



Bethany College Retrospective: 1927-2015

## “Unless a Seed...”

(Saskatchewan MB Convention, March 13, 2015)

We are grateful for the opportunity to welcome you here to Bethany, and to share some stories about this place with you. It’s a daunting assignment... something like **“This Hour has 88 Years.”** But I hope that those of you new to this place will catch a glimpse of some of the work that God has been doing here, and be encouraged. And those of you familiar with this place will have your memories, and yours hearts, stirred up as you listen.

### 1. Breaking Ground

It was a time of great optimism: almost 20 years since the treaties had been signed with the Cree, and the Northwest Territory (soon to be the Province of Saskatchewan) was ready for settlers. Almost 20 years since the first Russian Mennonite Brethren arrived in N. America, originally planting themselves in S. Dakota, Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota. The first MB families settled around Rosthern in the 1890s, their first church established in Laird, 1899. Settlement in the south centred on—you guessed it—Main Centre (near Herbert).

The Mennonite communities grew along with the fledgling province, and MB churches popped up all over: **Brotherfield & Dalmeny** 1901; **Borden** 1904, **Aberdeen** 1906, **Hepburn** 1910, **Waldheim** 1918. In the south: **Main Centre**, 1904; **Herbert** 1905; **Flowing Well** 1907; **Kelstern** 1907; **Woodrow** 1909; **Greenfarm** 1912, **Bethania** (near Waldeck) 1913; and **Fox Valley** 1914. (It may be useful to note that for this first quarter century, these Saskatchewan churches, along with Winkler and Winnipeg, *were* the totality of the Canadian MB Conference.)

These Mennonite immigrants (mostly American, hence known as “*Kanadier*”) were concerned for the spiritual life of their members. They knew that it was vital that each generation learn to walk with Jesus. The matter of education was of great interest, and one of the first activities to capture the attention of these young congregations. The Mennonite Brethren, more than any other Christian denomination in Western Canada, invested in the nurture of its youth by starting congregationally based Bible schools.

1909 was the first regional convention of MB churches—the direct ancestor of our own gathering tonight, held at Laird. Two years later, they gathered at Brotherfield. (60 delegates came from Herbert by train; about a thousand people were present altogether!). That winter, a Kansas teacher and publisher named John F. Harms taught a 6-week Bible course in Laird. His teaching must have been persuasive, because the next year the area churches began a fund to establish a Bible school. The South beat them to the punch: in 1913, Harms opened the Herbert Bible School.

WW1 came and went—that isn't our story tonight. But the aftermath came close to home in some unfortunate ways. War, then Russian Revolution, then famine—these tragedies overwhelmed the Mennonites in Russia, and news of their desperation leaked out to the American and Canadian Mennonites, now separated for almost 50 years. Some felt an obligation to help, to send relief, or even to sponsor immigration—and made arrangements with the CPR for the transport of 3000+ Mennonites. Others were fearful of the massive liabilities of this debt—the potential costs of inviting thousands of refugees into their territory, even if they were kin. It's on record that in August 1922, the MB churches of Hepburn, Brotherfield, Waldheim, Dalmeny, along with several other Mennonite churches, sent a strong letter of **protest** to the Board of Colonization. Nevertheless, the migration began, in the mid twenties, the Mennonite population here surged. Relations were not always smooth between the *Kanadier*, and the newly arrived "Russians" (*Russländer*).

Another Harms showed up in 1926. He too was an American Mennonite who had studied at both BIOLA and Moody—in other words, well educated in American evangelicalism. He taught night classes in the winter of 1927. Some 30 youth would come out night after night, for 3 months, to meet in the basement of the Hepburn MB Church. And so, a Hepburn Bible school was conceived—in the nursery, no less. Harms's classes were in English. That may have contributed to their popularity. One wonders, however, whether the newly arrived *Russländer* felt welcome, or even able, to attend.

These signs of interest in a Bible school led to a nine man board being established: Fischer from **Laird**; Derksen from **Borden**; Baerg, Unruh and Penner from **Hepburn**, Lepp from **Dalmeny**; Ediger and Funk from **Waldheim**, and Goossen from **Brotherfield**. There was no consensus on where to place the school, but then a solution presented itself: Hepburn's old 2-room school, and 3½ acres, came up for sale. The asking price was \$2000—they paid half down, and Bethany Bible School was born! **Dietrich Esau** was hired as the first teacher.

That first fall, 1927, the seven original students still met in the church basement, for daily lectures with Esau—in German! Esau taught Bible, psychology, German grammar, and music. At Christmas, they moved into the school building, and this campus became home. The class swelled to 21 students by the end of the year. If they weren't from town, they roomed with families in Hepburn. In 1928, a second group of students was added, and so another teacher was needed. Help came from Coaldale, with the arrival of Johann Toews. Interestingly (and dare I say, ironically?), both of these teachers were *Russländer*.

Toews became known as *Uncle*, or even *Daddy* Toews. (It's likely that he was named thus because it seems a habit in that Toews clan that every second male is named John, and nicknames are needed. His son was JB Toews, his nephew John B Toews, his grandson John E Toews, his great-grandnephew, studying at Bethany 2 years ago, also John Toews. Katherina, a great-grand-niece and current student, is grateful that "John" is not her middle name.) Toews presented a strong contrast to Esau: more solemn, even intimidating; less given to laughter in the classroom. Yet, as one of his students later wrote about him:

there was a childlike simplicity and a luminosity in his relationship with and faith in Jesus Christ that made *Onkel* Toews deeply loved and respected. "He was the kindest man I've ever known," said one former student. My own memories of him include the

time the girls' quartet accompanied him on visits to seriously ill old people in the Hepburn area. We were to sing. But what ought one to sing under the circumstances?

I see him yet, blinking as, with Bible clasped to his chest by both hands, he tapped the Book with his fingers. ["Sing about Jesus,"] he said simply. (M. Epp 25)

In a move that might remind us of the story of biblical Abraham, who arrived in the Promised Land only to encounter famine, two years after the school started, calamity hit. The stock market crashed in October 1929. And then came the Dirty Thirties: hail, drought, grasshoppers destroyed the farming economy. For example: in 1928, Saskatchewan's total farm income was \$360M; five years later, that had dropped to \$11M. Life was desperate for farming communities, and Hepburn and region was hard hit. There was no way to pay the remaining \$1000 for the facilities, and the Village of Hepburn eventually forgave the debt.

The poverty of those years is legendary. Listen to what the four Epp siblings, all students, brought in lieu of rent for the Hepburn family they roomed with in 1933: "a rackload of hay (for the landlord's cow). A boxload or two of sawed wood, a hundred pound bag or two of flour, a big barrel of potatoes. Sackfuls of carrots, cabbages, beets, and onions. Jars of home-canned meats and vegetables. A large crock filled with whole pickled watermelons. A gallon of home-made beet syrup, and a large boxful of bread." All this, for the long and arduous trek from Waldheim!

We are indebted to the early leaders as men of faith in times of great hardship. DP Esau, Johann Toews Sr, and then his son JB Toews, laid a foundation of Bible study and service that has not shifted in its essence over these 88 years. JB, the second principal (after Esau's 6 years), and then GW Peters after him, were united in mission—even if they often disagreed in method. The disagreements between these two leaders was well-known, and yet they were both ardent promoters of the mission of the church. And mission has been part of Bethany's DNA ever since.

## 2. Early Harvests

We should clarify more specifically what Bible school was in those early days. Most students, especially in smaller communities, only finished grade 8 in public school. And so Bible school (at least its first year) was a kind of high school equivalency. The minimum age for Bethany students was set at 16; but occasionally you'd have someone as young as 14. It was a different world then. Even in the mid 50s, as Canadian standards evolved, only half of Bethany students came as high-school graduates. So Bible school gave the opportunity of furthering one's education, but also of being nurtured in the faith and trained for service.

One of the amazing works of God in those early years was the **Bethany Prayer League**. This chapter of the story deserves retelling. In the school's fifth year, students and faculty banded together in a Monday night prayer meeting. Their burden was for their neighbours, primarily Russian Doukhobors to the north, and homesteaders all around. Their approach was to work with children. In the summer of '33, thirteen students volunteered a summer of ministry to hold VBS programs in 12 different locations. The next year, it was 23 student

volunteers. In 1936, they had 34 workers, travelling 19,000km to 30 locations—with expenses of \$406!

By 1937, the Bethany Prayer League had established its own missions organization, the **Western Children's Mission**, and in another four years, they were on the ground in Alberta and BC as well. In 1941 they began a radio ministry, and in 1944 they opened up the Sand Beach Bible Camp, at Mistawasis (40 km due north of Redberry). When that camp was closed in 1952, the **Redberry** site was purchased to continue on the ministry.

What did a day of this ministry look like? In the morning: opening devotional, chorus singing, Bible lesson, memory verse and crafts. Then a break, with outdoor games. Sound familiar? The afternoon was spent visiting homes and witnessing, and inviting parents to the Friday evening program. Sound familiar? The patterns established in those early years have had a long (and useful!) shelf-life.

By 1940, the mission had 40 full-time workers. Churches were planted for the new believers. In 1952, the work was taken over by the Sask MB Conference, and then merged with the City Mission also being undertaken. Listen to the roll call of the Saskatchewan churches that trace their stories back to the Mission, and the Bethany Prayer League: Blaine Lake, Carrot River, Foam Lake, Hague Ferry, Lucky Lake, Meadow Lake, Mildred, Pierceland, Regina, Saskatoon, Swift Current, and West Bank Camp. If your life has been shaped by one of these congregations, if your life has been shaped by Redberry or West Bank—pause to give thanks to God for spurring on a group of praying Bethany students, long before most of us were born.

There's more that could be said. Bethany believed as strongly in foreign missions as it did in home missions. They had a strong interest in expanding the scope of MB Missions around the world. In 1943, former principal GW Peters was sent (with his wife Susie Lepp, Dalmeny) to scout out South America. Colombia was chosen as a new mission field. Several Bethany alumni followed the call. Bethany teacher Dan Wirsche, his brother, and their wives were the first four to go, in 1945. The next year John & Mary Dyck joined them. MB missionaries (including later Bethany alumni) were active in Colombia until 2001. Currently there are 40-plus churches with over 1700 members in this country.

One more story of early missions: one of Bethany's early teachers, Jake Epp, had grown up in China as a missionary kid. After several years of study at Bethany (he was one of the four siblings coming from Waldheim with the wagonload of supplies) and also Prairie Bl, and then five years of teaching at Bethany, he wanted to return with his wife Alvena (Kruger) as a missionary to China. In 1941 they traveled by train to Vancouver, and were prevented from leaving only by the attack on Pearl Harbour. Being stuck in the Fraser Valley, he taught 3 years in Yarrow before finally escaping the depressing gloom and incessant rain, and returned to sunny Saskatchewan. He was invited back to Bethany, and stepped into the office of principal only "temporarily." And so began a tenure that eventually made him our longest serving leader—19 years.

### 3. Crop Diversification

For several intersecting reasons, Bethany was one of the first MB institutions to transition from German to English. Its founding constituency was primarily *Kanadier* Mennonites, who had a half century's head-start in acculturation. They had left Russia of their own accord, and perhaps were more positively inclined to a new homeland and language than those who escaped a nightmare not of their own choosing. Nevertheless, when Bethany started, instruction was held in German, by *Russländer* teachers.

After six years, Esau was replaced by JB Toews, 28 years young and fully bilingual. The transition of language from German to English was a contentious issue—as volatile, or even more so, than the so-called “worship wars” of the following generation. (I believe it’s the same struggle, just in a different dialect, but that’s another conversation...) One report says that the language transition was more or less complete for Bethany by the late 1930s. Remarkably early! However, the 1937 school calendar includes the following mission statements for the school, which suggests a slightly different reality:

*To give our ... youth foundational Bible instruction in the German and English languages, [and] to nurture the German language as a special possession handed down from our fathers...*

(By the way: tuition for the “foundational Bible instruction” that year was \$15.) Another report tells us that in 1940 the faculty are realizing that instruction in German is less than effective. And in 1942, the Board endorsed the full use of English. That may reflect shifting demographics of students. Without a doubt, it certainly reflects a larger Canadian suspicion of German, in the throes of the Second World War. This is what was happening in 1940: Vauxhall MB Church and another Menn. church in Alberta were torched, for speaking German. The Mennonite Bible school in Drake was raided, and a teacher driven out of town. The Herbert MB Church was scheduled to host the Cdn MB Convention that summer. After consulting with political officials in Regina, the Convention was cancelled. In 1941, the MB Bible school in Vineland, Ontario was shut down after an RCMP visit. It was clear: German was an enemy tongue, public pressure was strong, and English was highly expedient.

But, as in the book of Acts, so also here: persecution and mission are intertwined. The increasing use of English also fed a missionary impulse. Bethany was early involved in radio ministry here in Saskatchewan, and this must have been in English. It seems that the WCM began the radio work in 1941, the same year JK Schroeder began his long tenure as music teacher and choir director. I suspect these two are related. Soon enough, Bethany’s music and Bible program was being broadcast weekly in stations around the province. It was a major event when Bethany got its own tape recording equipment in 1951. Notes from the yearbook give an idea of the choir’s work schedule: “Christmas songs were introduced at the Nov 22 rehearsal.” They were recorded three weeks later.

Strangely, there seems to have been a resurgence of interest in German at this time (1951): a request from students for a German Bible class one year; a German greeting in the yearbook from the Watrous MB church, the next; and then, the yearbook’s Board report is in German. Is this because of recent post-war Mennonite immigrants? A pendulum swing in the constituency? There was increasing agitation at the Canadian Conference level for “preservation of the German language” (instigated in part by my grandfather, just before he

died in 1950; and continued on by Gil Dueck's great-grandfather.) This is one of the many political mysteries of which church life is full...

In any case, we see that Bethany, for reasons that lie somewhere between acculturation and mission, navigated the tricky currents of language transition earlier than almost any other Conference institution. That, I suspect, was both a blessing and a burden: the privilege, and the risk, of being a fore-runner, the first to leave home and explore new territory.

#### 4. On-going Crop Development

A few miscellaneous observations on Bethany life over the decades: With our **student numbers**, we have seen major ebbs and tides. Prewar, we peaked at 116 in 1939; postwar, we surged to our all-time high of 198 students in the late baby-boom classes of 1981 & 82. The **cultural shifts** of the 60s and 70s left their mark on the school. The Monday night meetings of the Prayer League morphed into a Friday afternoon testimony meeting by the 1960s; a decade later this moved into Friday morning's chapel. Now, forty years later, we're still being blessed by our "Praise & Prayer" chapels.

##### Interlude: Q&A

1. When was Bethany's first annual Youth Retreat? (Jan 1966)
2. When was Bethany's first Youth Advance? (1984)
3. What year did Bethany's women's hockey team start up? (1978 – lasted 13 years)
4. When did Bethany get its first office computer? Cost? (1986; \$3000, for 640K)
5. In 1951 students were debating whether recreation was a good thing at Bible school. (general consensus—yes). What was the first official team sport at Bethany, and what year was it organized? (Hockey 1959-60 [*ed. note: Vic Toews, Watrous/Saskatoon noted afterwards that they already had a hockey team in 1948, just no yearbook! Nevertheless, the first team picture shows up in the Ray '60*]; indoor: Basketball, 1970).
6. When was the first (and possibly only) use of the word "Goofus" in the student yearbook? (Ray 1957, p 57)
7. What year did the student body vote to open up the office of StuCo president to women? (1986) When did Bethany elect its first female StuCo president? (Wendy Hoepfner, 1995).
8. Who was the first Bethany faculty to gain a doctorate while on staff? (Ben Doerksen, 1986)
9. Who was the first Women's Soccer coach? (Alvin Thielmann, 1984).
10. Who will be the last Women's Soccer coach? (Lane Thielmann, 2014).

The arts have had a long and illustrious presence at Bethany, with music at centre stage. The boom of the late 70s and 80s seriously taxed the creative juices of those wanting to

name their singing groups. Alongside the Chorale and Oratorio Choirs, Ladies Choirs and Mens Choirs, we find:

*Daybreak, Surplus, Heritage Road, Joy, Peculiar Treasure, Master's Touch, First Love, Living Parable, Sonshine Unlimited, Sweet Communion, Steadfast Love, Logos, Carbon Copy, Chara, Children of Light, Branded, Freedom Now, Day Break, His Hands, Master's Script, Living Reflection, Solace, Sunrise, Tri-unity, Five Alive, Direct Connection, His Workmanship, Air Force, Jegar, His Kids, Breakaway, Copyright*

The class of 1986 either ran out of steam, or deliberately bucked the trend (and seeing that it included Rob Braun and Brian Heinrichs, I suspect the latter...). That year, you had your choice of "Trio 1, Trio 2, Quartet, Mixed Quartet, or Trumpet Trio"!

The campus as we know it took shape in the 1960s; this building was opened in 1961. Apparently, at the Christmas banquet that year, the heaters gave out, and the temp in here sank to +5C. In 1968, the original 1927 building was taken down, and recycled to build the Ministry Arts Wing. In 1969, Men's East Court was built. (*To put things into perspective, have a look at who was school that year... Dwayne Barkman, Irma Hiebert, Albert Klassen, Edgar Dueck, Phil Siebert, Shirl Huebert*). In 1979, West Court. In 1983, Ladies Centre Court. 1988, new landscaping and parking, with the Oval as the centrepiece. 1989, a new entrance with sign, and the final demotion of the Pearly Gates. In 1993, Bethany Place (gym/auditorium complex). In 1994, the old Tabernacle finally met its maker in a pillar of fire and cloud. In 2003, a new Men's Lounge. In 2012: a new kitchen.

Hepburn is billed as "the place where friends at family meet." Sometimes it's more accurate to describe Bethany as "the place where friends meet, and become family." It is a statistic too large and complex to count (we should have had a long form census!); but it is undisputed that countless marriages and families owe their existence to Bethany; and Bethany owes its existence to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations, and possibly even 4<sup>th</sup> generation of such matches. The 1964 yearbook features a picture of 56 second generation students. The 1977 yearbook has a picture of 39 siblings in the student body.

## 5. Rough Weather

As James says (5.7), "see how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains." That patient waiting has its share of rough weather, of drought and hail. In a community, the kind of solid and deep community found at Bethany, we weather all the storms of life together. We find ourselves at any given time *weeping* with those who weep, as well as *rejoicing* with those who rejoice.

Over the years, the story of Bethany has included many tragedies. Insurance companies call these "acts of God." At a theological school like Bethany, we use that term a bit more carefully. But we do recognize that God was at work in each situation. Each one is a story of alumni that needs to be remembered, honoured. The 1950s told of student **Abe Boldt** from Glenbush, killed in a farming accident; **Henry Isaak** (Rosthern); Colombian missionaries **John & Mary Dyck**, killed in a plane crash, and Nigerian missionary **Art Goossen**, taken while trying to save his son from drowning. In the 1960s: **Helmut Dueck** of Tofield, the summer after grad, got sick and 5 days later died of acute leukemia; **Jake Dyck**

(Clearbrook), also cancer; **Alvin Pauls** (Winkler), car accident. In 1978, three deaths rocked Coaldale: **Hilda Regehr**, working as a missionary in Ecuador; her brother **Abe**, died of dehydration doing a walkathon; and **Iris Dick**. The shocking accident that claimed music teacher **Henry Peters & Anne**. The 1980s tell the deaths of **Phil Rempel** (Borden), **Dorie Boldt** (Glenbush); **Bertha Reimer Geddert** (Coaldale, living in Edinburgh). Jan 1997, **Marni Unger** killed in a car accident. Most recently, voice teacher (and Susan's husband) **Carl Goerz** passed away suddenly in 2011. All stories of grief, and searching for God's grace in the midst of sorrow.

However, to the best of my knowledge, we have been spared, in these 88 years, any fatalities as a direct result of Bethany activities or travels. We have journeyed countless thousands of kilometres on trips, and not one student has been lost. This last year, we came within a hair's breadth of that tragic fate. It has been a year of profound pain and searching, following the van accident of 6 students returning from a volleyball tournament on the night of Oct 4. It has been a year of profound grace, and miraculous healing, as we have journey with those who were injured, especially **Jordan Laturnus**, who came back to campus one week ago, to finish out his second year, and **Addie Francis**, who walked, tenderly but with purpose, out of the hospital 9 days ago, and who intends to spend the final weeks of the semester in dorm. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

## 6. Bearing Much Fruit

An early mission statement (1937) declares that Bethany's purpose is...

- a) To give our . . . youth foundational Bible instruction in the German and English languages,
- b) to wrench our youth away from frivolous pursuits and the contemporary "*Zeitgeist*",
- c) to nurture the German language as a special possession handed down from our fathers,
- d) to raise believing youth for the battle of the faith,
- e) [and] to take into account the needs of the congregations in the methodical training of Sunday school teachers and sundry (church) workers.

As Bethany followed its vision, some of these specifics have shifted, but the foundation has not. For many years a **Bible Institute**, and then with **College** credentialing in 2000, Bethany's program has remained centred on the Bible as God's Word. The intent to lay a foundation for life, to create an intentionally Christian (and thus counter-cultural) worldview, embodied in community, preparing students for service in the church and in the world—this is still central to Bethany's mission. This vision is, by the grace of God and to the best of the school's ability, embedded in the spiritual DNA of every class, every student.

We cannot count—and probably should not count, because it would lead to pride—the visible fruit of these 88 years. Adding up to centuries of faithful service. Many of you here are among the thousands of alumni that were shaped one way or another for Christian life and mission. But it's certainly not just a counting of pastors and missionaries, teachers and



nurses (as was sometimes done) that measures the worth of a Bible college. (That's the sin of taking a census—read the OT!) It's the beautiful complexity of God's story—sometimes tragic, sometimes triumphant—taking concrete shape in a particular time and place. It's one chapter in the divine, eternal Book of Life, the Book whose story is for the refreshment of the spirit, the Book which will be ours to go on reading for ever and ever.

The decades have seen the comings and goings of great leaders and humble servants: I feel like the author of Hebrews 11: "And what more shall I say? I don't have time to tell" about **Gerhard Huebert, Corny Braun and Abe Wieler, Ike Bergen and Elmer Andres, Cliff Jantzen, James Nikkel, and Doug Berg; Rick Schellenberg and Howie Wall.** ...And their wives and children. **George Geddert** (grandfather of current student Jenny Geddert), with his record of longevity in the classroom and library; and **George Dirks**, not far behind. **JK Schroeder's** record of 25 years of ministry arts, followed closely by the tenure's of **Phil Siebert** and **Susan Goerz**. Long-time board chairmen **Sam Willems** and **Henry Braun. Ma and Pa Kroeker** in the kitchen, feeding a generation of students. Maintenance magician **Harry Unger**, holding the campus together with binder twine and chewing gum, and above all, prayer.

Take a step back, and behold even more ebb and flow in the contours of the decades. Schools have come and gone: Herbert amalgamated with Bethany in 1958. Coaldale in 1968. Tabor Bible School in Dalmeny is no more. So also Bethesda in Gem; Bible schools in Vauxhall and LaGlacé. Remember too our churches: Aberdeen, Brotherfield & Bethania; Elbow & Eyebrow & Gnadenu; Gilroy & Greenfarm; Laird, Langham, Lashburn & Lloyd; Maidstone & McMahan; North Battleford & Rush Lake, and more besides.

There is no shame in the company of these communities. There is no shame in 88 years of ministry. Pain, yes; much grief, yes—but no shame. Churches will need to find new ways of discipling their young. New ways of working towards theological and ethical integrity. New ways of reaching out to a dark and desperate world. And, I suspect, in our search for new ways, we will reinvent the wheel a few more times before the Lord returns.

"Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." (Jn 12.24) If this is true for our Saviour, it must be true for us. Individually, corporately. We hold nothing—students, facilities, ministries, programs, ideals—except for what God has given us. We are right to say, "The LORD has given, and the LORD has taken. Blessed be the name of the LORD." Even more, we look to the future, and say: "the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of the LORD endures forever."

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