleven-member largely German (?) two-year old Baptist church in Tiflis, Georgia. He and Anna Semenova whom he married in Tultscha, Romania in 1880, had four daughters. One of them died early and the others, as they grew to adulthood, actively involved themselves in their father's work. None of them were married.

Kargel's call to ministry emerged early, owing much to contacts with Johann Wieler, a Mennonite Brethren teacher and minister from the Molotschna colony in south Russia, whom he stayed with while visiting Odessa in 1872-73, and another slightly more senior Baptist minister, Karl Ondra, whom he met in the same Odessa setting during this time. Eager to begin his life's work, Kargel though still unordained, took over a short pastorate

in the Russian Polish village of Sorotschin, earlier pastored by Ondra, and also became a student for a year of the Hamburg Mission School , established by the German Baptists in 1849.. Also in 1873, Ondra, Kargel and Wieler joined a number of other church leaders, at a Mennonite Brethren missions conference held in the village of Klippenfeld, Molotschna .

After these biographical comments, Nichols provides a portrait of Kargel's ongoing work, pastoral and other ministries. The chronology of Appendix II very helpfully outlines Kargel's related activities from birth until his death in 1937, and present-day influences of his legacy among evangelicals.

Nichols then designates five periods following the years of beginnings and laying of ministry foundations from 1849-1874. These include, further, the first period of 1875-1880 in St. Petersburg (not sure why the name is consistently, with one observed exception, cited as Saint Petersburg). Most of Kargel's work at this point focused on ministry to people of German extraction (Baptist connections). This time also provided ample opportunities for improving his use of the Russian language and getting to know the larger spectrum of Russian churches,

Most importantly, for what was to come, it brought him and his wife into much closer contact with another emerging evangelical leader, Vasily Alexandrovich Pashkov, and his wife Alexandra Ivanovna Pashkova (surname needs to end with "a", not so used in the text, p. 72). Both would become strong influences in reshaping (widening, Anna would call it) some of the Kargels' theological thinking toward greater inclusivity of other than their earlier more strict Baptist interpretations regarding church structures and practices.

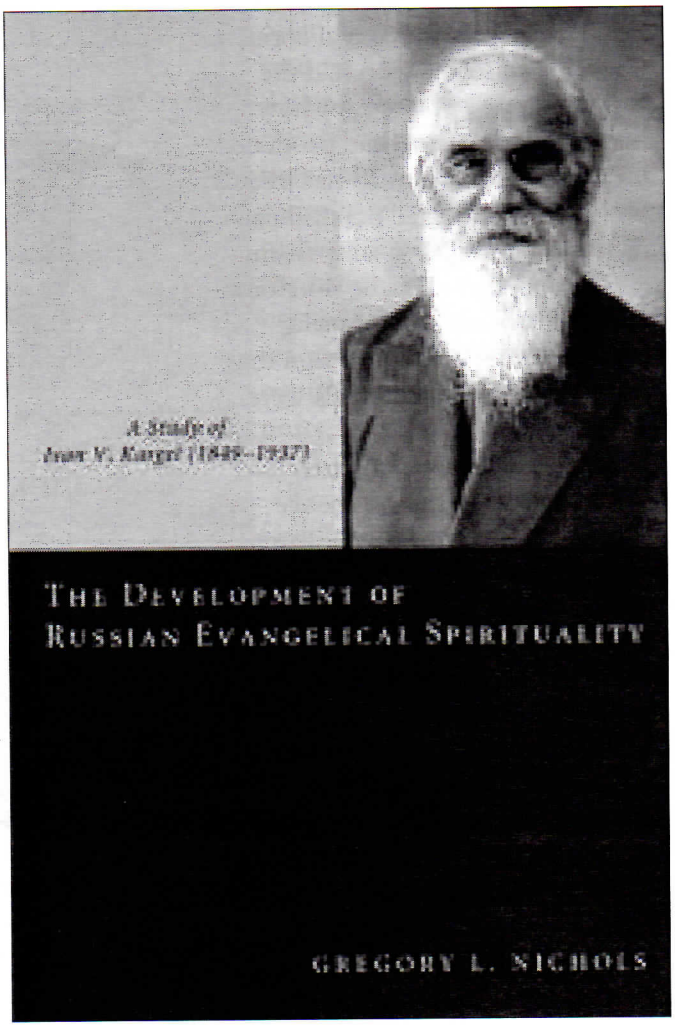
Then came the second period of work, now centred in Bulgaria (1880- 1884) during which the extensive correspondence of Anna with Alexandra played a key role in the redirection noted above. Here Nichols draws heavily on the Pashkov personal papers which have recently found their way to numerous North American and other libraries.

A second period of work in St. Petersburg came in 1884 – 1887, at the end of which Pashkov was exiled from Russia, and the way cleared, as it turned out, for Kargel to greatly increase his scope of leadership among the evangelicals of the Russia capital. Eleven years of wider ministry in Russia, much of it in company with a German itinerant preacher, Dr. Friedrich Baedeker, visiting prisons, then precede a third period of work in St. Petersburg in which Kargel further extended his influence and organizational/institutional work especially in education, among St. Petersburg evangelicals.

Kargel is interpreted as having two objectives beyond his basic calling to preach Good News and fulfill local pastoral in Bulgaria, Russian territories like Finland , w here h e established its first Baptist church, and elsewhere. Firstly Kargel hoped to unify evangelical Protestant groups in Russian-held lands. His other objective was to amplify their traditional theological spectrum by giving a more privileged place to the teaching of sanctification or holiness (in Russian, osvya(e?) shchenie, translit. with a "c", as the text does not).

The author does not attempt to analyze in depth the degree to which Kargel achieved these objectives. Evidence abounds to suggest that unifying disparate groups of Russian evangelicals was then, as it is still, a daunting (impossible?) task. Similarly the teaching of sanctification likely generated non-unifying controversy (though not highlighted in this study), as it did among those from the Keswick Convention disciples in Britain and other adherents who were Kargel's mentors/champions for this theological distinctive.

Space limits forbid a treatment of other significant features of what is really a most important and indeed even exciting study of someone who rose to the forefront of Russian evangelical leadership, far from forgotten among fellow



believers in Russia even today. The book is attractively produced with features like helpful appendices and maps, photos of Kargel (perhaps Anna's will show up one day), and a fine index with updated bibliography. Technical problems such as some text portions obviously omitted (e.g. p 190, line 4 ff), white space where not appropriate, proof reading problems (spelling errors) especially with German words, etc, do not distract unduly from reading through, but will be noticed by some.

Nichols' disclaimer about writing a definitive Kargel volume is reflected in a very useful, brief section putting forth themes for further research (pp. 306-307). For this reviewer the suggestion of looking more closely at the Mennonite (Brethren) connection is apropos. It is possible that the extensive Wieler correspondence in the Pashkov papers needs more exploration, and there may be German-language sources pertinent here also.

Another reviewer's judgment that from now on the author "deserves to be heard" on this topic is to the point. He deserves commendation indeed for making available an important new source for the study of Russian evangelical spirituality (perhaps beyond that) as the book's subtitle aptly claims.

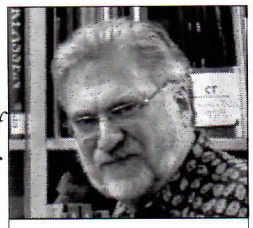
Notes:

Gregory L. Nichols is Lecturer of Baptist and Anabaptist Studies and Church History at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic.

Dr. Klippenstein is a retired professor of Bible and historian-archivist with the Mennonite Heritage Centre. He now resides with his wife, LaVerna, in Steinbach, Manitoba.❖

TAMING THE WHITE ELEPHANT

By Jim Bowman



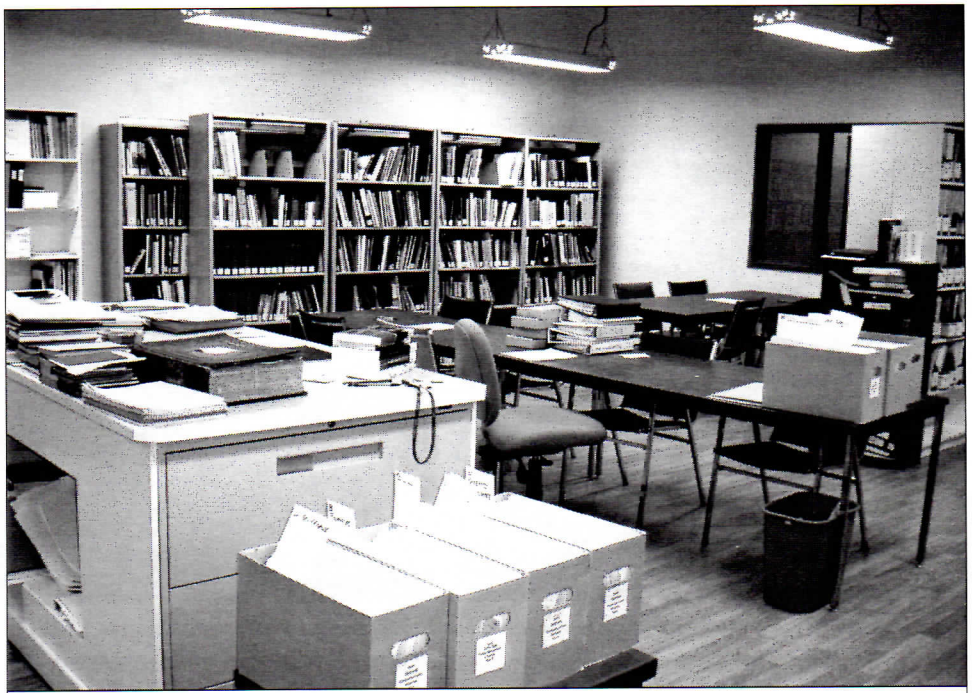
Jim Bowman

This report was originally prepared for the Archives Society of Alberta News. "Appraisal", in archivists' terminology, means "deciding which records to keep".

A white elephant is venerated as a sacred animal in Buddhist cosmology, symbolic of peace and prosperity. Monarchs of Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia kept them to characterize their reigns as just and peaceful. In the nineteenth century, it is said, the kings of Thailand presented them to courtiers they disliked, because they had to be cared for at great expense, yet had no practical value.

In 2004 the recently-formed archives of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta (MHSA) was presented with 70 standard records storage cartons from Mennonite Central Committee Alberta (MCCA). MCCA is the renowned social service and international aid agency which is supported formally by a half-dozen or so Mennonite denominations ("branches"), and supported informally by independent Mennonite congregations and some Hutterite colonies in Alberta. It is also the owner of the building which houses the MHSA Archives.

The accession contained about 4.5 cartons of records of the Vertreterversammlung ("Delegates' Assembly") also known by its English name Meeting of the Representatives of Mennonite Churches and Groups of Alberta. This important organization, which existed from 1929 to 1966, provided vital assistance to Mennonite refugees in the 1930s; it was also a pioneering venture of cooperation among the various branches of the Mennonite faith. This portion of the accession was arranged and described as a separate fonds almost immediately. The accession also contained about one-half of a carton of constitutional documents and high-level minutes of the



Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta library and workspace where accession are received and processed

MCCA from the period of its inception, the late 1960s.

The remaining 65 cartons consisted of records of the Employment Development Project, an MCCA agency based in Edmonton which specialized in job training and work experience programs for the disadvantaged, such as immigrants, indigenous peoples, and victims of family breakdown. From about 1985 to 1996 it operated several programs, including Edmonton's major recycling operation, a home renovation/neighborhood improvement business, and a landscaping service.

Judith Rempel, the MHSA's Archives Coordinator from 2002 until her death in 2011, compiled a preliminary inventory of the records, and supervised their refoldering and removal of fasteners. Initially she was reluctant to dispose of any of the records, but as she became more experienced and confident as an archivist, she began to see that reappraisal would be necessary. But the sheer volume of materials requiring selective retention was overwhelming.

This year the MHSA received an Access to Holdings grant from the Archives Society of Alberta for the reappraisal, arrangement, ands description of the records. The grant was enough to fund 20 days of my time, of which 11 days have now been completed.

Some of the appraisal decisions were easy to make. 20 of the cartons consisted predominantly of bookkeeping documents, such as bank statements, cancelled cheques, receipts, invoices, and expense claims. Indisputably, these had no archival significance. 10 cartons contained case files on employees and counselling clients. I thought that these records had no significance for genealogical or social studies, because they didn't systematically document a large population. In addition, responsibility for retention of records containing personal information was a concern. There is no certainty that a volunteer-run organization will be able to administer privacy restrictions over a lengthy period. 3 cartons contained records of house renovation projects. It was decided that these were of marginal significance in terms of both social history and architectural history.

The remaining 32 cartons were "office files" – originally kept in filing cabinets at the request of the project's executive director and filed in alphabetical/chronological sequences. With about 5000 files to sort through, appraisal decisions often had to be made in a split second. Materials that actually documented transactions of the agency were preferred for retention: minutes, contracts, correspondence with senior decision-makers. Files that were kept in the office only for reference purposes – brochures and report literature, early drafts of documents, unaudited financial reports, personal letters – were generally not retained.

The final steps in the Access to Holdings project will involve integration of the executive director's office files into one series of perhaps five metres in extent, writing the inventory, and mounting it on the MHSA website. Reduction of the extent will make better use of the MHSA's limited storage space. With good management, even a white elephant can be put to work. ❖

One view of a portion of the archive vault at the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

FROM VIETNAM TO CANADA: MY STORY

by DONNA DANG, DUNG THI NGO August 22, 2012

With the assistance of Doreen and Hugo Neufeld

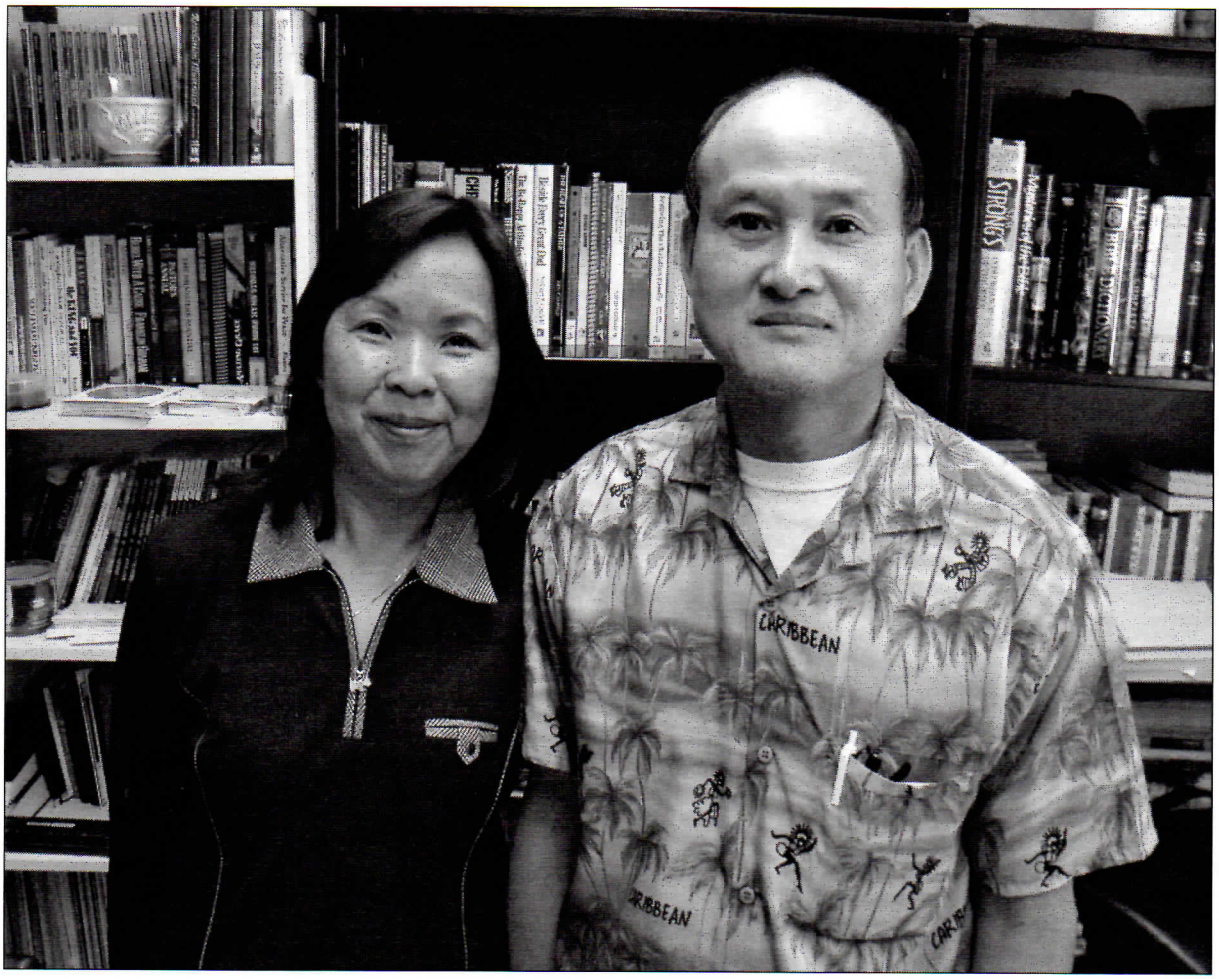
Happy are those who fear the Lord,
who delight greatly in his commandments.
Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed….
Their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.
Their hearts are steady,
they will not be afraid; …
They have distributed freely; they have given to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever. *Psalm 112: 1-2, 7b, 8a, 9a*

Introductory Reflections

I would like my story to be a witness to my family and to others, of all that God has done for me. Psalm 112 has become very special to me since it so aptly expresses much of my life. Along with my family and friends, I can say as the Psalmist did many years ago that "we fear the Lord" and have been blessed with joy. "Our hearts are secure in the Lord and we will not be afraid." I have experienced the truth of the words that the descendants of "those who fear the Lord" and "delight in his commandments" and are "upright", "will be blessed."

On April 14, 2012 my husband, Chau Dang, shared his story at the Mennonite Historical Society meeting at the Calgary Vietnamese Mennonite Church. While his story is very different from mine, we share the common

theme that even through very difficult times, God did not abandon us and has given us a future rich in blessings. We give God the glory and praise!



2. Christian Faith Enters my Family Tree; my Father's Family

On my father's side the Christian faith did not enter our family tree until 1933, when my grandfather became a Christian through the witness of his brother. My great uncle's dramatic conversion had positive consequences for generations to come.

Can you imagine what it would be like to not have even one Christian in your entire family?

For years my grandfather's brother had struggled with issues in his personal life, including dark feelings that he was a bad person. As a last resort he chose to get away from everyone. He left his wife and children and fled to a Buddhist temple, where he became a monk.

In those days there were few Christians in Vietnam, yet one day a Christian Vietnamese pastor stopped by at the temple to ask for a drink of water. My hospitable great uncle offered him a cup of refreshing cold water and the two began a conversation. Soon the pastor began asking questions about what led to the decision to become a monk. My great uncle, actively steeped in the Buddhist tradition, had not found peace and was still struggling with deep feelings of unhappiness.

Before long, the conversation turned to hope and salvation. The door was open for the pastor to tell the story of Jesus' love. My great uncle responded to the gift of abundant life, and went back home to the family he had abandoned, to "correct his life." His witness was so convincing that his wife and all his brothers became Christians. It was several years before his mother, who saw Christianity as a "Western" influence, also gave her life to Christ.

But my widowed great grandmother, who lived with them, remained adamantly opposed to Christianity; "No!

No! I don't believe in this strange religion," she insisted. She desperately clung to the worship of ancestors. Whenever my grandparents would take down the god-altars in their house, she would rebuild them. This see-sawed back and forth for years – the removal of the shrine and its retrieval and restoration. One day, in desperation, my grandfather threw it all into the outdoor cesspool. Great Grandmother was aghast. "You've desecrated the shrine! You've made it unclean. I can't worship these any longer!" she shouted. In the midst of her anger and anguish, her heart suddenly responded to the Spirit's touch, and she, too, gave her life to Christ. Now there was unity and peace in the family.

I can't help but think about the story in the Bible where the woman at the well gave Jesus a drink of water and received living water from Him in return. Like this woman, my great uncle shared the amazing gift of living water with everyone who would listen. Everyone in his family and community was blessed.

Following the conversions of most of my great uncle's immediate family members, others in the community could not resist the call of Christ.

I am grateful to God for my great uncle, who followed God's call and began the Christian movement in our extended family. Today most of the family members on my father's side are Christians.

3. My Mother's Family

My grandparents on my mother's side were well-off financially after my grandfather landed a high, well-paid position as secretary with the unpopular French government, who were ruling.

Vietnam at the time. While his new job took my grandfather to Saigon, my grandmother refused to leave the village where all her friends and family lived. The two began to drift apart. Through the influence of a local singer/actress, Grandfather, whose life in Saigon was often lonely, became addicted to drugs. Sadly he lost his job and died, isolated and alone.

The sadness of my maternal grandfather's life has served as a lesson for my extended family. After the Vietnam War many men were tempted to leave their spouses and families and go to safe countries, hoping to eventually bring the rest of their families over. However, the accepted guideline for my family was, "We are married together and will stay together, whether we live or die."

Losing her father at only one year of age, my mother experienced many hardships in her growing years. With her father's death came a loss of income and status for the family, so they became very poor, made worse by some family injustices and disagreements. My mother was to inherit a piece of land left by her father, but this was blocked by some relatives. Eventually my grandmother and mother were left with only a very small house. In the tiny yard Grandma raised a few chickens. With the sale at the market of eggs and older chickens, as well a few homegrown vegetables, they were able to earn a little cash for the household. Though they were poor, my mother and grandmother were ever so happy, because they were Christians. Sadly, not all in their extended family have found faith.

However, we continue to pray for them and in particular for one cousin who is still in Vietnam who had severe health issues for many years. At that time we sent her money and witnessed to her. Now she is healed, but continues to resist Christianity. She says she needs to take care of her in-laws, a requirement of a daughter-in-law in the "ancestor worshipping" religion of Vietnam. This includes the celebration of "deathday", an annual celebration marking the date of death, comparable to the celebration of birthdays in the Canadian culture.

4. Back to my Father's Family – a Radical Life Change

Before my father's father, whose name was CU' AN NGO, became a Christian, he had made good money from the 10 per cent and more he would claim from the gambling games he hosted in his own home. After his conversion he changed his life completely. Like Abraham, he felt the call to leave his friends and home community, not knowing what the future would hold. He felt called to move to the city, where other believers were gathered, trusting that God would provide for his family. At the same time, he encouraged his brothers to move to different cities to help the churches there, rather than clumping together in one place. His journey led him into the small city of Ca-Mau.

At first they were very poor and built a small thatched house. Grandfather felt strongly that before they could build a house for their family, they needed to focus their energy on building a church for the congregation, which was now worshipping in different homes. The other strict guideline they practiced was tithing. Often 10 per cent was not enough, and eventually it was not unusual for the family to tithe as much as 80 or 90 per cent.

Their first project was to buy a piece of property and build a church at the border of the city. Gradually they raised money to build a brick worship building. To support themselves, my grandparents built a simple small wooden 2 x1 metre box, which they would open in the market and sell buttons, thread, and other tailoring supplies. Always a generous tithe went to the church. As they prospered they moved from the outdoor market to a more permanent indoor stall, where they sold "everything", including shoes, hats, baskets, cosmetics, embroidery, baking supplies, a variety of household items, and goldsmith supplies.

As the family became more well-to-do grandfather became more generous, not only helping to pay for the church expenses, but also funding Bible school students, assisting retired pastors and pastors' widows with finances (I keep meeting pastors whom my father has helped), giving to the poor and other worthy causes. He attributed his economic success to God's blessing, just as Psalm 112 describes it. Grandfather was incredibly generous with all who needed help.

My grandparents were well-known for their faith. People in Ca-Mau called them "Mr. and Mrs. TIN LANH", which means "gospel"; a wonderful honour!

5. My Home 1961 – 1970 – Good Memories

June 5, 1961, marks the date of my birth, the middle child in a family of 13 children. Two of my older siblings died at a young age during the French/Japanese war, when it was difficult to get medical care. A third sibling died in 1974 at 3 years of age. I now have 2 older brothers and 3 older sisters, and 3 younger brothers and one younger sister. My father's name is Dau Ngo and my mother's is Suong Nguyen.

1971, visiting the sea shore in Vung Tau, 120 Km. from Saigon

In Ca-Mau holding a bouquet, 1969

We lived in the southern part of Vietnam in the small town of Ca-Mau (today a city of 205,000). My parents built a modest home on the same large lot as my grandparents, located a kilometre from the church.

Building on my grandparents' economic success, my father became a proficient goldsmith, even establishing a goldsmith training school. Their business, named VIET TIEN (which means progress, upgrading and moving toward prosperity), was well known for honesty and generosity. Instead of short-changing gold purchases on their

Donna (front) with siblings in Ca-Mau 1963

weights as was a common practice, my parents routinely gave a little extra. Prominent people, including teachers, would come to their store for purchases. Like my grandparents, my parents were known for their generosity.

School was an enjoyable experience for me, with good teachers and many happy experiences. Among the happiest childhood memories were singing in the choir, enjoying friends at church, and getting new clothes (a rare occasion) and "lucky money" for Chinese New Year.

Life revolved around the church and the extended family, and I remember many happy times. Although a war had started in 1959, the centre of town, where we lived, was safer than the outskirts, which were more vulnerable. We were aware of the warfare in our country, but our community was largely sheltered from the violence.

6. Move to Saigon, 1970–1979 – Experiencing the Tragedy of War

As the war escalated, my family moved to Saigon for increased safety, buying an expensive piece of property in the heart of the city. For the land itself they paid 500 ounces of gold. My sister and I stayed behind with my grandparents until the end of the school year. After rebuilding the existing house so the entire front opened as a store, with the residence in the back and upstairs, Mom began to sell goldsmith supplies, while Dad sold jewelry wholesale.

For me the move to Saigon at 9 years of age was traumatic at first, and I missed my warm, small community. Because I was very young when I had started school, I was not old enough to write the required exam when I finished grade five, so I had to repeat grade five. Each day I walked the two kilometers to the Christian School I attended, afraid of getting caught in demonstrations students were holding against the government. I particularly worried about tear gas, which the police used liberally. I regularly carried lime in my backpack as an antidote. Another real danger was kidnapping. Some children were kidnapped and then mutilated in order to become beggars, bringing in money for their masters.

Gradually I became comfortable in the 500 – 700 member congregation, where we were nurtured according to our age. Only those 15 and over attended the adult worship services. The younger ones attended Sunday school at the same time. In the afternoon a worship service was held for teenagers and young adults. My teachers and a special playmate nurtured me in my faith.

My actual conversion happened in Saigon when I was 11. I was impacted by a Gospel tract that pointedly suggested that the world might end in the year 2000. Encouraged by the tract to become a Christian while there was time, I bowed by my bed and gave my life to Christ. I was baptized on Easter Sunday, April 18, 1976. I shall always be grateful for the strong supportive church, especially the good teachers and good friends who supported me in those important years of growing faith. Many of them are now pastors or pastors' wives, living in the United States. Every time I think of that time I just smile. In spite of the war raging around us we felt safe in the community; we took care of each other.

Important connections from those days continue. The family of one of my older sister's teachers escaped to

the US in 1975 and then moved to Australia, where they became pastors. Next spring our own daughter is planning to marry their son, who is in ministry.

The war ended in 1975, and the communists took over South Vietnam. Major changes began to take place. On March 23, 1978, a government jeep pulled up in front of our house and several men emerged, pointing AK-47s (powerful rifles) at us. "Put your hands up," they commanded, "and sit still!" We were all in the store, with the large doors of our storefront completely open.

One of the men took my dad to the district office, while the others methodically proceeded to help themselves to valuables and to seal all drawers of cupboards, desks, and cabinets, including the fridge. The penalty for breaking a seal would be jail. After several hours of sitting, they allowed us to open the fridge so we could get some food to eat. We had broken no laws, but discovered that all who were considered to be "rich people" were being targeted.

They gave us two months notice to prepare to leave our home, allowing us to take only the most basic items with us (a few items had been hidden away earlier). During this time they were with us daily, carefully checking our lifestyle to make sure we had actually given up all our valuables. My father tried hard to do exactly what the authorities demanded. He melted down most of the jewelry and gave them the whole brick of gold, never getting anything for it. I am reminded of the words in Psalm 37:21: "The wicked borrow and do not pay back, but the righteous are generous and keep giving." My mother insisted that her jewelry was personal, and was allowed to keep it.

This was a very traumatic time, but I was confident that God was with us; that these trials were there to test our faith. I continued to go to school. Each day my older sister gave me a large piece of fabric, which I hid in my school bag and passed on to a trusted relative to keep for us, to be sold for the money we would eventually need to emigrate. (Unfortunately, when the time came, it was difficult to get all the fabric back).

In Saigon in our upstairs patio, 1971

With Nga, my youngest sister on my left, 1971

We had been told that after two months we must go back to our town of birth, but now the law suddenly changed, and "sea-gate" towns (those with a harbour), such as Ca-mau, were forbidden. Those who had no "home town" to go to were forced to move to "the New Economical Zone", literally, the jungle. Fortunately, my sister-in-law had an uncultivated piece of inland wilderness property in the area of Cai Lay, Tien Giang, that we were allowed to move to. During the war it had been near the border of the conflict between the communists and the west. Here bombs had been dropped, gouging out large tracts of land, leaving large ponds. The family now paid to have this property prepared. Tough, ten-foot-high grasses were cleared and a simple, palm-leaf house with a thatched roof and dirt floors was built at hugely inflated prices. We moved on May 23, 1978.

A few days after our move, a government official came and told me I had to go to Business College to learn accounting. I was to keep track of finances for the collective farms in the area. I had no choice but to go to another city to study for six months, though I was only 17 years old.

Studio picture in Saigon, 1976

When my studies were completed, I had to walk five kilometers every day to the central office of the village to work. The paths were poor. Many creeks needed to be crossed, but few had bridges. I would stand on shore and pray, weeping inwardly, while many stoically paddled by without listening to my pleas for help. At last someone would be kind enough to take me across. The same pattern was repeated on the way home. It soon became clear that I could not do this 6 days a week. Fortunately, I was able to find an acquaintance in the village with whom I could stay, and went home only on weekends.

The work was stressful, since I was often blamed for the government's excessive demands on the people. People were often threatened with imprisonment if they could not bring back the exact amount of tax (money or goods) that was imposed. Sometimes I had to get up in the middle of the night to accept a payment of rice, since boats could only come up the river at high tide. My salary was to be $25 a month, far from enough to make a living. At the same time, my two co-workers who regularly went to pick up the money each month, always spent mine before they got back, so I got nothing. I began to have severe headaches.

After three difficult months I secretly found a way to get to Saigon to visit my brother's family for Easter, a holiday that was not recognized or celebrated by the communist government. I asked permission to go to the district office to report. At the bus stop I continued to wrestle with a decision I had already made, to disobey the authorities and go the opposite way, to Saigon. I just knew I had to get out of that stressful situation. Plans were almost jeopardized when a neighbour who was a government official arrived at the same bus stop to catch a bus to the district office. I silently prayed to God for help. When his bus arrived, I told him the bus was just too full, and I would wait for the next one. Finally the Saigon bus arrived and I got on, going in the opposite direction. What a joy it was to once again celebrate the resurrection in my home church!

For approximately a week I stayed with my brother's family in Saigon. When we lived in Saigon, my father had allowed an engraver to set up his kiosk in front of our store, and never charged him rent. His entire family was very grateful to us. I went to one of his sons, who had become a physician in a mental hospital, and told him, "The stress level at my job is so high; I don't think I can go back to work. Would you please write a note saying I am mentally unfit to work?" He was hesitant, but after consulting with his parents, he agreed to help me.

I took the note, not to my supervisor, but to the head government official of my village and fortunately was given a leave to go back to Saigon for treatment. How thankful I was to get out of that impossible situation! I knew I couldn't have survived it much longer.

7. A Dangerous Journey at Sea (1979)

In the meantime, my family was preparing to leave the country. Because the Vietnamese and Chinese were fighting at this time, the Chinese people were being expelled from Vietnam. Since my family name is Chinese, my father was able to get permission to leave. To pay the required large sum of money, my father sold the goldsmith supplies he had been able to hide in various places, as well as the pieces of fabric that were still left.
Some friends joined the 20 family members, including my grandparents, who were preparing to flee together. Among them were the sister and two nieces of the doctor who had so kindly helped me.
On June 15, 1979, our family and friends were among the 345 persons who crowded into a small fishing boat leaving Ca-mau for Malaysia. Most of us were on the lower level, with little light or ventilation. I was exhausted, fighting for fresh air and suffering from extreme seasickness. In that "prison" that would also become our escape,

I desperately prayed for safety and liberation.

But on June 17 we were attacked by two Thai pirate ships. Repeatedly they rammed our boat from both sides, until it sprang a leak, right behind me. When I saw that splinter about a foot long and the water seeping in, I cried out to God:

"Please save me! Save my family! And save all on this boat! God, I will then serve you for the rest of my life!"

But the terror was not over yet. A few minutes later the pirates jumped on board, flashing large curved knives, axes and hammers. Nobody could resist. Systematically they robbed us of the very few valuables we had left. They even made us open our mouths to make sure we were not hiding gold there.

When the pirates were gone at last, the men began feverishly bailing out enough water to keep us afloat. That night one of the pirate ships, seeing our plight, returned to help us. However, earlier they had taken one of the motors from our boat, so we could only follow them very slowly. Eventually they began towing us. Though the pirates demanded more of the few possessions we had left, they took some of our passengers onto their ship to lighten our load. After giving us some food and pulling us close enough to a tanker to be rescued, they returned all passengers to our boat, and then left.

How beautiful was the sight of the lights outlining that big tanker! When it got close enough, it sent out a cargo ship to take us on board. You can imagine how grateful we were for that rescue, and for the meal they gave us! However, we could not stay on the tanker. We had to return to the cargo ship to try to find a country that would accept us. Since International Law states that people at sea can be picked up only if their boat sinks, the sinking of our leaking fishing boat had to be hastened, so pictures could confirm our plight. None of our few remaining belongings could be salvaged, not even our shoes. Some wealthy people on board lost expensive clothes and other treasures. Slowly, we saw the boat that had taken us this far sink out of sight.

Singapore would not accept us because we had no third country to go to, but after six days on the cargo ship, with only unpalatable rice to eat, arrangements were finally made to have us dropped off at a refugee camp at Pulau Tengah, on an isolated Malaysian island. We landed on June 23, 1979.

8. Refugee Camp - 1979-1980

For the first hours we were isolated from others in the camp, forced to stay in the hot sun until the authorities could establish that the United Nations would accept us as refugees. The Malaysian authorities kept a close eye on us and took a picture of each of us. Once we were accepted, they built us a large roof out of leaves for shelter. This was divided into sections for different families. There were no walls. We were part of a community without a homeland that consisted of over ten thousands refugees. Conditions were very primitive, but we were grateful to be on solid ground.

Picture taken June 23, 1979 by immigration officials at the refugee camp. MH stands for the province in Vietnam where I come from and 4041 represents the boat I was on.

We still didn't know where we would be going, or when, but we were very happy. We were supposed to die, but now we were safe. And most important of all, we had our freedom. One of the most wonderful surprises for us, and for them, was to meet the families of our married brother and sister, who had left a month earlier than we had. What a joy it was to spend time with them again!

While we waited to find a suitable country, we were fed reasonably well. Rations were limited, but because we were such a large family, we were able to put our portions together and eat better than many. To pass the time, I volunteered to work at the library, checking out books. It was the only organization on the island, other than a clinic, necessary for the health needs of the 10,000 refugees. Some refugees died during the 11 months we were on the island, but none of them from my family, thank God.

At the same time, we waited and prayed, not knowing which was the

Donna on left with mother (Suong) and sister (Nga) at the convent

18 years old Donna
at the convent

right country for us to go to. My grandfather wanted to go to the USA, because there were relatives and Vietnamese churches in California, and the climate was more like what we were used to. My father dreamed of going to Australia. I was okay with wherever God would send us.

On a regular basis people from different embassies came and interviewed us, in the order in which we had arrived on the island. Because my brother and sister had come earlier than we, we were invited to be interviewed with them, much earlier than would otherwise have been the case. We were told that Canada would accept us, but Grandfather thought Canada was too cold. For this reason we refused. The same thing happened the second time they came.

I began to pray earnestly that God would change my grandfather's heart, even though he had said he would rather die than go to Canada. I was now 18 years old and had to fill out my own separate forms. But our goal was to stay together as a family. Finally my sister and her family, who earlier had accepted the invitation to emigrate to Edmonton, sent a sponsorship for our family. And to our great joy, on our third opportunity, Grandfather agreed to go.

Now, at last, after 11 months of waiting, we had a destination. On January 26, 1980, a boat took us to the mainland. From there a large bus took us to Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. Here we were housed in a Catholic convent camp for several months, before my older brother with his pregnant wife and 6 children, an aunt and uncle, and I flew to Edmonton under the sponsorship of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Edmonton.

My parents, grandparents, and younger siblings were held back temporarily, while my grandfather got treatments for TB.

9. Canada

When we arrived in Montreal on May 7, 1980, I had only one set of clothes in addition to the ones I was wearing, my only shoes a pair of high heeled flip flops. In the refugee camp I had made a bag from a donated dress to carry my extra set of clothes. My other possessions were some notebooks from my English studies in the refugee camp. In Montreal we waited three days for paperwork to be completed. We were also given appropriate clothing for life in Edmonton, but when we arrived, the weather was so pleasant, I didn't even need my jacket.

At the goldsmith store in Edmonton

In Edmonton all 11 of us stayed with our sponsors, Mr. and Mrs. O'Hara, a wonderful Catholic couple, for 25 days. Almost immediately, Mrs. O'Hara helped me enroll in ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. After a month she took me to look for a job. Soon I began to work in a restaurant, serving at banquets from 3-10 p.m., while continuing English studies in the mornings. I also became the interpreter for the rest of my family, sometimes needing to travel some distances to help out. Seven months later I had saved enough for a down payment on a car. Now I could go wherever my services were needed.

After twenty-five days we found a house to rent. Before long we all had jobs and soon could pay the rent ourselves. We were extremely grateful for our sponsoring church, who had paid the airfare for all of us. I paid mine back by installments, but the cost for the rest of the family was forgiven. How grateful we were!! The church also supplied everything we needed for our house – furniture, bedding, vacuum cleaner, etc. We were able to choose our own clothing from a supply of used clothing at the church. In the first year of our arrival in Canada many of the senior women from the sponsoring church showed us all the practical things we needed to learn, such as how and where to receive medical care and dental care, where to go shopping, how to take the transit, and how to set up a household, including tasks such as hanging curtains.

Six or seven months later my dad got a job in Grande Prairie as a goldsmith. He invited me to go along as a helper and interpreter, so I quit my job and went with him. At first I expected no remuneration, but my father was promised a good wage of $12.00 per hour. On our arrival, Father's employer insisted on paying me $3.75 an hour (minimum wage) for my work, while my father was paid $9 an hour for his expertise. He and I, together with my sister who remained in Edmonton, supported the rest of the family, while they were still in school. My mother stayed home to cook and care for family needs. In June, 1981, my father and I returned to Edmonton to open our own business, called, Viet Tien Goldsmith. Some of the Catholic Church members volunteered to help us in this new beginning.

I know that throughout this dramatic journey God was with us. God heard my desperate pleas for help and protected us. And with God's help, I am committed to serving God for the rest of my life, as I promised.❖

My 21st birthday, June 5, 1982

Editor's Note: From Vietnam to Canada will conclude with Donna's story from 1982 to the present. We encourage others to submit their life stories particularly the way it has added to Mennonite culture and history. Submissions for the next edition should be sent to Dave Toews email dmtoews@gmail.com by February 1st, 2013 ❖