

An Overview of Mennonite History

Notes for the first of two presentations given in Low German to the Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association, in Leamington, Ontario, March 27, 2010, by Bill Janzen, 3830 Albion Road, Ottawa, ON., K1T 1A8, janzenw@sympatico.ca (slightly revised on May 17, 2010)

Introduction

One thing that may help us as we look at Mennonite history comes from our personal lives. There, we probably see places where we feel that God has led us and given us strength and protected us but we may also see places where we followed our own ideas, perhaps our own stubbornness or vanity. I believe it is that way in the life of churches too, that God has led and protected Mennonite churches in many ways but that at times we as churches may have followed our own ideas, not the leading of God.

I have broken down each presentation into five chapters. The chapters in the first presentation are entitled: (i) a strong but costly beginning; (ii) 200 difficult years; (iii) to Russia and the US, new countries with more freedoms; (iv) migrations to Canada; and (v) Mennonites in all the world.

I. A Strong but Costly Beginning

The Mennonite churches started in Europe about 500 years ago. If we look at Europe now we see separate countries like Germany, Holland, France, Switzerland, Italy, etc. But at that time Europe was more like one and everything was under the Roman Catholic church. That is why we cannot talk about the beginning of the Mennonite church without talking about the Catholic church. But we should remember that we are talking about the Catholic church of that time. That church has also changed in certain ways.

One of the things for which some people criticized the Catholic church was that of infant baptism. What concerned them was not just the practise but that it was required by law, meaning that if parents did not have their children baptized then they were punished; and also the teaching that if a child was not baptized by a Catholic priest then it could not go to heaven. Another concern were the high taxes. The money went not only to the government but also to the Catholic church. Some people hardly had enough to eat but they saw church leaders living well and building big beautiful church buildings and supporting wars. Since the church needed even more money they had started the teaching that if people paid extra money then their sins would be forgiven. And if relatives had died and they were not sure if they had gone to heaven they could pay money for them, and then they'd now go to heaven. Also, it looked as if priests did not consider Christian living important, for them or for the ordinary people.

One Catholic priest who believed something was wrong was Martin Luther. He lived in Germany and was well educated but he had no inner peace over his sins. This had bothered him for a long time.

Then one day, while studying the book of Romans in the New Testament, something became clear to him about the grace of God, that it was through the grace of God, shown in his son Jesus, that our sins could be forgiven, that it had nothing to do with paying money to the church.

Luther was quite outspoken. He started talking about what he had found and what he now believed. He had also come to believe that priests should be allowed to marry. It was not long before he was put out of the Catholic church. Eventually, he and his followers then started the Lutheran church. He also spent some years in prison. During that time he started to translate the Bible into German. He wanted ordinary people to be able to read it. Mennonites have used his translation of the Bible for a long, long time.

Another priest who had left the Catholic church was Ulrich Zwingli from the city of Zurich in Switzerland. But the city council of Zurich then took it upon itself to hire him so that he could continue to be the priest in the big central church in Zurich. Zwingli was an attractive man. A number of people supported him in making various changes in the church. But something came in between Zwingli and some of his supporters. When they wanted more changes, he said 'let's see what the city council says; the council should decide on how the church should be run'. The people who had supported him until now strongly disagreed with this. They said, 'these are not matters for the city council to decide; we must do what the Bible teaches'. Soon they parted ways.

One thing that these who now went away from Zwingli were against was infant baptism. Zwingli still believed in it, as did Luther. So, when these people who until now had supported Zwingli, did not bring their children to be baptized and when they started to baptize adults - which led to them being called Anabaptists - they broke the law. Soon a big persecution started. In January 1527 one of these men, Felix Manz, was taken; his hands and his feet were tied so that he could not move; then they took him into a small boat to the middle of a river and pushed him over board. Soon he drowned. Meanwhile, his mother stood on the side and called out to him: 'do not give up your new faith; remain steadfast.' Soon they killed others, often in gruesome ways.

These Anabaptists were not only against infant baptism. They agreed with Luther that our sins can be forgiven by the grace of God. They believed one had to personally accept Jesus but they also emphasized, in a strong way, that one had to try to follow Jesus in daily life. This meant (a) living clean, honest lives; (ii) not using the sword; (iii) not killing; (iv) seeking peace; (v) helping others; and (vi) avoiding various worldly things. Baptism was only for people who wanted to give themselves to living in this way; the baptism also signified that one was then a member of this new church. They wanted to follow the New Testament teaching. And they talked to other people about their new faith. They felt very strongly that God had done something new among them.

While all this was happening in Switzerland there were developments in Holland too. People there who were unhappy with the Catholic church started to meet in groups too. But some of these had strange ideas. One group felt that Jesus would come back soon but that before he could come back they had to overthrow all unrighteousness in the world, with force. They took over a small city and

thought that they would build up an army there and from there they would move out to clean up the world. Well, the government had a bigger army. Soon they had the upper hand; they killed many people in this city.

In Holland there was also a Catholic priest whose name was Menno Simons. He had begun to doubt some of the teachings of the Catholic church and he felt sorry for the people who were looking for something else but who were being persecuted severely. When he was 40 years old, in 1536, he gave up his priesthood and went over to one of these groups, one whose teachings were close to what he had come to believe. Soon they asked him to be their leader. From then until he died, 25 years later, he worked hard with many groups. He tried to teach them the New Testament. He visited the groups and wrote long letters to them. It is because of Menno Simons that we are called Mennonites.

One question that came up in some of those groups that has often come up in Mennonite history is that of excommunication and shunning. Some people at that time said that if the church had excommunicated a man then no one should have anything to do with that person; even his wife should avoid him completely. Menno Simons believed that went too far but once he allowed himself to be persuaded to take this position. Later in his life he regretted that he had agreed to it.

Menno also wrote a number of letters to governments. He wanted governments to understand that he and the groups he led wanted to live peacefully, that they were non-resistant, and that though they would not fight for a government, neither would they fight against a government. Even though he tried to live peacefully, the government tried to catch him and put him to death. There is a story that one time when he wanted to visit a church, he got a ride with a wagon – in those days before buses and trains, there were covered wagons for carrying people – but Menno, instead of sitting inside, sat up on top beside the driver. Then some policemen came riding in their horses. They stopped the wagon and asked: ‘is Menno Simon in this wagon?’ Menno then looked into the wagon and asked, ‘is Menno Simon in this wagon?’ The people say ‘no,’ so Menno told the policeman, ‘no, Menno Simons is not in this wagon.’

That time he was lucky. But many of those early Anabaptists were killed. People who have looked into it say at least 4000 were killed maybe 12,000. That is why we can call this first chapter, ‘a strong but costly beginning.’

II. Two Hundred Difficult Years

When I say that there were two hundred difficult years I mean it in an approximate way. It was not exactly two hundred years and it was not equally difficult at every place. To explain things I will again follow two paths, one from Holland and one from Switzerland.

In Holland the persecution continued until late in the 1500s. One time in 1569 a leader in a Mennonite group, Dirk Willems, knew that the government was trying to catch him. While walking across a field and he heard someone following him. Then he came to a river. The ice was thin but he stepped onto it

and walked quickly. When he was almost to the other side he heard someone from behind him calling for help. He looked and saw that a policeman had fallen through the ice and was about to drown. He then ran back and got him out. The two men walked to the shore together. But then the policeman arrested Willems and brought him to jail. Soon Willems was brought before a judge where he admitted that he was a Mennonite. Then they tied him to a post, put fire wood around his feet and burned him to death. He knew well, when he saved that policeman's life, that it could cost him his own life but he did it anyway.

In the years when the persecution in Holland continued, quite a few Mennonites moved northeast to Poland. The rulers there wanted to make their land productive so, having heard that the Mennonites were good farmers, they accepted them. But their freedoms were not secure. One time in 1676 an area was flooded. Homes and villages were destroyed. Now the rulers, who were devout Christians in their own way, said, 'this flood has come to us as a punishment from God; God wants to punish us for our sin; our sin is that we have allowed Mennonite people with their false teaching to live in our land.' Then they decided to send all the Mennonites out. Fortunately, before they did that other government people pointed out that the Mennonites were living peacefully and making a good contribution by farming the land. So they let them stay.

Another time, in 1713, a new king saw some Mennonite young men who were tall and strong so he asked that they be brought to serve as his bodyguards. When they did not want to do this, the king could hardly believe it. He felt insulted. Most people saw it as an honour if they could serve the king in this way. The Mennonites explained to the king that they did not believe in carrying weapons or in doing work where they might have to kill other people. The king had never heard of such a thing. He felt that if the Mennonites did not want to do this then they should be sent out of his territory. But again, before he could send them out, other government people told him that they were good farmers and that the country needed them. Again they were spared.

To try to overcome the uncertainty about whether they would be allowed to live in this land, the Mennonites proposed what became known as a "Privilegium". It was a contract in which the ruler would make certain written promises allowing the Mennonites to live in their territories, exempting them from military service, etc. Later such contracts were used in Russia, Canada, Mexico, Paraguay and other places. During their time in Poland the Mennonites also developed schools, not only for boys, as was customary, but also for girls. And they started to build church buildings though the government said they had to look more like ordinary houses, not like Lutheran and Catholic churches. They also started the practise of having "Vorsaenger" to lead in congregational singing. And they developed the "Waisenamt" which, among other things, provided a system to care for orphans and widows and to regulate inheritances. Given their circumstances and their time, it is impressive what these Mennonites accomplished.

But Poland was surrounded by ambitious and powerful neighbours – Russia, Prussia, and Austria - and by 1772 each of these countries had taken a piece of Poland. The area where the Mennonites lived was taken by Prussia and the ruler became known as 'Frederick the Great', because he had made

Prussia into a bigger country. One time he wanted to visit the Mennonites. He came with his horses and wagons and many helpers. The Mennonites had prepared big gifts for him. They gave him two big fat oxen, 400 lbs of butter, 20 cakes of cheese, and many chickens and ducks. They also gave him a letter. In this letter they asked for certain freedoms. When the King read the letter he was ready to say, yes, to all of the requests but not to the one about an exemption from military service. He wanted a strong army. When the Mennonites explained that this was very important to them, he decided to exempt them if they would pay a large sum of extra money every year. With that money he would run a school to train soldiers and officers for his military. The Mennonites were not comfortable with paying this money but they did it for quite a few years.

The king and other ruling people were still bothered by the fact that a sizeable group of people in their country would not serve in the military. They then, in the 1780s, made a law so that Mennonites would not be allowed to buy additional land. This was a problem. What were the Mennonites to do? Young Mennonite families needed land to start farming. Soon they realized that they would have to look for a new country. At that time the Russian government, which had taken over a broad strip of land on its southern side, was looking for new settlers. It was willing to promise broad freedoms. Soon these Mennonites started moving to Russia. That move belongs to our third chapter.

Before we move on we should note a few other things. One is that these Mennonites continued to use the Dutch language for many generations after leaving Holland. Only slowly did they begin to use Low German which was common in their area; then, when their area became part of Prussia, some also started to use High German. We should also note that they had various rules about the clothes that men and women could wear, about the hair of women and the beards of men; some groups had rules against the use of buttons and against having buckles on their shoes etc. Along with the rules there were questions about excommunicating and shunning people who did not follow them closely enough.

But not all the Mennonites from Holland had moved to Poland. Some had stayed. By the 1600s they had far more freedoms. They used it to do some valuable things. One of ministers collected all the letters that Menno Simons had written and published them. This book is still being read. Another collected as many stories of the martyrs, meaning those who had been killed for their faith, and published the 'Martyrs Mirror', which is also still being read. They built up schools not only for them but also for others. And they began to help people in need in other countries. In 1790 they started the first MCC. It was not called MCC but it was a committee with people from different groups set up to help Mennonites and other people in other countries.

Now we want to look at the other path, the one from Switzerland. For a long time the Mennonites there had very few freedoms. But they lived according to their faith as best they could. There was one gifted Mennonite minister called Hans Landis. The police first captured him in 1608 but somehow he managed to sneak out of jail. Then he went back to his church and continued to preach and help the poor etc; Then the police captured him a second time; now they told him to go to a different territory and never come back. But he went back to his church and resumed preaching and working there.

Then the police captured him a third time. Now they planned to sell him to a country far away where he would have to work as a slave. But before they did it, he was able to sneak out of jail again. It was not long before the police captured him for the fourth time and now they decided to kill him. When the day came, just before the police laid him down at a place where a big heavy axe would come down on his neck, the senior police officer asked if he wanted to say some last words. He replied, 'my one wish is that all people would confess their sins and accept Jesus as their saviour.' That happened in 1614.

Then the government decided not to kill Mennonites anymore. They would work against them in other ways. They required that Mennonites pay much heavier taxes than others; they took hot irons and burned signs on their skin; if a Mennonite had a farm that had once belonged to a person from a different church and if a descendant of that former owner now came and wanted that farm back then the Mennonite had to give it to him, for nothing. Another time they put a group of Mennonites on a boat and sent it down the Rhine river. Fortunately, Mennonites in Holland knew of this so when the boat came to Holland they persuaded the government there to let them stay. The Mennonites from Holland, who had more freedoms at this time, also asked their government to urge the government of Switzerland to give the Mennonites there more freedom.

In these years when Mennonites in Switzerland had it so hard, there were reports about the US. It was not called the US at that time. It was under the king of England but he allowed different people to start colonies there. One such man was William Penn. He belonged to the Quaker church which, in some ways, is similar to Mennonites. Penn wanted every group to have full religious freedom. For this reason in the later 1600s, Mennonites from Switzerland and nearby areas started to move to the US, as did people from other religious groups.

One other thing is worth noting. Even though the Mennonites in Switzerland had it very hard because of their governments, they also had trouble amongst themselves. They had many rules about clothes, buttons, buckles on shoes, hair and beards. But some leaders had relaxed the enforcement of the rules. Others were not happy about that. In 1693 one minister, Jacob Amman, felt that everything was becoming too lax, that people did not live by all the rules and that the leaders were not taking steps to excommunicate them. He tried to discuss this with the leader, Hans Reist, but then they became angry. Before long they had excommunicated each other. Now all the Mennonite groups in that part of Europe had to decide whether they were with Amman or with Reist. It must have been hard for the people. Those who sided with Amman became known as the Amish. That separation still stands, 300 years later.

III. To the US and to Russia: New Lands with More Freedoms

The Mennonites who started coming to the US late in the 1600s found a different country. Now they had a lot of land and broad freedoms. But the beginning was hard. Most of the land was under trees. And they only had axes to clear it out. But they had to do it to start planting crops.

Also, there were Indians. The Indians had long had all the land for themselves. Now, more and more white people were settling on it. Some white people wanted to make war on the Indians and push them away by force. The Mennonites did not. They tried to live peacefully with them. The Indians soon learned that they did not need to be afraid of the Mennonites. Another matter was slavery. Many white people who settled in the southern states bought black people who had been shipped there from Africa. But the Mennonites did not. Their teaching was that to have slaves is wrong.

Another matter was war. One started in 1775. Until then these colonies had been ruled by England. Now they wanted to govern themselves. The Mennonites did not want to fight, not for England or against England. But the war did not leave them alone. (i) At times soldiers from one side or the other would come to Mennonite farms and take horses, hay, chickens and grain. (ii) One Mennonite church house stood right where the two sides were fighting. That church house is still standing and I have been told that you one can still see where the bullets hit. (iii) One Mennonite had a blacksmith shop where he made guns. People had long wanted guns for hunting wild animals. Now a military officer came and said, 'we want you to make guns for us'. He replied, 'I do not make guns to kill people. Before I do that I will stop making guns altogether.' That is what he did. Soon after this war Mennonites from Pennsylvania started to move to what is now Ontario. We will talk about that in our next chapter.

Of course, many Mennonites stayed in the US. They had to deal with more war situations but other things were also happening. In the 1860s some Mennonites started with Sunday Schools. Others said, 'no, it is the task of the parents to teach their children about the Christian gospel'. Some also wanted to work with the young people and improve their schools and start a Mennonite newspaper and do mission work. Those churches who favoured these things formed the General Conference of Mennonite Churches. By forming a conference they were committing themselves to working together on various matters. We'll say more about this in the next chapter.

We must now look at the other path, the one of Mennonites from northern Germany moving to Russia. Russia has not always been a land with many freedoms but in the 1780s it offered more to the Mennonites than they had in the German areas. So, in 1788, some 228 of the poor families in Prussia (Germany) loaded their things onto wagons and went to Russia. But when they got there, something had come up; now the Russian government officials said they had to settle in a different place than where their delegates arranged things. Here the land was not as good. There were grasshoppers and insects. And the people who had lived in this area a long time were not happy that the Russian government had given so much land to new settlers. Sometimes they stole cattle from the Mennonites. Once they killed four Mennonites. But with time the government gave them better protection and eventually things improved.

The first big colony was called Chortitza. Fifteen years later, in 1804, more Mennonites came from Prussia and they started a colony called Mototshna. When that started the Chortitza colony was often called the "old colony". That is where that name comes from. These two colonies were the "mother" colonies. With time both started daughter colonies because their young people needed land. One of

them, started in 1834, was called the Bergthal colony, and another, started in 1864, was the Fuerstenland colony. Later, people from both of these colonies were in the first movement from Russia to Manitoba, Canada.

Life does not stand still. As the Mennonites made their living in Russia, some of them had different ideas on how things should be run. Around 1820, one man, Johann Cornies, wanted the Mennonites to improve their farming, using better horses and cattle and sheep, and cultivating their land in better ways. He also wanted the schools improved. He even wanted a school where people could learn how to be good teachers. Some Mennonites liked Cornies' ideas. Others did not. But the Russian government supported him strongly so he was able to get many changes implemented.

Another thing that happened was that in 1814 one minister, Klaas Reimer, started what became known as the Kleine Gemeinde. He felt that quite a few people were not really trying to live a Christian life, that the Mennonite church had been too supportive of Russia in its war with Napoleon, and that in the colonies the way a disobedient man was treated (given spankings) was often too harsh. Around 1860 another new church began. These came to be called Mennonite Brethren. They too had concerns about the spiritual and ethical life in the colonies. They started to meet by themselves for Bible Study; soon they had Holy Communion by themselves. The leaders of the larger church were against this. They even asked the Russian government not to let these people organize as a separate church but the government allowed it. Eventually they became quite large.

In 1870 something else came up. Now the Russian government wanted to have more say on how the colonies were run, they wanted the Mennonite schools to teach the Russian language, and they wanted young Mennonite men to serve in the military. This change was worrisome. What would the Mennonites do now? The government soon gave in on the military service issue, saying that the young men could serve the country in a different way. But their schools would have to start teaching the Russian language. [When the Mennonites sent two of their leaders to speak with the government and the officials saw that neither of them could speak Russian, the officials said this showed that their new policy was needed.]

Quite a few of the Mennonites were willing to accept the changes. But others wanted to look for a new homeland. Before long they had selected delegates and sent them to the US and Canada. In the next few years about 17,000 Mennonites moved away from Russia, 7000 to Manitoba, Canada, and 10,000 to Kansas and Nebraska in the US. I will say more about those who came to Canada in my second talk. These 17,000 who moved away were one-third of all the Mennonites in Russia. Two thirds stayed in Russia. In the next forty years they built up their colonies a lot. They built their own hospitals with their own doctors; they built many schools and high schools, even a school for the deaf; windmills to mill grain into flour became more common; and farm machinery factories were started; one Mennonite factory made 50,000 mowers per year; these were sold all over Russia and in other countries.

But then, in 1914, World War I started. Now Russia was at war against Germany. Since the Mennonites still used the German language they were easy targets. Before long the government restricted their freedoms. Then a civil war broke out. On one side were the communists. There had been communist groups in Russia earlier but now, in the unrest of World War I, they became much stronger. On the other side was the government army. In addition there were groups of bandits. Often the fighting was right where the Mennonites were living. One week the government army had control over a village and a few days later the communists controlled it. Whoever had control would take men and horses; the soldiers would abuse the women and the girls terribly. In one Mennonite village, in one night, they killed 81 men and 4 women. And then there were typhus and other diseases.

Just as the fighting let up a drought started. In the years 1921 and 22 there was no rain. So nothing grew in the gardens or on the fields. The people had nothing to eat. Then the Mennonites sent delegates to the US and Canada to ask the Mennonites here for help. This was when the Mennonites in North America started MCC. They sent a lot of help to Russia. My wife's father always said that if MCC had not sent food then he would have starved to death. The Mennonites from Canada also helped many of them to move here. Some settled here in the Leamington area. About 21000 came to Canada in the 1920s. Those who could not get out of Russia stayed there but they had a very, very hard time in the years and decades that followed.

IV. Migrations to Canada

How many migrations to Canada have there been? To me it looks like there have been at least seven.

1. The first immigration involved the Mennonites who moved from what had just become the US after the war against England. They started coming in 1786 with horses and wagons. They settled in the Vineland area; later they moved to what is now Kitchener-Waterloo and also to what is now Toronto. They had to deal with land agents who were not always honest and at first they did not have all the freedoms that they wished for but the prospects were good. Their names - Reesor, Burkholder, Wideman, Snyder, Weber, Sherk, and Erb - are still familiar in Ontario.

2. The second migration into Canada started in the 1820s. These were the Amish. One of their leaders in Europe, Christian Nafziger, came to Ontario to find land for his people. He found land but before he would bring his people here he wanted to be sure about the freedoms. So, on his way back to Europe he stopped in London, England and asked if he could see the king. The king met with him and told him that the freedoms were secure. Then he brought his people. For a long time they were called Amish; then they started to call themselves Amish Mennonites; and in the last fifty years many just call themselves Mennonites.

3. In the 1870s about 7000 Mennonites from Russia moved to Manitoba. I will say more about this migration in my second talk.

4. In the 1920s, about 21,000 Mennonites came from Russia. They settled in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and BC. Those Mennonites who were already in Canada helped them but it was still very hard. Soon after they got here the hard years of the 1930s began. Everything was scarce at that time and on the prairies there was drought. Nevertheless, these people were very grateful that they could live here in freedom.
5. After World War II another 7000 Mennonites from Russia came to Canada. Again they were helped by other Mennonites. Quite a few settled in BC, Manitoba and Ontario.
6. In the last 50 years a large number have come from Mexico. Their parents and grandparents moved there from Canada and now they have returned. If we count the Canadian born children of the returnees then, people say, there could be 40,000 to 50,000 in Ontario. The numbers for Manitoba and Alberta are only a little lower. Altogether there could well be 80,000 - 100,000.
7. We should also note those people who were not Mennonites when they came to Canada but joined a Mennonite church after coming here. They are of many different kinds. Apparently, if one could listen in on all the Mennonite churches in Canada on a Sunday morning then one would hear at least 17 different languages including German, English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and languages from India, Vietnam, and other countries.

How have Mennonites lived in Canada these 224 years? I have no doubt that many Mennonites have tried to live Christian lives, to raise good families, to live peacefully, to support their churches and communities, and to alleviate human need close by and far away. If one could count the social, economic and spiritual contributions that Mennonites have made in Canada, I'm sure they would be very substantial.

But there are many issues on which we have not agreed. Should worship services be held only in homes? Should there be Sunday Schools? Should the church organize special programs for young people? Should people wear distinctive clothes? Should people be allowed to vote in public elections? What language should churches use in their worship services? Should churches have their own day schools for their children? Should churches do mission work? Should there be revival meetings? Should ministers get a salary? What kind of melody and singing styles should churches use? For what kinds of things should people be excommunicated and should they then be shunned? Should churches, in time of war, support an alternative national service program? What should the churches do with Mennonites who enlist in the military?

It has happened quite often that when difficult issues have come up and people could not come to an agreement that the churches split and separated. Some of these separations may have been God's will but one wonders if all of them were.

V. Mennonites in the World

Last summer I had the privilege of attending the Mennonite World Conference in Paraguay. There were Mennonites from 56 countries there. They came from Africa, India, Indonesia, and some countries from South America. When someone would speak from the front, it would be translated into seven other languages.

How did it happen that there are Mennonites in so many countries? (In fact the total number of countries with Mennonites is around 80). One part of the answer has to do with the work on Mennonite missionaries. If we go back to 1847 – over 150 years ago – then the first Mennonite missionaries went out from Holland to Indonesia. One of them, a Peter Janz, learned the local language so well that he translated the whole Bible into it. Another missionary was a doctor.

In 1881 some Mennonites from Russia also sent missionaries to Indonesia to work together with the Dutch. They also sent missionaries to India. There is a large Mennonite church there now. Mennonites in the US also sent missionaries to Indian people in their own country; they too learned the language and translated the Bible. And churches like those in the Leamington area have supported mission work with their money and their prayers for generations.

But it was not all the work of the missionaries. In a way, what they did was plant seeds. In some countries the churches grew more when there were no missionaries. In Ethiopia where some missionaries had worked for a number of years, the Mennonite church had about 5000 members in 1982. Then a communist government took over. The missionaries had to leave and the local ministers were put in jail and the churches were closed. But the Christians did not stop talking about their faith. Ten years later when a different government came to power and the churches could open up again, they found that now there were 50,000 members. So many people had joined despite the persecution. It was the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is not always that way. In some places the persecution continues. Sometimes it comes from a government; at other times from people who belong to a different religion. In some places in Africa there is no persecution but the people are extremely poor. For us here, in material ways, things are very good. But we also have a challenge. Our culture is saying to us, ‘you do not need a faith, you do not need a church; you can easily get by without it.’ Some of our people are influenced by that message. I believe that if we try to stand with Mennonites in other countries then we can strengthen them and that, in doing so, we can also be strengthened ourselves.

Sources: (i) “Smith’s Story of the Mennonites”, by C. Henry Smith, Fifth Edition Revised and Enlarged by Cornelius Krahn, Faith and Life Press, Newton, Kansas, 1981; (ii) “Through fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History”, by Harry Loewen and Steven Nolt, Harold Press, Waterloo, Ontario, 1996