

A Brief History of Elmwood MB Church

The Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church developed out of the North-End Church of Winnipeg. The North-End Church got its start when a small group of German immigrants met for prayer and fellowship beginning in 1907. Upon learning about the existence of a Mennonite Brethren Church in Winkler, they sent a call to that congregation for assistance. Winkler responded and arranged for its ministers, Johann Warkentin and Peter Neufeld, to visit the group four times annually. Warkentin in particular, showed a warm interest in the group. With his own funds he purchased a small chapel in St. Vital and had it moved to a vacant lot at the corner of Burrows and Andrews. In 1913 the group began using this building for worship.

In November of 1913 William Bestvater was appointed to take over this “city mission church.” During his eight years of ministry in Winnipeg, he began a program which was to continue for many years. He preached an average of two sermons each Sunday, conducted Bible studies during the week, started a Sunday School and visited homes and hospitals.

From 1921-1925 Erdmann Nickel replaced Bestvater. He was followed by C.N. Hiebert from Waldheim, Saskatchewan. Of major importance to the small congregation was the immigration of Russian Mennonites to Canada in the 1920’s. The “city mission” which until now had focused its efforts upon the provision of spiritual nurture to the German-speaking residents in Winnipeg’s North-End, now was confronted with the task of assisting Russian-Mennonite immigrants. For the first time, and certainly not the last, the character of the congregation was changing. C.N. Hiebert, evidently the right man for the task, spent many hours in Winnipeg train stations supplying comfort, food and clothing to the new immigrants.

Because of the influx of these immigrants the church building soon became crowded. In 1929 a new site was purchased at 621 College Avenue and by late fall of the same year the basement was ready for services. The main part of the structure was completed the following year.

By 1936 the membership and activities of the church had increased and become too much for one person to oversee and administer. Therefore, the conference asked C.N. Hiebert to devote his time to mission activities and Franz Isaac was elected as minister. In 1939 Isaac resigned and Franz C. Thiessen assumed the responsibilities of church leadership for four years. He was followed by B.B. Fast (1943-1949) and David K. Duerksen (1979-1953).

By 1951 the congregation was once more discussing the need for a bigger building and the possibility of relocating in a more desirable location. After much discussion it was agreed to build a new church next to the Christian Press, on a plot of land which had been donated by C.A. DeFehr. The dedication of the completed sanctuary took place on February 7, 1954. The second storey of the education wing was completed in 1961. At this new location the congregation once again changed its character. It became the congregation associated with the College. This unofficial link with MBBC, due to its proximity to the College, remained until the 1970’s.

In the meantime D.K. Duerksen had resigned as part-time pastor. I.W. Redekopp responded to an invitation and served the church as pastor for thirteen years. He was succeeded by William

Schmidt (1967-1973). Eugene Gerbrandt followed and served for three years. In 1977 P.R. Toews accepted a call and he was succeeded by Henry Brucks for a period of one year in 1980. Following a brief period without a pastor Jay Neufeld accepted a call in 1983.

Over the years the congregation employed a number of associate ministers. They are Rueben Pauls, Wally Schmidt, Jake Klassen and presently Doug Enns.

Over the past 15 years the character of the congregation has changed once again. Many of the younger members have moved to the suburbs and the older members have remained. The area once considered a desirable location is now taking on a more inner city identity. In terms of ministry to the community the congregation of Elmwood is now radically different than the local community. A problem of identity and direction is once again being faced.

The Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church

The story of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg goes back to the turn of the present century when a small group of German immigrants met for prayer and fellowship in private homes, as early as 1907. They were, at the time, without spiritual care. While still in Russia they had been in contact with an evangelical group locally known as “pietists”. When they learned about the existence of a Mennonite Brethren Church in Winkler, they sent a “Macedonian call” to its members for help. The Church in Winkler responded by arranging for its ministers, Johann Warkentin (1859-1948) and Peter Neufeld (18974-1941), to visit the group in Winnipeg four times annually. Warkentin, in particular, showed a warm interest in the group. With his own funds he purchased a small chapel in St. Vital and had it moved to a vacant lot at the corner of Burrows and Andrews.

The Church in Winkler, as also the group in Winnipeg, felt the need for a full-time resident minister to continue and expand the work of the mission church and requested the Northern District M.B. conference to find a suitable missionary. Hereupon the Conference appointed Wilhelm J. Bestvater (18979-1969) from Mountain Lake, Minnesota, to assume direction of the work.

When Rev. Bestvater took over the mission in November, 1913, the Church had twenty-two baptized members. Bestvater, who had received training at Hope Bible Institute in Cleveland, Ohio as well as through several correspondence courses, was a devoted and competent leader. His oratory and style in presenting the gospel appealed to his listeners. Many new members were added to the Church so that within a year they were already looking for a larger chapel. This need for more room was met temporarily by a hall at the corner of Manitoba Avenue and McKenzie Street, rented from the German Baptists. During his eight years of ministry in Winnipeg, Bestvater performed a variety of services. Besides preaching two sermons on Sunday and conducting a Bible study during the week, he visited homes and hospitals, and started a Sunday School. To enhance the Sunday services, he introduced, and personally conducted, the first Mennonite choir in Winnipeg. He was fortunate to have a family of musicians in his congregation. The Edward Horch family brought both beauty and depth to the music provided during the church services.

Aside from his regular church duties, Bestvater also provided spiritual and material help to numerous families who temporarily stayed in Winnipeg before they moved farther West. During World War I, he helped many young Mennonite men in obtaining exemption from military service.

It was also during this time that Anna Thiessen (1892-1977), who had just graduated from the Herbert Bible School, was asked to assist in the mission work in Winnipeg. She carried on an extensive tract ministry, visited homes and hospitals, and also taught Sunday School and German School classes. She served as matron of the Mary-Martha Home from 1925 to 1947. During her many years of service in the Winnipeg city mission, she proved herself to be deeply dedicated and faithful to her calling.

By 1916 the rented premises were once more inadequate to carry out the expanded and varied mission program and therefore the Conference decided to begin construction of a larger sanctuary at the junction of Burrows and Andrews Streets. However, limited funds permitted the construction of only a basement, measuring 30 feet by 60 feet, with an improvised roof. The basement could seat 550 people. In 1921, Rev. Bestvater left Winnipeg to teach in the Herbert Bible School and Erdman Nikkel from Laird, Sask., took over the work of the city mission and served as its pastoral leader until 1925.

In 1925, the Mission Board appointed C.N. Hiebert (1880-1974) from Waldheim, Sask., and with him a new epoch for the Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg was ushered in.

The 1920's witnessed a second major immigration of Russian Mennonites to Canada. About 21,000 Mennonites, who had lost all their material possessions during the Russian Revolution, managed by the grace of God to escape to Canada. The city mission, which until now had focused its efforts upon the provision of spiritual nurture to the German-speaking residents (mostly "Volga Deutsche") in Winnipeg, was suddenly confronted with the new task of assisting the Russian Mennonite immigrants who arrived in Winnipeg almost daily. C.N.Hiebert was evidently the right man for the task. Rev. Hiebert and Anna Thiessen spent many hours in Winnipeg train stations supplying comfort, food, and clothing to the new immigrants.

Among these immigrants were many who were members of the Mennonite Brethren Church. This sudden influx of so many Mennonite Brethren folk brought with it a certain sequence of events. Some of the new members bought or rented homes in North Kildonan as well as south of the C.P.R. tracks. Because distances were great and means of transportation poor, Winnipeg soon witnessed the establishment of several additional Mennonite Brethren Churches. The families living south of the tracks (South End) began to meet separately in 1927, and those in North Kildonan, in 1928.

The basement quarters on Burrows and Andrews were now too small and hardly adequate for people who were accustomed to worshipping in beautiful sanctuaries such as they had known in Rueckenau, Einlage, and Olgafeld. In 1929, a new site was purchased at 621 College Avenue and by late fall of the same year, the basement could be used for services. The main part of the structure was completed the following year.

The congregation was delighted and thankful for the beautiful new sanctuary. Church functions and activities flourished greatly. It was also at this time that the North-End Church initiated and hosted the annual "Bibelbesprechungen". These Bible study sessions, continued regularly, have been a great blessing to the Mennonite community in Manitoba. The North-End Church to this point served a dual function. It was, first of all, a city mission and, secondly, a traditional Mennonite Brethren Church, pastored by the Conference-appointed city missionary. By 1936 the membership and activities of the Church had increased and become too much for one person to oversee and administer. Therefore the Conference asked C.N. Hiebert to devote his full time to the city mission while the Church elected Franz Isaac to serve as its leading minister. In 1939 Isaac resigned and Franz Thiessen (1881-1950) assumed the responsibilities of church

leadership for four years. He was followed by B.B. Fast, who served in the capacity from 1943-1949, and following him, Rev. David K. Duerksen, from 1949 to 1953.

The growth of the Church during those years can be described in the words of Paul, “and the Lord added to the church daily”, so that by 1951 they were once more discussing the need for a bigger church and the possibility of relocating to a more desirable place. A committee consisting of four members – Mr. C.A. DeFehr, Mr. A.A. Kroeker, Mr. P. Barga and Mr. Wm. Neufeld – was asked to study this matter and to report back to the Church. After much discussion, it was agreed to build a new church next to the Christian Press, on a plot of land which had been donated by Mr. C.A. DeFehr. The Church at 621 College, which had been used for 23 years, was sold to the Christian Reformed conference. Mr. D.A. DeFehr turned the first sod at a special service on May 21, 1953. The dedication service for the completed sanctuary, which had been constructed at a cost of \$120,000, took place on February 7, 1954. The speakers at that special occasion were J.A. Toews, A.H. Unruh, and J.H. Quiring. The second storey of the education wing was completed in 1961.

During the meantime, Rev. D.K. Duerksen had resigned as part-time pastor. Rev. I.W. Redekop responded to its invitation and served the Church as pastor for thirteen years. His pastoral philosophy – “Die muessen alle angesprochen werden” – made the services very attractive so that during his time as pastor the Church membership increased to over six hundred.

Brother Redekop was succeeded by Rev. Wm. Schmidt, who served as pastor of the Church for six years (1967-73). Rev. Eugene Gerbrandt followed, and served for three years (1973-76). In 1977, the Rev. P.R. Toews from Clearbrook, B.C. accepted a call from this Church to come and shepherd the flock.

On this occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church, we are reminded that the church of Jesus Christ is committed to the task of proclaiming the good news, and of teaching all that the Master has commanded. As a part of the larger church of Jesus Christ, our local church exists to carry out this mandate. In the course of its existence, individual members, families, and indeed the entire congregation, have experienced times of joy and blessing as well as times of pain and sorrow. May the words of the Apostle Paul apply to us now, and to those who come after us, as they have to those who have gone before:

“Be not afraid, but speak and hold not thy peace, for I am with thee and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee, for I have much people in this city.” Acts 18:9.

Bill Schroeder, 1977.