

A History of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization

By Walter Franz

In Partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the course
History 267G

Waterloo, Ontario
December 1976

(Borrowed from Archives at CMBC Winnipeg,
February 1983)

Introduction

In the Fall of 1959, the Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan became the Conference organization of the congregations of Saskatchewan affiliated with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and in turn with the General Conference Mennonite Church of North America. Prior to this time these congregations were unified by two other provincial organizations, namely, The Minister's and Deacon's Conference and The Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization.

It is significant that some of the congregations now holding membership in the Saskatchewan Conference owe their existence, at least in part, to a Mennonite Youth Movement that swept through the General Conference Mennonite communities beginning in 1958. It is also true that much of the program and many of the institutions of the present day Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan (COMOS) arose out of the Mennonite Youth Society of Saskatchewan.

In seeking to understand the present shape of the Saskatchewan Conference, it is necessary to trace at least part of its development through the history of the Mennonite Youth Society of Saskatchewan. This history makes an interesting study in itself and stands as a significant movement independent of its relationship to COMOS.

It is to this history that I now turn. It has been my intention to trace as accurately as possible the origin and development of this Youth Society, later referred to as the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization. I have further endeavoured to reflect something of the dynamic spirit of this movement. How well I have succeeded will be for the reader to determine.

A. FROM HOT-DOG STAND TO ONE-HALF MILLION DOLLAR VENTURE

In 1938 a group of young people interested in the work of the General Conference Mennonite Church operated a hot-dog stand at the tri-annual sessions in Saskatoon.¹ While listening to the reports and discussions of a special session of the Young People's Union, this small but visionary group conceived the notion of a related organization in Saskatchewan. Further inspiration and direction was given by Olin Krehbiehl of Berne, Indiana, president of the Young People's Union of the General Conference Mennonite Church.²

¹ "Remarkable Growth of S.M.Y.O.," The Canadian Mennonite, Apr. 2, 1954, p.3.

² "Mennonite Youth Organization," The Mennonite Encyclopedia, III, 643.

It should, however, not be supposed that these conference sessions were the first or only factor pertaining to the developments of what finally came to be called the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization. There appear to be at least three other elements involved in this movement.

Firstly, the Christian Endeavour Committees were thriving, youth centered organizations in the Mennonite Congregations in Saskatchewan. There is recorded of at least one meeting of all these Endeavour Committee's prior to the 1938 General Conference sessions. This meeting is recorded in Sept. 25, 1936 issue of Der Bote.³ Representation at the annual sessions of the Mennonite Youth Society in the early years of its existence came via the local Christian Endeavour Committees. In 1946 a total of 56 Endeavour groups were represented in the form of one delegate for every fifty members.⁴

Secondly, it is evident that leadership played a major role in the organization and in the character of this new movement. Early leadership in the Rosthern area came primarily from Rev. J. C. Schmidt, Rev. Isaac Epp, and Mr. Henry W. Friesen. In the southern part of the province the three men giving initial impetus to the youth movement were Rev. Valentine Nickel, Rev. Hans Dyck and Rev. Isaac Derksen. The secretary of the General Conference Mennonite Church Home Mission Board, A.J. Neuenschwander assessed this leadership in the following manner: "When it comes to faith in God and courage to undertake great things for the Lord, these men stand well in the ranks of the heroes of Bible times."⁵ Although other young men provide leadership in the origin and development of this youth organization, these men provided intense and stable leadership for at least a decade.

One person in particular stands out in the history of the organization. Henry W. Friesen remained actively involved in the youth movement from the time of the hot-dog stand in 1938 until the Youth Farm holdings were transferred to the Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan in 1964.

This man's vision, enthusiasm and passion for mission work and his ability to solicit funds for youth projects, and in particular for the Mennonite Youth Farm, were instrumental in the success of these ventures. Mr. Friesen's simple faith and perseverance inspired others to become involved in projects of the Saskatchewan youth movement. Continually, he attributed the growth of this work to God's constant guidance and help. When, at an annual meeting on March 27, 1954 the growth of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization reviewed, Henry made the comment: "We never started

³ Der Bote Index, p. 113.

⁴ Isaac Epp, "Youth Organizations in Canada", The Mennonite, May 7, 1948, p. 11.

⁵ A.J. Neuenschwander, "The Saskatchewan Retreats", The Mennonite, Aug. 21, 1940, pp. 9-10.

anything without prayer.”⁶ Rev. John G. Rempel was convinced that Friesen was the “leader, initiator and soul of the Youth Farm.”⁷ The Youth Farm itself was center around which the youth movement revolved. It is true that Henry Friesen for the sake of this work and His Lord became in turn an administrator, a farmer, a chaplain, a father to orphan children, an orderly, a solicitor of funds, and a camp organizer. In a very real sense he became all things to a number of people for the benefit of their salvation.

Thirdly, it was out of the English-German Academy at Rosthern, The Rosthern Bible School and the Swift Current Bible Institute that leadership and inspiration came. The early leadership most definitely represented the faculty and students of these institutions. Out of the context of biblical studies, Anabaptist-Mennonite studies, and the promotion of missions and revivalism a sense of being a part of a God-movement arose that enveloped all the General Conference Mennonite communities of Saskatchewan, opened new horizons for missions and service in the province, influenced youth programs in Canada and the U.S.A and sent missionaries to Japan and India. It would be inaccurate to suggest that this spirit of revivalism originated with the Bible schools. The converse is likely nearer the truth, however, these schools fostered this spirit and channelled it through instruments within the Mennonite churches.

The youth movement arising out of the 1958 General Conference sessions, and inspired by the afore-mentioned factors became a large and influential movement in the province involving a labour in which hundreds of people became actively involved. Within fifteen years of its official organization it became a financial institution with net assets amounting to between 300 and 400 thousand dollars and with an annual financial overturn of over one quarter of a million dollars.⁸

B. “YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS”⁹

Behind a movement there lies inevitably a spirit, a vision which becomes embodied in an evolving organization or institution. The vision inspiring the creation of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization was a united youth for Christ responsible for fostering spirituality within the

⁶ “Remarkable Growth” p. 3

⁷ John G. Rempel, “Bist du Gewachsen, Kind?”, *The Y. F. Messenger*, March, 1949, p. 11.

⁸ Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization Annual Reports 1963 & 1964.

⁹ *The Holy Bible*, The Revised Standard Version, Grand Rapids, 1946-1952, Acts 2:17.

movement, mobilizing Christian youth for service within the context of the General Conference Mennonite Churches in Saskatchewan.

At a spring meeting in 1940, the spirituality and the vitality of the youth movement became visualized was compared to the Old Testament figures of Daniel and his friends. Henry W. Friesen indicated that these faithful Old Testament figures constituted the first Christian youth organization.¹⁰

In addition to this type of vision, there was a goal of injecting a Conference into Saskatchewan Mennonite youth. Homer Janzen, active within the early years of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization (S.M.Y.O.), makes this statement concerning the General Conference Mennonite Church: "We have everything that any other denomination offers, and more."¹¹

The new youth society within the conference context was to find its meaning in missions and service. A verse often quoted in the period of inception and development in the 1940's was the following: "For the son of man came to seek and to save the lost."¹² The hymn that was repeatedly used was related to this text: "Die Sach ist Dein, Herr Jesu Christ." (The Work is Thine, O Christ our Lord)¹³

Armed with such visions and intentions, representative youth at a meeting at the Canadian Conference sessions in Waldheim in 1940 elected the first committee composed of: Rev. J. C. Schmidt, chairman; Henry W. Friesen, vice-chairmen; and Rev. Paul Schroeder, secretary. A constitution as now prepared and presented for adoption at a special meeting at the 1941 Canadian Conference sessions in Laird.¹⁴ The name given to this fledging organization, linked to the Young People's Union of the General Conference Mennonite Church, was: The Mennonite Youth Society of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada: Saskatchewan Division.¹⁵ Most often it was simply referred to as the Mennonite Youth Society.

The vision, however, extended beyond a committee and an organization. A place was necessary to give this vision concreteness and reality. Even while a constitution was being prepared in 1940, prayers were uttered for a suitable headquarters facility. The dominion Experimental Farm just outside the town of Rosthern became the symbol of an ideal place for youth work and a centre from which to reach out with acts of Christian service and with words of proclamation.

¹⁰ Die Jugendecke, Der Bote, July 24, 1940, p.6.

¹¹ Homer Janzen, "Mennonite Youth Society of the Conference of Mennonites of Canada, Saskatchewan Division," Winnipeg, May 24, 1949, p. 3.

¹² The Holy Bible, Luke 19:10.

¹³ Die Jugendecke, Der Bote, July 24, 1940, p. 5.

¹⁴ Janzen, p. 3.

¹⁵ Janzen, p. 4.

C. THE MENNONITE YOUTH FARM

The Dominion Experimental Farm at Rosthern was opened 1909. Over the years it developed a reputation for having the finest dairy herd in Saskatchewan, as well as, a superior herd of Yorkshire swine. Horticulture and field work also became specialties. The Experimental Farm yard became a veritable park with beautiful lawns, hedges and numerous varieties of trees including an orchard.

In 1939 this Farm fell subject to the spending cuts made necessary by the events of World War II and was, therefore, closed. This valuable piece of property now became saleable and among the interested buyers was the newly formed Mennonite Youth Society

The Experimental Farm consisted of 640 acres of well-fenced land plus five dwellings, all with electricity and running water, a horse barn for 20 horses, a 24 cow capacity dairy barn, chicken and brooder houses, hog barns, a machine shed, and a large granary with a built in elevator. This site with its facilities was, according to chairman Jacob C. Schmidt, exactly what the Mennonite Youth Society (M.Y.S.) needed: "We feel that it is very essential to have a place for an orphan home, Bible school, Retreats and a site where our own youth activities could be centralized. This farm is ideal for such activities."¹⁶ It should be pointed out, also, that chairman Schmidt was also a teacher in the Rosthern Bible School.

A special session of prayer was devoted to this concern at the first Sask. Youth retreat held of the very grounds in question in June of 1941. No doubt the aspirations of owning this property became very intense through the annual retreats of 1941-1943. I do not believe that it is out of place to suggest that for many of the General Conference Mennonites in Saskatchewan, the Experimental Farm land, subsequently the Mennonite Youth Farm, became Holy Ground.

Active correspondence with Dominion Government officials regarding the purchase of the Experiment Farm began in 1942. It was soon evident that a number of individuals also had aspirations to acquire this highly valued piece of real estate. Some of these individuals tendered prices considerably in excess of the actual sale price. The decision to sell, however, was made in favour of the Mennonite Youth Society for reasons by agriculture Minister J.C. Gardiner: "In the type of work you have outlined it would seem that the Farm could be used to very good advantage, and it is because of that consideration that we would be prepared to consider its sale at this time."¹⁷ By this time the uses for which the Experimental Farm was to be bought had been articulated more fully. This Farm was to become the

¹⁶ J.C. Schmidt, "Where are the Men?" The Mennonite, Oct. 26, 1943, p. 9.

¹⁷ Die Jugendecke, Der Bote, Apr. 17, 1946, p. 6.

location where the Mennonite Youth Society would hold its annual retreats and song festivals, have its central offices, and found an orphan's home. In addition to this, the farm itself was to be instrumental in the calling, preparation and support of Daily Vacation Bible School workers, evangelists and missionaries. There was the suggestion that in some way the Farm might serve the entire serve the entire Canadian Conference Mennonite constituency.

The Dominion Government, through the Hon. James Gardiner, extended a most reasonable offer to the MYS. The Government was willing to sell the Experimental Farm for a price of \$20,000 with a down payment of \$5,000. The remaining \$15,000 was to be submitted in equal payments over a three-year period. Not only were these terms offered on an interest free basis, but a 5% discount would be in effect for each instalment payment which would be submitted in advance of the due date. The purchase agreement was made in December, 1943 with the contract of sale becoming official in February, 1944.

The Mennonite Youth Society was most anxious to accept the very generous offer of the Federal Government. MYS leaders were well aware of the fact that the Farm buildings alone had cost the government \$60,000 to erect.¹⁸ Now began an appeal for funds which not only extended throughout Saskatchewan but included the whole General Conference constituency. J. Winfield Fretz, after a visit to the Experimental Farm in the August of 1943, wrote an article in the General Conference Mennonite Church's communication vehicle, The Mennonite, in which he advocated generous support for the purchase of the Farm. An incentive, he indicated, was the favourable rate exchange making each American dollar worth an additional ten cents in Canadian currency.¹⁹ Financial support for this venture came from Mennonites throughout Saskatchewan in particular. Although his was considered to be a youth project, it was the adults who supported it with their finances.

The \$5,000 down payment was duly made and the title to this property registered in the name of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. Only in 1963 was the title transferred to the Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan. The remainder of the purchase price was repayed, slightly ahead of schedule, by October of 1946. The value of this property for the visibility of a youth program in the province of Saskatchewan can hardly be estimated. Predictably the Farm now bore the name "Mennonite Youth Farm" and it indeed became the centre of activity for the MYS for several decades.

¹⁸ "The Mennonite Youth Organization." P. 6.

¹⁹ J. Winfield Fretz, "Help the Mennonite Young People In Canada", The Mennonite, Nov. 23, 1943, p. 9.

The Youth Farm had been purchased for mission work and it was clearly the intention for the MYS committee to carry out that aim. The earliest plans were to conduct youth retreats of the Farm grounds and to found an orphanage. Retreats were being conducted annually in 1941. Almost immediately upon purchase of the Farm solicitation of funds for the development of a children's home began. In the course of this process, however, the committee became convinced that a nursing home for the elderly and those with terminal illness was a more pressing need.

In the summer of 1944 after a dedication service at the youth retreat, the Invalid Home was opened. The largest home on the Farm had been converted for this purpose and it now housed eight patients. This structure was gradually expanded until the capacity totalled over fifty beds. Chaplaincy services, as well as regular Sunday morning worship services, were a part of the spiritual care provided for the guests. Despite inadequate facilities and lack of staff, or untrained staff, this facility met a very definite need. A spirit of loving concern may have more than compensated for the weaknesses in facilities and trained workers. More often than not there was a waiting list composed of those needed this care but could not be accommodated due to lack of room.

The cost of operating the Invalid Home was initially borne to a large extent by the guests themselves. In 1945 the fee was \$30,00 per month for each guest. This was subsidized by an additional dollar or two by the MYS. The Invalid Home was replaced by the ultra-modern Mennonite Nursing Home on the same Youth Farm Grounds in 1968. This new facility had a capacity of sixty-eight beds.

The Invalid Home often provided extended care for those who could no longer look after their own basic needs. Some were deaf, others blind, many bedridden and unable to feed themselves. Henry W. Friesen arrived at this explanation for the suffering and the ministry of the Invalid Home in response to this suffering: "God wants to see what we Christians will do. I believe God has given us a mission field where we are to be the good Samaritan."²⁰

The wide-spread need for nursing care seemed to warrant another Invalid home in the southern part of the province. Under the auspices of the Youth Farm a large building was purchased in the town of Herbert. The very reasonable purchase price of \$3,000 was paid to Dr. Clamon of Swift Current. Following an opening service of August 12, 1951 the Herbert Invalid home began its ministry.²¹ Its history also depicts continual growth and expansion into new facilities and a fairly stable program to the present time.

²⁰ Henry W. Friesen, "Youth Farm Project," The Y.F. Messenger, Oct., 1947, p. 12.

²¹ M.Y.S. Annual Reports, 1951.

Meanwhile some changes were becoming necessary in the function of the Invalid Home at Rosthern. In addition to ministering to guests requiring nursing care, the Home also ministered to several “harmless” mental patients. It was evident that these should be given a different kind of attention. With the encouragement of \$4,000 donated to the MYS by the Mennonite Relief Committee of Saskatchewan the decision was made to proceed building a home large enough to accommodate 20 guests suffering from mental retardation.²² When the old Rosthern Hospital became available plans to build were changed in favour of purchasing the hospital and moving it to a prepared location on the Mennonite Youth Farm. The capacity of this facility was twelve guests. The Mental Home, as it was referred to, began operations on January 15, 1954. Two years later this work was expanded with the dedication of a building purchased from the Lutheran church in Laird.²³ It was now possible to accommodate approximately 25 guests and to house the males and females in separate quarters.

Farm work and chores could not always be done responsibly and profitably with those suffering from mental retardation. Also, it may not have been therapeutically the best kind of activity for these people. It does remain a fact, however, that understanding that loving care was extended. Henry Friesen once again proved to be the kind of person who shared himself fully with those who have often been treated as “the least” in society. Mr. Friesen discovered the gifts of these guests, organized them into a touring group and visited Mennonite congregations where these poor in mental ability could render a spiritual service. Somewhat later special camps were organized to benefit the mentally retarded.

The initial prompting to found an orphanage or children’s home was never forgotten. This project also, was given impetus by a special gift of \$5,000. The donor in this case was reverend I.P. Friesen. Construction began in 1946 and in 1947 the Children’s Home began functioning by opening its doors to three Nickel children, George, Peter and Ruth.²⁴ The establishment of this home was motivated by the words of Jesus: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.” It was pointed out with deep emotional feeling that there were a thousand and more homeless waifs in the province of Saskatchewan. “Dare we then go by those little ones that are ‘neglected, ragged and wild?’... Think of them! Outcasts! Not wanted! No mother to love them, no father to take care of them and guide them. Are there really none?”²⁵ In response to this need the Children’s Home was

²² M.Y.S, 1951.

²³ Laura Bergen, “The Saskatchewan Youth” Nov. 23, 1956, p. 7.

²⁴ Bergen, p. 5.

²⁵ Sara Lehn, “Our Children’s Home,” The Y.F. Messenger, Dec., 1949, p. 17.

established. The attention, clearly was also to present a faith, a loving Christ to the unloved. The staff of children of the Children's Home became known as "The Sunshine Family."²⁶

Among the complex of charitable institutions that composed the Mennonite Youth Farm was also a Crippled Children's Home. Crippled children from coast to coast were accepted here. This ministry began with a dedication service on May 3, 1953.²⁷ In 1960 the Children's Home was closed and the Crippled Children's Home was expanded to accommodate about 20 patients. This work indeed required patience and love for many of the children were severely handicapped in every way and totally helpless.

All of the charitable institutions that have been briefly described were considered part of the home mission program of the Mennonite Youth Society of Saskatchewan. Frequently, when employees were sought it was with the invitation to participate in the mission work of the Youth Farm or Youth Society. To keep alive this sense of mission, weekly bible study and prayer meetings were held for staff members. In addition, each institution was given spiritual care through Bible study, prayer meetings or worship experiences.

The farm operation with its crops and animals was an integral part of this mission venture. Food supplies from the farm were, for at least the first decade or more, made available to the institutions. The farm setting itself was a part of the care given to the children and the retarded guests. The total work of the MYS was also being underwritten, financially, by the farm operations. Financial records for a ten-year period from the early 1950's to the early 1960's indicate that an average of approximately \$5,000 annually was donated to the total mission work of the MYS. This money was usually given to the Youth Farm institutions, other home mission work, foreign missions, and at least one occasion a \$1,000 gift was given to the Rosthern Bible School.

The farming operations in addition to the usual grain and hay crops, involved a dairy operation eventually expanding to 60 cows plus young stock, a sizable piggery, chickens, and, in the early years, sheep and horses.

A unique feature of the farming operation of the Mennonite Youth Farm for many years was the pasteurization plant which began operations in November, 1949. This plant made it possible for the farm to deliver bottled milk to the town of Rosthern. As many as 500 quarts of milk daily and 30 gallons of cream, weekly, were supplied to the Rosthern Junior College, the Bible School, cafe's, hotels, and

²⁶ Janzen, p. 3.

²⁷ M.Y.S., 1952.

stores in the town of Rosthern. Often milk was purchased from surrounding farmers in order to meet these obligations. During the years of operation several prizes for cleanliness and production were won by this dairy industry.

D. THE RETREATS AND RALLIES

No single factor seems to have assisted the vision of a united Mennonite youth for Christ as much as the annual retreats of the Youth Society. Here the challenge of mission was presented, Youth Farm activities reported on, evangelistic services held and young people dedicated for service. Song festivals at times became a part of the retreat activities.

The first retreat sponsored by the MYS was held on the Experimental Farm grounds June 13 – June 15, 1941. Permission had been granted by Mr. J. C. Friesen, a local farmer leasing the Farm since it ceased operation as an Experimental Farm in 1939. This retreat, which had been the object of prayer since 1938, was conducted around the theme, “All for Jesus.”²⁸ One Hundred and twenty-eight young people registered in response to the program that had been printed and distributed in advance. The three teachers from the Rosthern Bible School, Rev. Isaac Epp, Rev. Jacob C. Schmidt, and Rev. John G. Rempel spoke on topics relating to Spiritual Life, The Book of Romans, and Foundational beliefs of the Mennonite Church respectively. Missionary Voth provided information and inspiration for the mission field. Special music was provided by a quartet from the German-English academy.

A meaningful feature of the first retreat for many of the young people was the camp fire service at which many of the young people had opportunity to give a personal testimony while placing a branch on the fire and thereby replenishing it. It was this practise, as well as the use of the English language, that received criticism at the Canadian Conference sessions in Laird in 1941 and in Manitoba in 1942.²⁹

The response of this first retreat on the part of the young people was overwhelmingly in favour. The experience of having this kind of fellowship around the campfire, singing together and hearing inspirational messages were highlights. If there was any criticism, it was an oft repeated comment that the retreat had been much too short. One young person suggested that it should have been at least a week in length.³⁰

²⁸ Die Judendecke, Der Bote, July 2, 1942, p.7.

²⁹ Janzen, p. 3.

³⁰ Die Judendecke, Der Bote, July 2, 1941, p. 7.

The first retreat in the southern part of the province was held in the Swift Current area at Gowan's Grove. The group activities were conducted in a tent erected for that purpose. When a camp-site was attained the Sunday services at these retreats became a community affair. On Sunday, July 25, 1945 an afternoon song festival (Saengerfest) was conducted with choirs from Swift Current and Herbert participating. While the registration for the retreat was approximately 60 young people, the attendance on this particular afternoon was 450 young people.³¹

These retreats did a great deal to keep the Mennonite young people, scattered across the province, in contact with each other. Prompted by evangelists like Rev. J. J. Esau, many decisions for Christ were recorded and "many a life of sinfulness had a 'monkey-wrench' thrown into it."³² Other young people were prompted to dedicate themselves, their talents and their training to the work of the Lord. At the close of one of the retreats, fifty-nine youth responded to such an invitation.³³ It was largely due to the challenge of the retreats that twelve young people declared themselves as willing candidates for foreign mission service in 1946.³⁴

A great inspiration to these retreats was the appearance of missionaries and evangelists returning from the field to report enthusiastically to the very group that called them into service and supported them financially.

The missionary emphasis in the retreat program was supplemented with youth rallies and mission conferences. The first two youth rallies were in 1946 and their clear intent was to foster missions. Subsequently, mission conferences, planned together with the Saskatchewan Minister's and Deacon's Conference, kept alive this emphasis. Missionaries and mission Board personal reported on the work of missions within the General Conference Mennonite Church. This fostered a spirit of urgency for missions and at the same time provided an opportunity for fund-raising. The number of young people prepared to enter mission work, the huge gatherings for mission conferences, and the significant amounts of money raised speak for the strength of this movement.

Between retreats, rallies and mission conferences, leaders of the MYS kept alive the urgency of missions with pleas and promptings in Mennonite periodicals. In 1948 president J. C. Schmidt stirred his young people with this message:

³¹ Isaac Derksen, "Retreat Held Near Swift Current Saskatchewan." The Mennonite, Nov. 30m 1943, p. 7.

³² Janzen, p. 6.

³³ Isaac Epp, "A Living Sacrifice," The Y. F. Messenger, Oct., 1947.

³⁴ Isaac Derksen, "Sask. Minister's and Deacons's Hold Conference," The Mennonite, Jan. 15, 1946.

Do you realize the dire need in the world today? Dark war clouds are once again looming on the horizon. Hundreds of people are suffering from want of food and clothing. Thousands are sinking into Christ-less graves every day because they have never heard the gospel story of a loving Lord who saves. The indifference in the world is appalling. Never before has the church been in greater need for men than today. We are called to "redeem the time" for the days are evil.³⁵

Other leaders responded by presenting specific needs and fields for the young people to give serious attention to. Rev. David P. Friesen of Barnes Crossing in North-western Saskatchewan invited teachers to come to his area for the purpose of "gaining souls for the Lord."³⁶

E. THE MENNONITE YOUTH SOCIETY BECOMES A MISSION AGENCY

1. Daily Vacation Bible School

The first summer Bible School within the framework of the General Conference churches of Saskatchewan was conducted by Henry W. Friesen in 1937. From this small beginning this method of outreach became a major instrument of the MYS. Out of the Experimental Farm gathering of 1942, 42 workers were sent throughout the province to "share the Gospel with the children."³⁷ This program most definitely ministered to Mennonite families who had scattered throughout the province in the two years of the Depression. Rev. Isaac Epp saw the Mennonite diaspora in this light: "The Mennonite people are scattered throughout Saskatchewan as the seed in the parable of the sower and the seed. We need to grow and bear fruit where the Lord has placed us."³⁸ One aspect of the D.V.B.S. program was to further the faithfulness of these isolated people. The interest, however, to also reach beyond the Mennonite fold was keen.

The pattern of work and activities for the D.V.B.S. program was similar throughout the province. The youth workers would visit all the homes with invitations to send children to the summer Bible School. Children would travel as far as twenty miles to attend. This would mean lodging with friends or relatives for the duration of the week. The lessons, conducted in German or in English, were based on bible stories and supplemented with flannel-graphs, pictures and with memorization of scripture verses. The evangelistic emphasis was strong. It appears as though a full-time evangelist and colporteur were

³⁵ Schmidt, p. 25.

³⁶ David P. Friesen, "The Need in the North," The Y.F. Messenger, Mar., 1942, p. 11.

³⁷ Fretz, p. 9.

³⁸ Isaac Epp, the Y.F. Messenger, Sept, 1949.

hired in relation to D.V.B.S. program.³⁹ Conversions were carefully recorded and converts were followed up with letters and Sunday School papers.

The year of greatest summer Bible School activity appears to have been 1958 with a total of 79 schools, conducted by 250 teachers. The total enrolment was 2,944 students.⁴⁰ The schools could vary in size from five students to well over fifty. In the S.M.Y.O. minutes of March 26, 1960 it is recorded that this work now became the responsibility of the newly formed Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan.

2. Radio Work

The Minister's and Deacon's Conference in session in October, 1947 authorized Isaac Epp to investigate the possibilities of religious radio broadcasting and to report back at a later date. The MYS had already given a favourable response to such a possibility. Thus, when Epp gave an encouraging report at the Minister's Course in the Rosthern Bible School in March, 1948 he was immediately advised to proceed. This new work became a joint project of the Minister's and Deacon's Conference and the MYS. The first broadcast appeared over station CKBI in Prince Albert on Oct. 24, 1948.⁴¹

The aims of this venture were four-fold: to win the lost for Christ, to strengthen believers, to bring the gospel to shut-ins and to keep in contact with Mennonites living in isolation.⁴² This program originated in Prince Albert, and was beamed virtually the length and width of the populated regions of Saskatchewan.

This broadcast, initially directed by Rev. Isaac Epp appeared at 7:00 A.M. on Sundays under the name of "Wings of the Morning." The format included German songs and predominantly English messages. Music was provided by singing groups from the local churches and from the German-English academy and the Bible Schools. Occasional broadcasts originated from the Mennonite Youth Farm and from the Mission field where MYS supported missionaries laboured under General Conference auspices. These programs were considered to be extra-special.

Financial support for the radio work came directly from the Christian Endeavour committees and also from the individual donors. Letter support, especially from isolated communities was also initially strong.

³⁹ Isaac Epp, "Youth Organizations in Canada," The Mennonite, May 7, 1946, p. 7.

⁴⁰ S.M.Y.O. Annual Reports, 1959.

⁴¹ Janzen, p. 9.

⁴² "Wings of the Morning." The Y.F. Messenger, Mar., 1949, p. 11.

3. Camp Work

In the Middle to late 1930's the Mennonite community in the Swift Current area experienced a revival under the ministry of Nicholai Bannmann. The Swift Current Bible School arose out of this context and became "the nucleus of the spiritual life of our southern youth."⁴³ As was the case in the north, Bible School staff and students became active in retreat and D.V.B.S. ministries. What was needed in the southern part of the province was a retreat facility that would become a permanent place for young people's gatherings. Two retreats had already been held in the Swift Current area since 1943.

In 1945 a property called Iverson's Beach was purchased for \$10,000 plus a \$32,500 debt on the property. It was located on LacFelletier 26 miles S.W. of Swift Current. This beautiful property, nestled in the rolling hills of South-west Saskatchewan, consisted of 320 acres of land, an auditorium-restaurant building, seven cabins and some boats.⁴⁴ By 1947 this facility, called Elim Gospel Beach, was fully paid for.

The purpose of obtaining Elim Gospel Beach was articulated by John Loewen, teacher at the Swift Current Bible School:

Young people desire to make contribution to society and to the Kingdom of God. They want ownership and responsibility. They want to develop a strong Christian character. Besides developing physically they want to develop spiritually and socially. They want to be of service in carrying out the great commission of Christ when he said 'preach the gospel to every creature.' By having their own retreat grounds and making it available not only to Mennonites, but to all those who desire a place that provides spiritual and physical rest this purpose is, in part, realized.⁴⁵

The first children's camp was held in 1946 and was the beginning of a successful camping and retreat program that lasted several decades. 1960 the total enrolment for all Elim camps was 350 people.

The camp program in the north was initially conducted by the Rosthern Youth Farm. In 1956, however, the MYS became the recipients of the Pike Lake Bible Camp. This camp, donated by the Saskatoon churches, was located some 20 miles south-west of Saskatoon on a parcel of leased land within the Pike Lake provincial Park. This site became the main camping facility for the Mennonite churches of the north.

⁴³ Janzen, p. (?).

⁴⁴ John P. Loewen, "Elim Gospel Beach," Mennonite Life, July, 1947, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Loewen, p. 5.

It was not long before these camps became the focus of considerable discussion and disagreement concerning the methodology employed in evangelism. A polarization on this question hindered the effectiveness of these camps from at least the early 1960's until the present time.

4. Missionaries and Voluntary Service Workers.

The first home mission worker of the MYS to receive partial support was Rev. Isaac Epp, working under the General Conference Mission Board in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Since he was secretary of the MYS, editor of Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth and also editor of the Young People's Messenger and director of the "Wings of the Morning" radio program, it is readily seen that he was deeply immersed in youth work.

In the winter of 1948, Erna Dyck, graduate of the Rosthern Bible School, began work as a full-time missionary in the Mayfair and Pleasant Hill region of Saskatoon. She was supported by the Christian Endeavour committees, the Saskatoon Young People's Society and the First Mennonite Church, Saskatoon.⁴⁶ Although the work was not limited to Mennonites, there was nonetheless deep concern for many Old Colony Mennonites whose families were large, whose economic plight was severe, and whose connection with the church was very loose. Miss Dyck's work with children was supplemented with the youth, choir and Sunday School work of Homer Janzen and Elmer Richert who were university students in Saskatoon. This work was also related to work begun by Benno Toews in 1938 and carried on by Rev. J.J. Thiessen. The Bethesda Church in Langham was given to the MYS for mission work in the Mayfair area in 1949. The First Mennonite Church donated a building for the Pleasant Hill district somewhat later. The MYS, therefore, had a part in founding of two congregations in Saskatoon, the Mayfair Mennonite Church and the Pleasant Hill Mennonite Church.

While this work was in process the MYS was making plans to launch an outreach program among native Canadians on an Indian Reserve just north of Rosthern. In 1948 Mr. and Mrs. Bill Zacharias began the work with a home visitation program. This work was interrupted for several weeks by an order from the chief to leave his people alone because they did not wish to have their religion changed. Somewhat later public meetings were conducted in a vacant school. This work proved to be very difficult and unsuccessful. The hope was that this would be but a beginning in mission work among the Indian people. "May God continue to lead even here, not only on this reserve, but also the other

⁴⁶ Henry W. Friesen. "Review Yearly Work in Saskatchewan." The Mennonite, Apr. 20, 1948, p. 14.

sixty-seven reserves in Saskatchewan which hold an Indian population of some twenty-thousand souls. They are ready for the Gospel; who will go and bring it to them?"⁴⁷

The D.V.B.S. program prepared the way for a MYS mission worker in the Northern Pine or Pierceland area with outreach into the Good Soil community. Jake Andres and Jake Giesbrecht were the D.V.B.S. workers assigned to this region in 1949. When Andres returned home after the summer, Giesbrecht remained throughout the winter working with young people, assisting Rev. J. Dyck in Pierceland and conducting services on alternative Sundays in Good Soil. The Jake Reimers were stationed were stationed in the Northern Pine area in the early 1950's and after two years of service they were replaced by Reuben and Tina Siemens.

In 1950 another worker was sent to a northern location. Ella Heppner, graduate of the Swift Current Bible School, began work in the Lake Four or Debden-Park Valley area north-west of Prince Albert. The work consisted of Sunday School work, Bible Study and, prayer meetings, children's hour, home visitation, sewing for poor Mennonite families, and young people's activities.⁴⁸ This work became a Conference of Mennonites in Canada mission station.

Another type of youth worker in Saskatchewan was the Voluntary Service worker. Inspiration for VS involvement grew out of an YHU executive meeting in 1947 in Newton Kansas, at which the MYS was represented. It was in this same year that four Saskatchewan young people journeyed to the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Montana on a Voluntary Service assignment. That same year eleven youth, including eight from the U.S.A., became the first VS workers on the Youth Farm. This was the beginning of a an extended VS program in which American Mennonite young man fulfilled their compulsory service to their country in lieu of military service. While some difficulty arose from time to time because of constant turnover of staff, this service was a valuable experience for both the Youth Farm and the young men rendering this service.

The mission arm of the MYS also extended to foreign missions. A group of mission-minded men in the Rosthern area donated a total of \$6,000 to the MYS to be invested in foreign missions. This money was first of all invested in the pasteurization plant at the Youth Farm with the stipulation that \$2,000 plus interest be channelled into foreign missions over the next three years. Initial amounts of about \$200 - \$400 per person were paid to Alvin Friesen, Dorothy Andres and Martha Giesbrecht in their perpetration for mission work.

⁴⁷ Janzen, p. 8.

⁴⁸ M.Y.S. Annual reports, 1951.

In 1951, Esther Paetkau left for Japan with the support of the MYS.⁴⁹ She was considered to be a missionary of this society even though her official sending agency was the General Conference Mennonite Mission Board. Her annual reports to the MYS, expressing appreciation for prayerful and financial support, are evidence of the obligation she felt to this organization. The young people of Saskatchewan looked forward to these annual reports and especially to the contact with their missionaries during the furlough years.

The year 1952 saw a missionary couple, the Ben Sawatzky's sail for the General Conference Mennonite mission field in India.⁵⁰ They too, went with the full financial backing of the MYS. Contact with the Sawatzky's was maintained in the manner described in relation to Missionary Paetkau.

Until the end of the 1961 fiscal year the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth Organization designated its contributions for the missionaries it was instrumental in sending out. Beyond this date the contributions to missions are listed without designation as the amounts contributed gradually lessen until, in 1967, no contributions are explicitly for missions. The closest semblance of this was a \$100 donation to the Canadian Mennonite for the payment of subscriptions for Pazmen.⁵¹

F. Internal Operations

The first committee of the Youth Society consisted of three members. This committee was soon enlarged to five members to accommodate representation from the southern part of the province and from the Minister's and Deacon's Conference. In 1949 constitutional changes took place. The change in name from the Mennonite Youth Society of The General Conference Church: Saskatchewan Division to the Mennonite Youth Society of The Conference of Mennonites in Canada: Saskatchewan Division reflected the Canadian identification.⁵² The governing committee was now enlarged to nine members. Effective, 1953, six out of nine board members must be under thirty years of age.

As the organization grew, separate holdings committees were formed to look after the administration of the Youth Farm, Elim Gospel Beach and Pike Lake Bible Camp and the Herbert Invalid Home.

⁴⁹ M.Y.S. Annual Reports, 1951.

⁵⁰ M.Y.S. Annual Reports, 1951.

⁵¹ M.Y.S. Annual reports, 1953.

⁵² Janzen, p. 3.

The annual meetings of the MYS and by the late 1950/s the S.M.Y.O. were geared to bring young people together from all over the province. The inspirational emphasis in addition to the business affairs, the Saturday evening banquets and the mass choirs drew several hundred young people. These gatherings eventually took the place of the retreats. The annual meeting in 1963 drew 275 young people from 30 congregations. The mass choir, directed by Vernon Neufeld, was composed of 135 voices and performed in front of 475 people at the Sunday afternoon service.⁵³ Some of those in attendance had travelled 400 miles to attend this event.

The goal of a united Mennonite youth for Christ and the promotion of a rather large organization presupposed some instruments of communication. The Jugendecke of Der Hote and the Youth Page of The Mennonite were used as such vehicles of communication until 1944.⁵⁴ At this time the MYS began to publish its own paper, the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth. The first issue of this six-page paper appeared at the annual sessions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in the Eigenheim Church near Rosthern. It was not long before interest in such a regional paper extended to other provinces and finally it was decided to publish a Canadian paper for all Mennonite youth affiliated with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. As a result of this the Saskatchewan paper ceased publication in 1949. Subscription rates until the termination of this paper had been 50 cents per year. The Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth was a quarterly publication until June of 1947 when it began to appear monthly.

In 1948 the Young People's Messenger was the Canadian Conference Youth Periodical that appeared to unite youth activities across the five western provinces. Both the English and German languages were used in this new publication. The Saskatchewan periodical gave way to its Canadian counterpart in 1949. The Messenger, however, was also short lived. By 1951 there were no publications particular to the youth organizations of the Mennonite churches we have been dealing with. General Conference periodicals once again were relied upon.

One more attempt at producing a Saskatchewan youth periodical was to be made. In 1959-1960 the S.M.Y.O. began to publish The Reporter and continued to do so until the S.M.Y.O. itself was nearing termination in the late 1960's. This paper carried concerns of the S.M.Y.O., published coming events, and provided a forum through which local groups could keep in contact with each other.

⁵³ La Verne Jantz, "Youth Farm May Become Sask. Conference Property." The Canadian Mennonite, Mar. 22, 1963, p. 22.

⁵⁴ "Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth." The Mennonite Encyclopedia, (Scottdale, 1959) IV, 427.

The most unique method of promotion or publicity employed by the MYS was undoubtedly the production of a film, "God Giveth the Increase." This was basically documentary film depicting the work of the MYS and centering particularly on the Mennonite Youth Farm. This color film was produced by Wm. Zehr of the United States in 1957 and at a cost of \$4,500. The premiere showing took place at the Canadian Conference sessions in Saskatoon in 1958. This project for which money was borrowed, turned out to be a losing proposition. The film appeared to be more popular outside the province of Sask. than among MYS supporters. If a copy could be located today, it would be an interesting and valuable record of a dynamic organization that no longer exists.

Attention should be briefly focused on the relationship between the MYS and the General Conference related schools in Saskatchewan. There are a number of different aspects to the involvement of the schools.

Firstly, it should be pointed out that there was a certain interest on the part of the German-English Academy, or the Rosthern Junior College, in the farming operation of the Youth Farm. R.J.C. students on various occasions assisted with the chores, spring cleaning and even the raising of vegetables and meat supplies in an effort to provide economical food for the school.⁵⁵ The most interesting discussion between the MYS and the German-English academy is reported in a 1946 issue of Der Bote. The Academy was seeking to establish an agricultural training program. In connection with this a request was made to the Mennonite Youth Farm for co-operation and assistance. In response to this request, 10 acres or more of the best land was offered for experimental and training purposes. Permission was also given to work with some of the farm animals. Further details could be arranged.⁵⁶

The Bible schools provided a good deal of the initial inspiration and leadership of the MYS. In the north this leadership expressed itself in the form of teaching, of preparing D.V.B.S. teachers and Sunday School workers and through presentations at the retreats. It has already been pointed out that organizational leadership was one of the main contributions of the Rosthern Bible School.

The Swift Current Bible Institute faculty provided some of the leadership of the youth activities in the south. In the summer Bible School and camp activities, a great percentage of the workers were S.C.B.I. students. While Christian education was one of the contributions of the Rosthern Bible School, evangelism was one of the contributions of the Swift Current Bible Institute. Faculty members in the persons of Nicholai Bannmann, Jacob Unrau and Hans Dyck were used in various parts

⁵⁵ Epp, Frank Education With a Plus, Waterloo, 1975, p. 156.

⁵⁶ Die Jugendecke, Der Bote, Apr. 17, 1946, p. 6.

of the province for the purpose of conducting evangelistic meetings. It was, at least in part, the revivalistic spirit and the winning of new converts that contributed to the vitality of the youth movement as it has been described.

All three schools provided music on an on-going basis for the retreats, annual meetings, and radio work for the MYS. The schools were also represented at special MYS activities and functions.

G. DECLINE AND TERMINATION

The year 1963 appears to have been a crucial year in the life of S.M.Y.O. At this time both the Rosthern and Herbert Invalid Homes were facing major expansion programs. These institutions, as well as the two Camps, were demanding a great deal of the S.M.Y.O. Cabinet's time and energy. President Bill Thiessen reflected this concern at the organization's annual meeting in March, 1964 by indicating that some of the holdings "have grown out of our hands as it were."⁵⁷ The Cabinet wished to be released of some of these obligations in order to give more attention to their youth.

Already in 1963, Otto Driedger, chairman of the Youth Farm Holdings Board, made the following comment: "because we serve older people and solicit funds from the entire church community, we feel that some of the responsibility of the Youth Farm should be carried by the Saskatchewan Conference."⁵⁸

The S.M.Y.O. Cabinet received authorization from the delegate of the annual meeting to explore the possibility of transferring the Youth Farm and the Herbert Invalid Home Holdings to the Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan. The transfer was, subsequently approved at the 1964 annual sessions of the S.M.Y.O. Rev. H. T. Klassen, moderator of COMOS, accepted the transfer of holdings on behalf of his organization. He indicated that this action on the part of the youth symbolized their confidence in the Saskatchewan Conference.⁵⁹ The last properties of the S.M.Y.O. were given over to COMOS in 1965. These were the Elim Gospel Beach and the Pike Lake Bible Camp. The S.M.Y.O. was able to concentrate more directly on working with its youth. There was now, however, no visible or symbolic shape left which the organization could be clearly identified. Increasingly, the question was raised, "What is the S.M.Y.O.?"

⁵⁷ Kay Martens, "Farm and Other Holdings Transferred to Conference. The Canadian Mennonite, May 31, 1964, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Jantz, p. 9 & 12.

⁵⁹ Martens, p. 12.

The S.M.Y.O. Cabinet now made an effort to visit youth groups across the province to strengthen these groups. An effort was also made to continue to practise of conducting leadership workshops which had been held periodically since 1952. In addition, Voluntary Service involvement was promoted, including summer VS involvement in Indian communities in the North Battleford area. The annual meetings of the S.M.Y.O. continued to thrive beyond the mid 1960's.

The local youth groups, however, were struggling. Problems of leadership and purpose were some of the factors involved. This was reflected, increasingly at the provincial level. Leadership in the early days of the MYS was provided by people who were of the age of 30 or older. A number of them were ordained clergyman. Now leadership responsibility was carried by youth under 18 years of age.

An attempt was made to speak these problems by proposing that a youth worker be engaged. The S.M.Y.O. annual meeting in 1967 endorsed a Cabinet recommendation to that effect. This, however, did not materialize. The Cabinet itself, increasingly, raised questions pertaining to the meaning and the future of the S.M.Y.O. When local youth groups no longer showed interest in sending representation to meetings to discuss the future role of S.M.Y.O., it was decided to terminate the organization. The termination date was February 28, 1971.⁶⁰ Youth work now became the responsibility of the education Committee of COMOS. At present there are no organized youth activities at the provincial level.

F. CONCLUSION

It has been suggested that the removal of holdings and concrete projects contributed to the loss of identity of the S.M.Y.O. The younger age of those entrusted with leadership also may have been a definite factor in the decline of the youth movement. Another reason contributing to this struggle was, undoubtedly, the negativism of the 1960's. Perhaps one of the greatest factors was a change of, or a loss of vision. Certainly, the vision of 1938 (two unreadable words) provided the basis for existence. A rising individualism and regionalism also undermined the ideal of the united Mennonite youth.

Whatever the factors, or reasons involved, an era of youth work in Saskatchewan has come to an end. It is small wonder that those who were involved in the formation and development look back with feelings of nostalgia and regret. It is no more. The story of the S.M.Y.O. is, however, an inspiring one. It is possible for the spirit of such a movement to live on in different shapes and forms. The

⁶⁰ "S.M.Y.O. Dissolves," The Canadian Mennonite, Jan. 21, 1971.

Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan embodies at least some of the spirit and shape and many of the people of the earlier youth movement. In as much as the youth movement was in response to the promptings of the Spirit of God, this can happen, is happening and will continue to happen, in various relevant shapes and forms. So be it.