

The History of the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church

by Elvira Hubert

The Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church came to be due to two factors. The first was anarchy in Russia. Unrest was created by the Soviet Revolution, war, and famine. The second was Canada's need for farmers to settle the Canadian west. The Canadian Pacific Railway known as the CPR invited the Mennonites to come to Canada crossing the Atlantic Ocean on CPR steamships. Once in Canada they traveled by railway to the west. Many Mennonites made Coaldale their home, because the CPR offered immigrants 80-acre farms on credit, paying with proceeds of ten acres of sugar beets annually until the farm was paid for. The CPR also built homes and barns on these farms. This was very attractive to the new immigrants.

Besides making a living the immigrants needed a place of worship. As a result, the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church was organized and began services on May 23, 1926. There were twenty-one charter members-twelve men and nine women. Church services were held in the barn hayloft on the Lathrop farm, two miles south and three and a half miles east of Coaldale. The first church leader was Klaas Enns. That summer the first baptism of five ladies took place in the Lathrop farm pond. The church grew rapidly due to immigration.

However, with the onset of winter, the hayloft services were discontinued. The school board gave permission to use the public school for Sunday services. The need for a cemetery was keenly felt, when a one and a half year old toddler drowned in an irrigation canal and there was no burial ground. The little boy was buried on a farm.

By the end of 1927, a suitable place for a church building and an adjoining cemetery was purchased from the CPR. It was a five-acre plot of land north of Coaldale purchased at fifteen dollars per acre. It was quite an undertaking to raise the necessary funds to build the church. Most of the money came in through voluntary contributions. The work was done by voluntary labour.

The first service was held in the newly constructed church on Sunday, January 27, 1929. However the dedication of the church didn't go as planned. The weather turned nasty-39 degrees below zero. It was impossible to cancel or postpone the event, since there were no phones. Anti-freeze and

block heaters were non-existent, so no vehicles would start. No one wanted to travel by horse and have them stand outside on the church yard all day. The only alternative was to walk and that's what the men did. The women stayed home with the children. The wives packed lunches in honey pails and a jar of hot Prips (a coffee substitute of ground roasted wheat). The Prips was wrapped in pages of the Rundschau to keep it from freezing. The men were layered with most of the clothes they owned. After walking for up to six miles, they reached the church. It was good to stand around the coal heater in the church to warm themselves.

The guest speaker of the day was Aaron Toews from Namaka. The church was only about one-third full but the fellowship was warm. The congregation eagerly listened to a message from God's word and sang "Nun Danket Alle Gott" with gratitude. The offering for foreign missions was the large sum of twelve dollars.

When it came time for lunch the frozen Zwieback were held over the heater to thaw. They were enjoyed with the now cold Prips.

From the beginning the building proved to be too small. An addition was added later in 1929 on the east end. Three years later another addition was built on the south side.

The Coaldale Bible School was organized in 1929. The first year there were twelve students, who met in the church nursery. The Bible school provided training for Sunday School teachers and other church workers. My dad, uncles, and aunts attended Coaldale Bible School in the 1930's. In 1934 the Bible school building was erected beside the church building.

Also in 1929 a Saturday morning German school was established. The purpose of the German school was so the German language wouldn't be forgotten. Communication between older and younger generations had to be maintained. Since worship services were in German, it was a way to keep the children involved in the services. Since the English public schools didn't offer religious instruction, the German school provided Bible instruction as well. The German school was a response to the influence of English taught in the public schools.

By 1939 it was necessary to build a new and still larger church

structure. It took three and a half months of volunteer labour to build the church. The seating capacity was six hundred. The church membership was 438. The building cost \$13, 626. The church leader was B.B. Janz. There were about a dozen lay preachers as well.

Then came World War II. The church was opposed to the war effort on religious grounds. The Mennonites had come to Canada to escape religious persecution and mandatory military service. Some young Mennonite men in the church became conscientious objectors (Co's). The CO's were required to appear before a judge to undergo a rigorous interview regarding their pacifist faith. Some of the young men were confident in expressing themselves in English. Some unsophisticated farm boys found it difficult to articulate their beliefs. Some judges challenged the young men on their patriotic duties. Some of the men were drafted into the army while others were allowed to become conscientious objectors. One of those CO's was my Uncle David.

There were five work camps in Alberta. The CO's were assigned non-combative duties such as building highways, fighting forest fires, and planting trees. The work was physically demanding. The CO's were known for being conscientious and hard-working with a strong work ethic.

The CO's faced severe criticism from the community, being accused of reaping the benefits of living in Canada (peace, prosperity, democracy and freedom), while not sharing in the cost required to protect those rights and privileges. The Mennonite church in Vauxhall was set on fire by vigilantes.

In 1943 a two-week Daily Vacation Bible School for children was conducted in many towns in southern Alberta. Bible school students served as teachers. This was an outreach program.

Also in 1943 many people moved to British Columbia and Ontario. Among those were the Martens and Krokors of our family. Eighty-three families alone moved to B.C. People felt the church had been built too large.

Then came the influx of displaced persons from Russia and Germany after World War II. Large baptisms (115 persons in three years) changed the

picture again. The church was filled to capacity on Sunday mornings. The membership rose to 590.

In 1946 The Alberta Mennonite High School (known as AMHS) was organized for youth from grades seven to twelve. Parents wanted their children to go beyond the required grade ten education. They wanted their children to excel in professions beyond high school. They wanted their children to be taught by Christian teachers, avoiding worldly philosophies like evolution. The first winter there were forty students.

I attended AMHS from 1960 to 1964. AMHS was a good experience for me. AMHS was the first time I had Christian friends in my class. In the public school system, I was never in the same class as my church friends. The friends I made in AMHS are still my friends today. The second good thing about AMHS was the idea of working for excellence. It wasn't good enough to be a mediocre student. I learned to excel in my studies and in music. It was fun to do my best. The AMHS choir won awards for our excellent singing in the Lethbridge Music Festival.

By 1946 the Reiseschuld became a big issue. In the 1920's the new immigrants all had immigration debt that they owed the CPR for passage from Russia to Canada. By the 1940's many people still hadn't paid the debt. Some couldn't and some wouldn't pay their share. The church was concerned about their reputation and Christian witness to the CPR. People from Mennonite churches all over Canada met in Coaldale to debate the issue. The meeting was controversial and very heated. There was a lot of anger and tears against those who hadn't paid. The decision was made for the MB conference to pay the remaining debt. The debt was paid and congregations worked toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

By 1948 the Coaldale Bible School had over one hundred students from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia. A new building was erected. The Bible school students taught Bible for one hour a week in the local public schools.

In 1952 the Gospel Bells radio program was aired as an outreach program. Peter Martens was the choir director.

In 1955 the membership of the church reached 616, an all time high.

In 1956 the first paid pastor, David Pankratz, was hired. In 1958 worship services became bilingual, both English and German. In 1960 a German radio program "Brot Des Lebens" was aired on several radio stations.

In 1963 a church plant was started in Lethbridge. Some members left to join there. Membership dropped to 410.

A new sanctuary was built in town in 1971. In 1974 our longest standing pastor (twenty-one years), Rudy Heidebrecht was hired. He brought much stability to the church. Walter Goerzen was hired as choir director and John Siebert led the male choir. In 1980 Ken Peters was hired as the first youth pastor.

Coaldale MB Church has always had a strong foreign mission emphasis. Many missionaries have gone out from this church. Helen Toews was a nurse in the Congo and Brazil. Nettie Berg worked as a nurse in Zaire and was in charge of the Mailbox Bible Club for children. Anne Kornelsen and Hilda Regehr did radio work in Quito, Ecuador at HCJB. Agnes Dueck and Margaret Enns worked as teachers for missionary children in India. Helen Dueck served as a nurse in India and Zambia. Katherine Wiens worked as a nurse in the Congo and Brazil. Katherine's sister, Lucille Wiens, worked as a lab technician in Paraguay. Harold and Ann Kasper served in Argentina. Albert and Tina Erion were missionaries in Ethiopia. When missionaries came home on furlough, they presented reports of their work during Sunday evening services.

Presently, we are supporting missionaries in Ecuador, Indonesia, France (to the Muslims), the Philippines and India.

Much can be said about the importance of music at Coaldale MB. Singing was prominent in the Sunday school and German school. In the early years the church had two large choirs made up mostly of young people led by Jacob B. Janz and Peter Dick. The songfests (Sangerfest) were a time of learning new music and presenting concerts. As early as 1952 there was a church orchestra. Over the years, there have been youth choirs, radio choirs, male choirs and octets, ladies' choirs, and children's choirs. Under Randy Klassen's direction the church choir presented Handel's Messiah, Mendelssohn's St. Paul, and Haydn's Creation.

At the present time much of the music is done by worship teams with guitars and drums. The words of the songs are seen on a large screen rather than using hymn books. Our most prominent worship team is the Bartels (children of Leona Hubert Bartel).

A report of Coaldale MB Church wouldn't be complete without reference to preaching and Bible study. Being students of the Bible was a high priority. I remember having Bibelbesprechung when I was a child. The church would meet for several days to study a book of the Bible. Our own preachers and others from the province would interpret scripture. People from the congregation also made comments.

New Year's Day was always a special day for the church. All the ordained and lay preachers (a dozen or more) each brought a five minute message, a word of encouragement for the coming year. I used to take notes and refer back to those scriptures during the year.

In 1956 we had evangelistic meetings with a Pastor Klassen from Vancouver. I was under deep conviction, and became a Christian as a result of those meetings.

Henry Kornelsen had a gift for interpreting the book of Revelation. In 1987 we had the Janz team hold evangelistic services in our gym. In later years Pastor Lorne Willms preached simply but meaningfully, making our Christian lives practical for everyday living. I vividly remember Pastor Tom Allen's sermons on the beatitudes taken from Matthew chapter five. He encouraged us to fix the church by being broken people who recognized our own inadequacy and God's sufficiency.

In conclusion, I would like to read a delightful little story from II Kings 4:1-7. The pouring of the oil reminds me of God's faithfulness to Coaldale MB Church. The oil of blessing has been pouring for more than eighty-nine years. I'm amazed at God's provision. He has done so many unexpected things-things no one could have thought or imagined at the beginning of this church. In difficult times God stepped in to meet our needs. May the oil keep flowing for many years to come.