**Manitou Mennonite Brethren Church**

**90th Anniversary Celebration**

**June 25, 2017**

**Looking Back: A Presentation on the History of our Church.**

As we look back we tend to see how much things have changed. Our church building has changed as well as the family names in the congregation. In the earlier years there were names such as Berg, Dyck, Epp, Huebner, Isaac, Kasper, Lepp, and Rempel that no longer appear on our member list. Today we have names such as Bird, Anderson, Brown, Christoff, Good, Grettum, Hoeppner, Janzen, Johnston, Letkeman, Reimer and Shipman that were not present in 1927. These lists are not complete but do make the point of change. It is interesting to note that at one time if you called for Helen, at least eight ladies could have answered. The mode of transportation has moved from the horse and buggy to the sleek modern vehicles of today with all their conveniences. Can you imagine first feeding and watering your horse(s) before harnessing them and then facing an hour or more of travel when the heater in cold weather was a few bricks at your feet which had been heated in the kitchen stove and naturally conditioned fresh air was the given at all times. If you were in a rush to communicate with someone you travelled whatever distance it was to talk to them. If you were not in a rush you sent a letter and waited for the reply to arrive in a week or two.

It would be hard for us today to imagine the social climate at that time when these new German speaking immigrants arrived. The memory of the 1st World War when so many young sons left this community and did not return was still fresh. The enemy was Germany and I am sure that there was uncertainty for a time at least whether these new comers could be trusted. This group also tended to keep to themselves which gave them a sense of security as they still remembered the horrors experienced in Russia. However, the transition into the community was eased and assisted with Mennonites already present from earlier prewar migrations and by the progressive acceptance by the local people.

It was during the 1920’s that Mennonites, who started our church, immigrated from Russia and settled in the surrounding area. Many humorous anecdotes tell how the people of this area helped theMennonites learn the new language. In retrospect, we see their kindness and neighbourly help.

The Manitou Mennonite Brethren church came into being on June 6, 1927. Thirty believers were present at the organizational meeting. Right from the beginning they were well organized as they immediately elected a leader, assistant leader, secretary, treasurer, deacons, Sunday School superintendent, choir leader and a custodian.

At first the church services were held in the Hazel School, north of Manitou. When the group

needed more space, they met in a machine shed of one of its members during the summer and

in various homes during the winter. In 1929, a church council was formed. This council was to

serve in an advisory capacity, allowing the church body to contribute ideas and make the final

decisions.

In 1930 more families followed and the last to arrive came after World War 2. Many of the families went into debt to pay for their passage to Canada and then on arrival needed to borrow money to purchase farm animals and machinery. Subsequently church expenditures were kept to a minimum.

On October 16, 1931, it was decided to construct a church building west of town, on an acre of

land in the area of the present day arena. The building material for the 22 by 32 foot church cost between $300-$400. Each family was asked to contribute $5.00 as first payment towards the building cost. The Agricultural Society allowed the use of their barn on the fairground for the horses during the

winter months. Eventually, a barn was built east of the church.

The church members proclaimed Sunday June 9, 1932, a day of Prayer, Repentance and Fasting, to remember their relatives and friends still in Russia enduring exile and persecution. At this time a ladies mission circle was organized to raise funds by selling to the highest bidder the articles they had made. Some of the money raised for missions was used to help their loved ones in Russia. The Ladies Circle also helped the church treasury to pay off a debt for lumber at the bank. History repeated itself in 1999 when funds raised by the Ladies Fellowship were used to purchase a new P.A. system for the church and in 2002 money raised by the ladies was used to buy new carpet for the church sanctuary.

The transition from using the German language for church services, to using English transpired

fairly smoothly, although it took a number of years. In 1956, it was decided to conduct

evening evangelistic services in English every first and third Sunday of the month. The first

English hymnbooks were purchased in 1958. By 1963, there was an English message on

Sunday morning, as well as a German message. An optional German adult Sunday School class was still available as late as 1972.

In 1937 the first church building was enlarged and a piano was purchased. A new and larger church was built in 1950 just north of the present day Haven. This was followed by our present building which was dedicated on June 25, 1967, which is exactly 50 years ago today. Our first salaried pastor, Jake Falk, was hired later that same year. Until then ordained pastors from within the congregation and visiting ministers from the Mennonite Brethren Conference served us.

Pastor Falk introduced the Christian Service Brigade Program for boys in 1968. A pacifist church with a program that uses titles such as Battalion and Captain? A few eyebrows were raised. A few years later, the Pioneer Girls Program began, with both clubs ministering to the youth in our church and the community.

Some notable events over the years have been the community crusade in 1977 with Allan Churchill and the Messengers quartet, the sponsoring of a Vietnamese family in the 1980's, the evening in 2001 with Dale Lang, whose son was killed in a school shooting, as he shared about loss, grief and forgiveness, and in 2003 we had Tom Bowen, a fire fighter at Ground Zero in New York on 9-11, who shared about the overwhelming scope of the disaster and how difficult it was to accept the change from a “search and rescue” operation to a “search and recover” operation. The last two events were shared with our community.

A number of our regular long standing activities have undergone changes or even disappeared as the years went by. The choir, which used to perform every Sunday, now serves us only on special occasions. Our club program and Ladies Fellowship have both been discontinued.

We have changed from a one culture, German speaking congregation to a congregation made up of many cultural and religious backgrounds. The depopulation of the rural area has also resulted in fewer young families in our midst. However, what has not changed is our commitment to worship, stewardship, discipleship, fellowship and evangelism for our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.