

1883-1983

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF HISTORICAL DISTINCTIVES

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The Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church was formed on December 29, 1883, following a series of mergers between the Reformed Mennonites and the New Mennonites (1875), the Evangelical Mennonites and the United Mennonites (1879), and the Evangelical United Mennonites and a Brethren in Christ group (Swankites) in 1883. All this sounds a bit confusing to casual observers of the denomination today, but in truth the formation of the M.B.C. Church in 1883 was the result of a spiritual awakening that occurred throughout North America and ultimately pervaded the Mennonite Church in the late 19th century. The common characteristics of this spiritual awakening, especially as it had impact upon the Mennonite Church, formed the historical distinctive of the M.B.C. and subsequently the Missionary Church. It is appropriate that on the 100th anniversary of one of the formulating denominations of the Missionary Church that we examine, briefly our historical roots in an attempt to gain a proper sense of direction for the future.

One of the individuals who played a major role in the historic event of December 19, 1883, was Daniel Brenneman. Brenneman was born in Fairfield County, Ohio, on June 8, 1834. Twenty-two years later he made a decision to follow Christ and within a year was ordained into the ministry. After serving a congregation in Ohio he moved to Elkhart, Indiana, in 1864 with his family to take charge of a church in that locale. It was while Brenneman was serving a congregation near Goshen that a series of events occurred leading to his eventual departure from the Mennonite Church and the creation of the M.B.C. Church. Late in his life Brenneman was asked by the noted Mennonite historian, C. Henry Smith, to give a written account of his removal from the Mennonite Church. In a letter written in 1918 (and presently in the possession of the Bluffton College Mennonite Historical Library) Brenneman described the circumstances leading to his expulsion in 1874.

Some of his differences with the Mennonite Church were cultural. Brenneman was a progressive pastor and began preaching in English early in his ministry to accommodate Americanizing Mennonite youth of his day. This was met with resistance by some of the older members of his congregation as was his penchant for singing four-part harmony. The tradition-laden Mennonites were slow to change, and Brenneman was perceived as conforming to the world.

However, his differences with his denomination did not end here. There was a much more basic cause for his dispute with the church than the cultural conflicts he encountered. These were but the tip of the iceberg. As Brenneman held separate English services in nearby schoolhouses, he sensed more than a hunger for the English preaching; many displayed a deep longing for the preaching of the gospel for the sake of decision rather than simply for perpetuation of Mennonite traditions. Soon these services were held on a protracted basis and Brenneman received calls throughout the country for revival services. Responding as he was able, Brenneman soon met with intolerance on the part of his colleagues who already were suspicious of the talented English preaching pastor of the Yellow Creek Mennonite Church.

Brenneman's identification with a revival in the Ontario branch of the Mennonite Church 1874 was the "straw that broke the camel's back." Later that year he was excommunicated for spreading dissension and discord both at home and abroad within the Mennonite Church. Shortly thereafter, Brenneman joined the Reformed Mennonites who eventually merged with other groups to form the M.B.C. Church in 1883. Brenneman's important role in the December 29th, 1883 Conference is a matter of recorded history.

Throughout his life Brenneman continued his vigorous preaching emphasizing the new birth, the deeper life of holiness, and the return of Christ. A few years later another young preacher would proclaim a similar message with the same distinctive emphasis. He too would be cut off from his denomination. His name was Joseph Ramseyer and in fifteen years the Missionary Church will celebrate the 100th anniversary of another contributor to the present day denomination. Truly the heritage of our church is rich. This heritage provides us with the historical direction we so desperately need.