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**Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada:  
A Historical Case Study**

by

Gloria L. Neufeld Redekop

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Religious Studies  
Faculty of Arts

University of Ottawa  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada 1993



Gloria L. Neufeld Redekop, Ottawa, Canada, 1993



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"Was würde die Gemeinde tun, ohne diese treuen,  
fleiszigten Hände?" [What would become of the  
congregation without these faithful, hardworking  
hands?]

- Marie Dyck, "Fleiszigte Frauenhände,"  
Der Bote (30 November 1955):46.

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## Abstract

This study is a social history of Canadian Mennonite women's societies in the two largest Russian Mennonite denominations in Canada--the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) and the Mennonite Brethren (MB). Using archival materials and information generated by the author's survey, the thesis traces the growth and decline of Mennonite women's societies in Canada within CMC and MB churches established during the three periods of Russian immigration to Canada. Set within the historical context of the role of Mennonite women from the time of Anabaptism in the Netherlands, and through subsequent migrations to Prussia and Russia, it explores the development of Mennonite women's societies in Canada in the light of the changing role of Mennonite women both in the church and in society. It suggests that, in the early years, Mennonite women's societies gave Mennonite women an opportunity to serve God and fully participate in worship at a time when their roles were restricted in the church. In later years, interest in Mennonite women's societies declined.

This thesis argues that Mennonite women's societies became a context for women's service to God. Motivated by the call of God through the biblical text, it was here that they organized for the support of missions as they raised money in their own creative ways. It was a context as well for fellowship and mutual support as women.

For Mennonite women, their societies were also an avenue for spiritual growth. In their regular meetings they developed a worship ritual that was so strikingly similar to the components of the Sunday morning worship service in the church that we could say Mennonite women's societies functioned as a parallel church for Mennonite women.

The decline of Mennonite women's societies occurred along with other trends in the church and society. Women were gradually being included within the official church structure. First they were granted the vote at church business meetings. Then their role was enlarged and they were able to take positions on church boards and committees. Not only were women becoming more involved in the church, they were also becoming more integrated into Canadian society. The women's movement did not leave Mennonite women untouched. From the late 1960s, they began to pursue higher education and employment outside the home. Concurrent with the changes in women's roles in church and society came a self-questioning of the usefulness of Mennonite women's societies as interest in membership was declining.

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## Abbreviations

CMC	Conference of Mennonites in Canada
CWM	Canadian Women in Mission
KM	<u>Kirchliche</u> Mennonite
MB	Mennonite Brethren
MCC	Mennonite Central Committee
WM	Women in Mission
WMA	Women's Missionary Association
WA	Women's Association

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## Introduction

In the 1870s when Russian Mennonites began to arrive in Canada, Mennonite women organized their own church societies, which they called Vereine<sup>1</sup>. While these were not without precedence in Europe, their growth in Canada was remarkable. The largest concentrated involvement of Canadian Mennonite women in the Mennonite church has been within the context of women's societies, through which they have contributed their energy, time and financial resources to the mission programs of the church. This thesis will analyze the experience of Canadian Mennonite women from Russia within the context of Mennonite women's societies since the establishment of the first Verein in 1895 until 1988. I will argue that Canadian Mennonite women, although restricted from leadership positions in the church, organized their own societies on the basis of a commitment to the biblical text, because they too wanted to be obedient to God. While they would have been hesitant to voice or even to realize their exclusion from the institutional church, these gendered societies

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<sup>1</sup> Vereine is the German word for societies, clubs or associations. According to the South Western Ontario Women in Mission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada it signifies more than this. "It is a group that works together for a common goal . . . whose members give each other friendship and support," South Western Ontario Women in Mission (1925-1987), p. 5. Both in Europe and in the first decades of Mennonite immigration to Canada, many Mennonite women's groups were called Vereine. Since then most have changed to English names, although some groups which still use the German language have kept the designation of Verein (singular form). In this thesis the words Vereine and societies will be used interchangeably.

functioned as a parallel church, becoming a context in which women could speak, pray, and creatively give expression to their own understanding of the biblical message. Furthermore, I will attempt to link the growth and subsequent decline of Mennonite women's societies to the church's understanding of women's role and the influence of society.

In the introduction I will begin by defining the scope of the research, indicating which Mennonite women's Vereine will be examined and what period of time the thesis deals with. Next I will discuss previous research in the field, beginning with historical writings of Canadian women's societies in other Protestant denominations, including Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist and Church of England traditions. Following this, an analysis of Mennonite women's studies, Mennonite historical studies, and Mennonite sociological studies will indicate the degree to which the history of Canadian Mennonite women's societies has been excluded in the documented history of Canadian Mennonites and the subsequent need for a history of Canadian Mennonite women's societies to be written. First, then, we will define the scope of the thesis.

### ***A. Scope of the Research***

The particular Canadian Mennonite women's societies which form the focus of the thesis have three defining characteristics. First, they are women's societies within the two largest denominations of Mennonites who immigrated to Canada from Russia.

Second, they are women's societies in Canadian Russian Mennonite churches which were established between 1874 and 1952. Third, they include societies formed between 1895 (the year of the establishment of the first women's society in a Canadian Russian Mennonite church) to 1988 (the year of my survey of these women's societies).

The first defining characteristic then, of the women's societies in question is that they are Canadian Mennonite women's groups within the two largest denominations of Canadian Russian Mennonites. These had their origins in the 1500s in the European Anabaptist movement, the radical left wing of the reformation.<sup>2</sup> Within this movement were religious communities which came to be called Amish, Hutterite, and Mennonite, the latter of which followed two distinct historical streams.<sup>3</sup> The first, known as Swiss Mennonites, originating in Switzerland, emigrated to Pennsylvania in the late 1600s and later to Ontario. A second stream, designated Russian Mennonites, originated in the Netherlands, went east to Prussia in the sixteenth century, then to Russia in the late 1700s, and to Canada in several waves of immigration, beginning in the late 1800s. The 1988 census statistics indicated that the Canadian Anabaptist Mennonite membership, both Swiss and Russian, comprised approximately

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<sup>2</sup> Frank H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., An Introduction to Mennonite History (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1967), pp. 26-162.

93,250 and included fifteen denominations.<sup>4</sup> Those with historical roots in Russia comprised approximately seventy-seven thousand members in nine denominations (83 percent of Canadian Mennonites).<sup>5</sup> The largest two of these denominations are the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) and Mennonite Brethren (MB). The CMC, numbering 29,192 members, was organized in 1903--an amalgamation of various Manitoba and Saskatchewan Mennonites.<sup>6</sup> The MB, a renewal movement organized in Russia in 1860, had 25,395 members in Canada in 1988. My thesis will analyze Canadian Mennonite women's societies in these two denominations. Since the CMC and MB together comprised 54,587 members in 1988, 71 percent of Canadian Mennonites with Russian links, a study of women's societies within them is representative of a high percentage of Canadian Russian Mennonites. But the research will be limited to Russian Canadian Mennonite churches established within a prescribed period of time, which brings us to the second defining characteristic of women's societies chosen for the thesis.

A second characteristic of the particular women's societies which form the focus of the research is that they will be limited to societies organized in Canadian Russian Mennonite churches

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<sup>4</sup> James E. Horsch, ed. Mennonite Yearbook and Directory, Vol. 79 (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1990), p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel F. Pannabecker, Open Doors: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Church (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1975), pp. 146-149.

which were established between 1874 and 1952. The choice of time period is based on the three major immigrations of Russian Mennonites to Canada--eight thousand people between 1874 and 1880, twenty thousand between 1923 and 1930, and seven thousand between 1947 and 1952.<sup>7</sup> This means that the study will encompass all CMC and MB women's societies organized in churches formed between the first year of the first immigration period and the last year of the last immigration period. We might say these societies are the Vereine of the immigrant churches.

The decision to concentrate on women's societies in these churches is related to their homogeneity. Since the concern of Mennonites during the immigration years was their own religious and cultural survival, they were primarily occupied with maintaining a strong Mennonite identity and keeping themselves separate from society. This is illustrated in the establishment of over twenty CMC and MB Bible schools and high schools in Canada between 1913 and 1947,<sup>8</sup> for the sake of "winning and keeping of the young people. Without them, all the leaders knew, there was no continuity for the Mennonite way of life, no perpetuity for the congregational communities and their values."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church (Fresno: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), p. 153.

<sup>8</sup> Pannabecker, Open Doors: The History of the General Conference Mennonite Church, p. 357 and Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, pp. 173, 382.

<sup>9</sup> Frank H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982), p. 447.

But after 1952, the focus gradually changed from a concern for survival to a desire to establish new churches in Canada in areas where a critical mass of Mennonites did not exist. These churches were intended to reach out to people who were not Mennonite by ethnic origin, such as the French in Quebec.<sup>10</sup> Since the social and cultural reality in churches of other ethnic origins differed considerably from that of immigrant churches with Russian historical links, they are not included in this research.<sup>11</sup> To measure the degree to which women's societies in these new churches functioned in the same manner as in immigrant churches, is a separate study.

A third defining characteristic of the research concerns the period of years for which the study of Mennonite women's societies will be traced. The history begins with 1874, the first year of Russian Mennonite immigration to Canada and continues until 1988, the year in which I designed and distributed a survey to Russian Canadian Mennonite women's societies of the CMC and MB in order to determine both past and present realities of Canadian Mennonite women's experience within Mennonite women's societies established in immigrant churches. While the thesis will include the history of evolution of women's societies during this entire time span, particular consideration

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<sup>10</sup> Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup> Prior to 1952, CMC and MB churches only existed in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. Therefore only CMC and MB women's societies in these provinces are included in this study.

will be given to developments after 1952. This emphasis is justified not only because 1952 was the last year of Russian Mennonite immigration to Canada, but more importantly, it was not until the 1950s that women's societies truly came into their own and grew substantially.

Having established the parameters of the research, we will now turn to a discussion of documented history of other Protestant women's societies as well as the extent to which the history of Mennonite women has been included within the broader field of the history of Mennonites in Canada.

## ***B. Previous Research in the Field***

The study of Canadian Mennonite women's societies can be situated within the context of two larger fields of study. First, we need to place it within the broader context of women's societies in other Protestant denominations, comparing women's experience in Mennonite women's societies with that of women in other Protestant women's societies. A second area of study to consider is the broader field of Canadian Mennonite studies, both historical and sociological. We need to determine to what extent Mennonite women's history and especially that of Mennonite women's societies has been excluded from Canadian Mennonite studies. After this examination of previous research in these fields, the value of the contribution of this thesis on Canadian Mennonite women's societies will become apparent. First, then, we will discuss a review of the literature on the history of

Protestant women's societies in Canada.

## 1. Research on Protestant Women's Societies

A review of the literature begins with an examination of anecdotal histories of women's associations among Canadian Protestant churches generally and Canadian Russian Mennonite churches in particular, after which we will discuss scholarly historical work on Canadian women's societies. A number of women's societies in various Protestant denominations have recorded stories of their origins, goals, and activities, beginning with the story of their establishment in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concentrating on a time span of anywhere from ten to 140 years.<sup>12</sup> These histories have several

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<sup>12</sup> See Harriet Louise Platt, The Story of the Years: A History of the Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, Canada, 1881-1906, 2 vols. (Toronto: WMS, 1908); Mrs. W.H. Graham, Forty-Five Years Effort of the Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Church of Canada, 1881-1925 (Toronto: WMS, n.d.); Jean G. Campbell, A Lively Story: Historical Sketches of the Women's Missionary Society (Western Division) of the Presbyterian Church in Canada 1864-1989 (n.p., 1989); Mary Cramp, Retrospect, A History of the Formation and Progress of the Women's Missionary Aid Societies of the Maritime Provinces (n.p., 1892); Jean Gordon Forbes, Wide Windows: The Story of the Woman's Missionary Society of the United Church of Canada (n.p.: WMS, 1951); Mary Kinley Ingraham, Seventy-Five Years Historical Sketch of the United Baptist Woman's Missionary Union in the Maritime Provinces of Canada (Kentville: Kentville Publishing Co., n.d.); Mary McKerihen, A Brief History Relative to the Growth and Development of Woman's Associations from Local to Presbytery to Conference to Dominion Courts. 1913-1943 (Toronto: Woman's Association Council of the United Church of Canada, 1943); Mrs. Garfield Arthur Platt, The Story of the Woman's Auxiliary in the Diocese of Ontario: 1885-1961 (n.p., 1961); and Earl Merrick, These Impossible Women. The Story of the United Baptist Women's Missionary Union of the Atlantic Provinces (Fredericton: n.p., 1970).

features in common. They are, for the most part, written from within women's societies themselves. These are the reports of the faithful, the members of women's societies. Anecdotal in style, the stories include a variety of details--names of women who were important to the success of societies, names of missionaries who were supported by women's groups, reports of how much money was spent for mission projects, and lists of mission projects undertaken.

Although these stories of women's societies are primarily descriptive reports of group activities, they nonetheless supply evidence that these church women felt they were motivated by the call of God and thus, through their societies, could claim to be an integral part of the church body. For example, the Woman's Auxiliary to the Board of Missions of the Church of England in Canada, organized in 1885, held strongly to "the claim of women to share in the work and responsibility of the church and missions."<sup>13</sup> The impetus for their work came from their sense of the call of God, a call which was based on their own choice of biblical texts and themes which gave direction to their groups--

For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the  
glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. Isa.  
11:9<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Platt, The Story of the Woman's Auxiliary in the Diocese of Ontario: 1885-1961, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ingraham, Seventy-Five Years Historical Sketch of the United Baptist Woman's Missionary Union in the Maritime Provinces of Canada, p. 38.

The work of our hands, establish thou it. Ps. 90:17<sup>15</sup>

She hath done what she could. Mk. 14:8<sup>16</sup>

Texts such as these gave women in Protestant women's societies a biblical ground for action.

In a similar fashion, Mennonite women also recorded the stories of their societies. In the MB denomination there are only a few histories of women's societies available and these are merely short accounts buried within larger congregational histories.<sup>17</sup> There is considerably more documentation of women's societies in the CMC. At the North American level, Women in Search of Mission documents the early beginnings of the General Conference Mennonite Church<sup>18</sup> women's missionary societies in the United States and their spread to Canada.<sup>19</sup> In Canada, in 1977, the twentieth anniversary of Canadian Women in Mission (CWM), the CMC national women's organization, was the occasion for the documentation of the development of CMC women's societies. Histories of provincial CMC women's groups in British Columbia,

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<sup>15</sup> McKerihen, A Brief History Relative to the Growth and Development of Woman's Associations from Local to Presbytery to Conference to Dominion Courts. 1913-1943, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Platt, The Story of the Woman's Auxiliary in the Diocese of Ontario: 1885-1961, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> One example is Leamington Mennonite Brethren Church (n.p., n.d.).

<sup>18</sup> The General Conference Mennonite Church is the North American organization to which both the American General Conference Mennonites and the CMC belong.

<sup>19</sup> Gladys V. Goering, Women in Search of Mission: A History of the General Conference Mennonite women's Organization (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1980).

Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario, as well as a history of CWM were written at this time.<sup>20</sup> Typically, each provincial history lists all women's associations in the province and records such details as purpose of the group, year of organization, person responsible for establishment of the group, name given to the society, number of women attending, projects supported, methods of fundraising, and elements of regular worship. These are not unlike anecdotal accounts of women's societies in other Protestant denominations, discussed above. In common with other Protestant women's societies women in Mennonite women's societies received their impetus for service from biblical teaching and were convinced that their work was an important contribution to the mission of the church.

While the anecdotal histories of women's societies are valuable for their accounts of the activities of church women's societies, there is need for analysis at a deeper level. Only a few studies have analyzed Canadian Protestant women's societies

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<sup>20</sup> Katie Hooge, The History of the Canadian Women in Mission (1952-1977) (Winnipeg: Canadian Women in Mission, 1977); Hildegard Fiss, The Story of Women in Mission (Southwest Ontario) (n.p., 1976); Anita Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977) (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission, 1977); Mary Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission (n.p.: Saskatchewan Women in Mission, 1977); Anne Neufeld, ed., History of Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977) (Coaldale: Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission, 1977); Martha Rempel, History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976) (Chilliwack: British Columbia Mennonite Women in Mission, 1976). Ontario Women in Mission later updated their histories, resulting in Ontario Women in Mission (1946-1986) (n.p.: Ontario Women in Mission, 1986); and Margaret Gossen Toews, ed., South Western Ontario Women in Mission (1925-1987) (Leamington: South Western Ontario Women in Mission, 1987).

beyond a narrative description. A discussion of these works follows.

Shirley Davy's book, Women, Work and Worship in the United Church of Canada, analyzes the development of women's societies in the United Church of Canada from their early beginnings in the 1800s to the 1980s in the light of changes in society and the church.<sup>21</sup> Davy examines why women's societies were formed, why they thrived and what their value was for women. Recognizing that "the 'history' of our church has been developed almost entirely from a male perspective," she writes a church history from women's point of view, giving voice to women's own words and experiences.<sup>22</sup>

Wendy Mitchinson's article, "Canadian Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," documents the transition from financial accountability of women's associations to varying degrees of independence.<sup>23</sup> In her analysis of societies in the Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist and Church of England traditions, Mitchinson differentiates between ladies aid societies in which women took on the role of housekeepers of the church building and missionary societies through which women were

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<sup>21</sup> Shirley Davy, Project Coordinator, Women, Work and Worship in the United Church of Canada (n.p.: The United Church of Canada, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. viii.

<sup>23</sup> Wendy Mitchinson, "Canadian Women and the Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," Atlantis 2 (Spring 1977):73.

able to become independent participants in the church. As members of missionary societies, women viewed their commitment as obedience to God. She argues that while these women "did not consider themselves participants in the women's movement" and accepted "their role in terms of the traditional attributes of duty, service and self-denial,"<sup>24</sup> their associations provided a meaningful outlet for their energies and in effect contributed to women's increased role in society at large.<sup>25</sup> Women learned to lead meetings, handle money and make decisions; they developed the power to organize.<sup>26</sup> Ruth Compton Brouwer, in her recent thesis, "Canadian Women and the Foreign Missionary Movement," agrees with Mitchinson that women's membership in church women's societies was enriching to them personally and allowed for the development of leadership skills through spiritual, intellectual and social involvement.<sup>27</sup>

While Mitchinson does not view these women as members of the women's movement, Margaret E. McPherson does.<sup>28</sup> In her article,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-74.

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Compton Brouwer, "Canadian Women and the Foreign Missionary Movement: A Case Study of Presbyterian Women's Involvement at the Home Base and in Central India, 1876-1914," (Ph.D. dissertation, York University, Toronto, 1987), p. 451.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret E. McPherson, "Head, heart and purse: The Presbyterian Women's Missionary Society in Canada, 1876-1925," in Prairie Spirit: Perspectives on the Heritage of the United Church of Canada in the West, ed. Dennis L. Butcher et al. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1985), p. 150.

"Head, heart and purse: The Presbyterian Women's Missionary Society in Canada, 1876-1925," McPherson contends that while women were willing to work within the established system they were "spurred by both the feminist spirit and Christ's command to carry the Gospel to the world." She suggests these women were "maternal feminists," in that they extended their maternal sphere of influence beyond the family.

Whereas both Mitchinson and McPherson attribute to women in women's societies considerable power to act, Christopher Headon in his article, "Women and Organized Religion in Mid and Late Nineteenth Century Canada," suggests that women were for the most part under the domination of men, even within their own societies.<sup>29</sup> Headon argues that while women were able to make a valuable contribution in the church, they were not treated equally--"women remained within rigid denominational structures in a passive dependent relationship to men."<sup>30</sup> According to him, missionary societies operated, for the most part, as auxiliaries to mission boards managed by men.<sup>31</sup> Similar conclusions have been reached regarding women's societies within that branch of the Mennonite church which has its roots in Switzerland.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Christopher Headon, "Women and Organized Religion In Mid and Late Nineteenth Century Canada," Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society XX, 1-2 (May-June 1978):3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> This branch is designated as Mennonite Church, a North American Mennonite denomination of Mennonites of Swiss origin.

Sharon Klingelsmith and Melvin Gingerich analyze changes in the structure of the women's missionary societies of the Mennonite Church from the early 1900s to the 1950s in the context of the fear of the Mission Board that women's societies might want to operate independently of the Board.<sup>33</sup> Klingelsmith and Gingerich see this as an underlying factor in the action of the Board to change the structure of women's societies to that of an auxiliary status. In so doing, women's societies remained structurally under the domination of male boards.

The review of the literature on Protestant women's societies shows that a very limited amount of research has been done on an analytical level, but what has been done is instructive for this thesis. Like Davy, I will examine the reasons why women's societies flourished and ask questions of the meaning they held for Mennonite women. Similar to Mitchinson's analysis, this thesis will examine the role of biblical texts in informing a motivation for action for Vereine.

We will now turn to an examination of the few articles that have dealt with the role of Canadian Mennonite women, not only in the context of Vereine but generally within the church, home, and society. Their approach is useful for this thesis. In the first article, "The Diverse Roles of Ontario Mennonite Women," Frank

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<sup>33</sup> Sharon Klingelsmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church, 1900-1930," Mennonite Quarterly Review 54,3 (July 1980):163-207; Melvin Gingerich, "The Mennonite Woman's Missionary Society," Mennonite Quarterly Review 37,2 (April 1963):113-25; and Melvin Gingerich, "The Mennonite Woman's Missionary Society:II," Mennonite Quarterly Review 37,3 (July 1963):214-33.

Epp and Marlene Epp attempt to explain the evolving roles of Ontario Mennonite women in the twentieth century by linking them to various factors, including the tendency to biblical literalism, immigration and settlement patterns, a mentality of separateness from the world, and at the same time forces like the feminist movement which have influenced the Mennonite community toward integration.<sup>34</sup> In the second article, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'," Marlene Epp traces the changes in the roles of Canadian Mennonite women in the twentieth century in the light of changes generally in the roles of women in Canadian society.<sup>35</sup> The third article by Frieda Esau Klippenstein examines the reasons why Mennonite immigrant women took jobs as domestic servants in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> What is valuable about her work is her use of primary sources; it is based on the words of women themselves, women who had worked as maids during this time.

The approach of these three articles on the role of Mennonite women is instructive for my research in that I will examine the role of women within Mennonite women's societies as a

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<sup>34</sup> Frank H. Epp and Marlene G. Epp, "The Diverse Roles of Ontario Mennonite Women," in Looking Into My Sister's Eyes, ed. Jean Burnet. (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986), pp. 223-41.

<sup>35</sup> Marlene Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'," Journal of Mennonite Studies 5 (1987):90-107.

<sup>36</sup> Frieda Esau Klippenstein, "'Doing What We Could': Mennonite Domestic Servants in Winnipeg, 1920s to 1950s," Journal of Mennonite Studies 7 (1989):145-65.

function of a variety of similar factors. Following the analysis of Epp and Epp, these factors include the changing interpretation of the biblical text, the gradual integration of Mennonite women into Canadian society, and the influence of the feminist movement on the Mennonite community. Like Klippenstein, my history of Vereine will be based on women's own words about their experiences. The unique contribution of my thesis is that it focusses on the role of Mennonite women exclusively within the context of Mennonite women's societies, asking questions about the relationship between growth and decline and women's role in church, home, and society.

Not only is it important to place the study of Mennonite women's societies within the broader field of the history of Protestant women's societies, as we have done, but we must also situate it within the field of Canadian Mennonite history. What follows is an examination of Canadian Mennonite historical and sociological writing to determine what has already been recorded of the history of Canadian Mennonite women's societies.

## 2. Mennonite Studies

While there have been a few anecdotal accounts of the activities of Canadian Mennonite societies, there has been only scant mention of them in general histories of Mennonites in Canada. The following review of Mennonite research will show that Mennonite women have been virtually left out of historical and sociological studies of Mennonites in Canada.

a. Mennonite historical studies

Recorded Canadian Mennonite history has been primarily chronological and confessional. The most comprehensive and historically accurate studies of Mennonites in Canada are Frank H. Epp's two volumes, Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People and Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival.<sup>37</sup> While these incorporate the history of all Canadian Mennonite traditions, including the CMC and MB, no mention is made of Mennonite women in the first volume. In the second, there is one reference to Mennonite women's sewing circles, describing them as groups where women could help meet the physical needs of others and at the same time, satisfy their own social needs.<sup>38</sup> Brief attention is also given to women's vote in the church assembly, dress codes for women and the importance of woman's role as mother and wife.<sup>39</sup> One comment is made about suffrage in the early 1900s--"suffrage for women appeared unnecessary, if not dangerous."<sup>40</sup> This viewpoint by a Mennonite historian indicates the extent to which some Canadian Mennonites detached themselves from the women's

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<sup>37</sup> Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People; and Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival.

<sup>38</sup> Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival, p. 458.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 70-85, 239, 267, 433, 450, 458, 478, 511, 512.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

liberation movement at that time.

In addition to Epp's volumes, separate histories of the MB and CMC were also written. In The Mennonite Brethren Church, John H. Lohrenz traces the development of the MB Church from 1860-1948.<sup>41</sup> In two chapters which address the Canadian experience, two paragraphs are devoted to the work of Anna Thiessen, whom Lohrenz describes as a full time mission worker in Winnipeg, engaging in "hospital visitation, tract distribution, conducting sewing classes with larger (older) girls, and other work among children."<sup>42</sup>

A more recent history of the MB Church, by John A. Toews, History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, is a confessional account of the history of the Mennonite Brethren Church from its beginnings in Europe to its continuation in the United States, Canada and other parts of the world.<sup>43</sup> Besides a brief reference to the deaconess movement, the number of women's groups in North America in 1968, and a few female missionaries, women are absent from the history.<sup>44</sup> While the story of home and foreign missions is told in some detail, the role of Mennonite women's associations in mission work is missing entirely.

Besides general histories of the MB Church, one book has

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<sup>41</sup> John H. Lohrenz, The Mennonite Brethren Church (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1950).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>43</sup> Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, p. xi.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 94, 213, 226, 313, 400-436.

been written on the history of MB missions. In 1954, Mrs. H.T. Esau (designated by "Mrs." because H.T. are her husband's initials), wrote First Sixty Years of M.B. Missions.<sup>45</sup> At the suggestion of a Ladies Missionary Society in an MB church in Kansas, Esau decided to write a book describing the work of MB missions around the world. Through storytelling, she gives a detailed chronicle of foreign mission work done by both married couples and single female missionaries. Her stories include the establishment, in foreign lands, of sewing circles, schools for girls, and homes for widows--

they did things at home, such as raising chickens and vegetables and sewing clothing. Their mission sale in 1934 amounted to 76 rupees . . . It represented a great sum for those women.<sup>46</sup>

While such details give significance to the role of women as missionaries, the author does not discuss the extent to which Canadian Mennonite women's societies were involved in the support of foreign missionaries.

In addition to histories of the MB church, one history has been written on the development of the General Conference Mennonite Church. Samuel F. Pannabecker's Open Doors: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Church, spanning the years 1860 to 1975, combines Canadian and American General Conference

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<sup>45</sup> Mrs. H.T. Esau, First Sixty Years of M.B. Missions (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1954).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 49, 67, 205, 354.

Mennonite history.<sup>47</sup> In the four pages devoted to women's associations, Pannabecker discusses their emergence in the United States in the late 1800s and consequent developments to 1975, praising missionary societies for their support of the mission program of the church.<sup>48</sup> Unlike other histories of Mennonites in Canada, he at least has recognized and acknowledged the value of women's contribution through women's societies--"The Women's Missionary Association has been more than an association; it has been a multitude of consecrated and energetic women."<sup>49</sup>

In addition to studies specific to the formation of the MB and CMC conferences, two additional historical works focus on Russian Mennonite immigration to Canada. The first, Frank H. Epp's Mennonite Exodus, like the other histories of Mennonites in Canada, pays scant attention to women.<sup>50</sup> There is only one reference to the formation of women's societies.<sup>51</sup> Katie Hooge is the only woman who receives passing mention in her role as secretary for the Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council, a position she held from 1923 to 1962.<sup>52</sup> The second

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<sup>47</sup> Pannabecker, Open Doors: The History of the General Conference Mennonite Church.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 288-291.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>50</sup> Frank H. Epp, Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution (Altona: D.W. Friesen and Sons, 1962).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 312.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 344, 482.

historical work, Clarence Hiebert's Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need, A Scrapbook About Mennonite Immigrants From Russia 1870-1885, is a reproduction of original documents, including ship lists of immigrants; government documents and correspondence; local newspaper articles; and church paper articles.<sup>53</sup> Although most of the research pertains to the United States, there are numerous documents which concern the immigration of Russian Mennonites to Manitoba in the late 1880s. These give us a small glimpse into the position of Mennonite women in the late 1800s. In the documents, both men and women are designated by their occupation--men as farmers, labourers, painters, musicians, or blacksmiths and women as wives, spinsters, widows, servants (in the case of teenage girls), or "no occupation."<sup>54</sup> Thus, while men's identity centered on paid employment, women were considered to have none. Their identity was directly related to their relationship to men.

In all of these historical works it is quite evident that a history of the experience of Mennonite women and in particular Mennonite women's societies is virtually absent from existing historiography of Canadian Mennonites. Women have been only briefly identified in their role within Vereine; their role in the support of the church's mission is missing. Having examined Mennonite historical works, we turn next to Canadian Mennonite

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<sup>53</sup> Clarence Hiebert, ed., Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need. A Scrapbook About Mennonite Immigrants From Russia 1870-1885 (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1974).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 152, 293, 296, 395, 423.

sociological studies in order to determine to what extent women's role in the Mennonite church has been discussed in this field.

b. Mennonite sociological studies

There has been a limited amount of sociological research conducted in the area of Mennonites in Canada. The first was E.K. Francis' book in 1955, In Search of Utopia, a discussion of the survival of the Mennonites as an ethnic group in Manitoba.<sup>55</sup> Francis' brief mention of women's role in the early 1900s is described in terms of mothers and homemakers--

Child bearing, child rearing and homemaking were still considered the main objective of a woman's life . . . Household duties were treated neither as a pastime nor as a drudgery . . . women themselves achieved a deep sense of satisfaction from their awareness of how crucial their work was for the family economy and welfare.<sup>56</sup>

In 1962, Leland Harder, in "The Quest for Equilibrium in an Established Sect: A Study of Social Change in the General Conference Church," also describes woman's primary function in terms of homemaker and mother.<sup>57</sup> Another study of change among Mennonites was conducted by J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder

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<sup>55</sup> E.K. Francis, In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba (Altona: D.W. Friesen and Sons, 1955), p. 276.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>57</sup> Leland Harder, "The Quest for Equilibrium in an Established Sect: A Study of Social Change in the General Conference Mennonite Church," (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, Ann Arbor, 1962).

in 1975.<sup>58</sup> Kauffman and Harder's used their 1962 questionnaire, the largest statistical survey of its kind on Mennonite thought, to analyze social and religious change among North American Mennonites. The objective of the study was to determine the degree to which church members still reflected sixteenth century Anabaptism in faith and in practice, and "what can be done to strengthen and deepen the faith of church members and to strengthen the influence of the church in their lives."<sup>59</sup>

While it was intended to be a profile of five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ denominations in the United States and Canada, the authors admit that the study may not adequately represent Mennonites in Canada.<sup>60</sup> It therefore has its limits in terms of analysis of change among Canadian Mennonites. Nonetheless, the fact that three questions on the survey pertained to women's role is an indication that Mennonites in the early 1960s were at least aware of the issue of discrimination against women and were discussing female leadership in the church.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, Anabaptists Four Centuries Later (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1975).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 8. Kauffman and Harder recognize that those members chosen from churches where German was still the primary language could not answer the questionnaire and thus were not included in the survey results. Because of the strong German element in Canadian churches in 1962, Canada may not have been as well represented in this study as was the United States. In fact the writers acknowledge that they may not "have fully represented Canadian interests and concerns in the study," p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 60, 196. The three questions on the survey about women's role were the following--  
1. In the future should larger numbers of qualified women be

Besides Kauffman and Harder's research, two Canadian Mennonite sociological studies of the 1980s should be mentioned. The first is Peter M. Hamm's, Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren.<sup>62</sup> Based on Kauffman and Harder's 1962 survey, it has the same weakness as their research, in that it may not be representative of Canadian Mennonites. Besides this, Hamm pays little attention to the role of women, only briefly mentioning "ladies societies" as vehicles for fellowship and as such, one way for the church to inspire continued participation in church life.<sup>63</sup> A second sociological study, written in 1988, was Mennonite Identity in Conflict, by Leo Driedger.<sup>64</sup> In Driedger's attempt to examine the effect of "the changing environmental context" on Mennonites from the late 1800s to the present, he pays little attention to ways in which Mennonite women, throughout this time period, were affected by changes in Mennonite identity, except for one brief chapter on

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elected or appointed to church boards and committees at denominational, district, and congregational levels?

2. Should the policy on ordination in your denomination be changed to allow for the ordination of women to the Christian ministry?

3. Do you believe that women in Canadian and American societies are being discriminated against and denied certain basic rights?

<sup>62</sup> Peter M. Hamm, Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1987).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 122, 128.

<sup>64</sup> Leo Driedger, Mennonite Identity in Conflict (Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988).

family roles.<sup>65</sup> While this may not seem very significant, he at least raises the issue of gender roles among Mennonites suggesting that

as Mennonites become more urban the conjugal role-relationships move from individual segregated patterns to complimentary (sic) and joint role patterns as wives enter the job market, and as education rises. . . The potential for role conflict as gender relations change is evident.<sup>66</sup>

His brief discussion is an indication first of all that by 1988 there was some discussion about gender roles among Mennonites in Canada. Second, it signifies that there was, at least on the part of some, an awareness of possible implications of changes in gender relations.

From this analysis of Canadian Mennonite historical and sociological studies, we can determine what is lacking in research in the area of women's role and contribution within the Mennonite tradition. We have seen that only incidental reference is made to their work and identity as members of Mennonite women's societies. However, while women were virtually left out of historical and sociological Canadian Mennonite studies, a few biographies have been written by women on the experience of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 39, 131-145. In chapter IX, "Kinship: Changing Mennonite Family Roles and Networks," Driedger discusses data collected by a 1980 survey on attitudes of Ontario Mennonite youth towards sex and family roles. Survey responses indicated that more males than females adhered to traditionally patriarchal values with respect to male/female roles. For example, 51 percent of males and 36 percent of females felt the care of small children was the domain of the wife; 49 percent of males and 39 percent of females believed major decisions in the home should be made by the husband.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

Mennonite women in Russia and in Canada. A brief discussion of biographies of Canadian Mennonite women follows.

c. Biographies of Mennonite women

A few personal stories of Canadian Mennonite women have been published, all of them biographical in nature. The first was in 1955, The City Mission in Winnipeg, Anna Thiessen's personal story of the development of a home for immigrant girls and women's auxiliary groups in Winnipeg in the early 1900s.<sup>67</sup> Other similar stories document personal experiences of individual Mennonite women both in Russia and in the early years of immigration to Canada.<sup>68</sup> Three biographical compilations of Mennonite women's experience have also been published. In Women Among the Brethren, Katie Funk Wiebe attempts to depict the "courage, vision, sacrifice, and faith" of MB women as they immigrated from Russia to North America.<sup>69</sup> Based on data from personal files and interviews, only five of the fifteen stories

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<sup>67</sup> Anna Thiessen, The City Mission in Winnipeg, trans. Ida Toews (Winnipeg: Centre for MB Studies, 1991).

<sup>68</sup> Anna Baerg, Diary of Anna Baerg (1916-1924), trans. and ed. Gerald Peters (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Brethren Bible College, 1985); Anna Reimer Dyck, Anna: From the Caucasus to Canada, trans and ed. Peter J. Klassen (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1979); Peter G. Epp, Agatchen: A Russian Mennonite Mother's Story, trans. and ed. Peter Pauls (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1986); and Susan Toews, Letters From Susan: A Woman's View of the Russian Mennonite Experience (1928-1941), trans. and ed. John B. Toews (North Newton: Bethel College, 1988).

<sup>69</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, ed., Women Among the Brethren (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1979), p. viii.

are about Canadian MB women. Full Circle: Stories of Mennonite Women, by Mary Lou Cummings, is a collection of stories of Mennonite women from various Mennonite denominations around the world.<sup>70</sup> Only two out of nineteen women are Canadian.

Encircled: Stories of Mennonite Women, by Ruth Unrau, a sequel to Full Circle: Stories of Mennonite Women, records stories of Mennonite women of the General Conference Mennonite Church.<sup>71</sup> Only two of the thirty-three stories are about Canadian women. Thus, even in the few biographical writings about the experience of Mennonite women, only a small percentage of them are about Canadian Mennonite women. Besides this, these do not relate the reality of gender roles to the phenomenon of the establishment of Mennonite women's societies.

d. The absence of Mennonite women from recorded history

Katie Funk Wiebe was one of the first to make explicit reference to the fact that women have been virtually absent from the documented history of Mennonites in Canada--

As I read Mennonite history books ... women become a diffused segment of the mass of humanity which has no definitive characteristics ... the names of women are missing almost entirely.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Mary Lou Cummings, ed., Full Circle: Stories of Mennonite Women (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1978).

<sup>71</sup> Ruth Unrau, Encircled: Stories of Mennonite Women (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1986).

<sup>72</sup> Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G. Toews, eds., Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977), pp. 312-314.

That the history of Mennonite women from their origins in the Netherlands in the 1500s to their immigration to Prussia, Russia and Canada is scantily recorded, is due to several factors. First, until recently Mennonite historians have concentrated primarily on confessional history and history of church institutions. Wiebe noted in 1981, in her article "Mennonite Brethren Women: Images and Realities of the Early Years," that historians do not try "to make sense of the lives of ordinary and powerless persons, particularly women, who were not part of the public record."<sup>73</sup> The fact that women's primary role was as wives and mothers meant that they weren't included in recorded history--

The absence of historical material about Mennonite women may be symbolic of their role as wives, mothers, or maids, never entirely distinct from their servanthood position.<sup>74</sup>

A second reason for the lack of documented Mennonite women's history is the lack of available source material. This is especially true of eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Russian Mennonite history, since documents were destroyed or made inaccessible during the 1917 Russian revolution and subsequent civil war.<sup>75</sup> In addition, a number of women's

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<sup>73</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "Mennonite Brethren Women: Images and Realities of the Early Years," Mennonite Life 36,3 (September 1981), p. 22.

<sup>74</sup> As quoted in Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G. Toews, eds., Manitoba Mennonite Memories (Altona: Manitoba Mennonite Centennial Committee, 1974), p. 250.

<sup>75</sup> John B. Toews, Czars, Soviets and Mennonites (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1982), p. 213.

societies did not keep records of meetings during the early years in Canada. For example, the Concordia Ladies Aid of Rosemary, Alberta has no written records from 1930 to 1960.<sup>76</sup> Even those who did keep records did not necessarily give copies to archival libraries. If researchers wish to obtain minutes of Mennonite women's society meetings, they have to go to individual women's groups to retrieve them.

Third, in many instances, even when archival material is available, references to Mennonite women of the past are often designated by the names of men, with only a "Mrs." to indicate they were women.<sup>77</sup> This makes it difficult to identify these women and necessitates that the historian look for other source material. The fact that there are problems finding and using archival materials when it concerns the history of Mennonite women's experience and contribution has been noted by a Mennonite historian, Marlene Epp, who addresses the problem of sources in "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'," and emphasizes the usefulness of non-traditional sources such as missionary society newsletters, interviews, conference yearbooks, and unpublished research papers.<sup>78</sup> It is

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<sup>76</sup> "Concordia Ladies Aid for 1988," Rosemary Mennonite Church, Rosemary, Alberta, 1988.

<sup>77</sup> See endnote #7--First Sixty Years of M.B. Missions by Mrs. H.T. Esau. "H.T." are the initials of Mrs. Esau's husband's name. This woman's identity is "the wife of H.T. Esau." In this book, other women's names are also listed by their husbands' initials.

<sup>78</sup> Marlene Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'," pp. 90-107.

from these sources that we learn the nature of women's involvement in the church, but this is often a time consuming task.

In spite of the invisibility of women in much historical and sociological writing about Mennonites, and in spite of the difficulties of documentation, a picture, however faint, of how the roles of Mennonite women have been perceived begins to emerge from the literature. They have been depicted primarily as wives, mothers, homemakers, and missionaries. Naming patterns and occupational designations have indicated a subordinate position. More recently there has been brief mention of changes in gender roles among Mennonites and the phenomenon of Mennonite women working outside of the home. Women's contribution in terms of the support of missions and church projects has been only incidentally mentioned. Acknowledgement has not been given either to the extent of participation of Mennonite women within the context of Vereine nor to the significance of Vereine for women. A review of the literature leaves us with several unanswered questions. Why did Mennonite women establish their own societies upon immigration to Canada? What did the experience of Vereine mean to them? What factors contributed both to their growth and later decline?

One of the unique contributions of this thesis is that it tells the corporate story of Mennonite women's societies in Canada from the first years of Russian Mennonite immigration to Canada until 1988, a story that to date has not been documented.

We have noted that a few histories of CMC women's societies have been written, but these are isolated accounts of Vereine in local congregations, besides which, their story is told only to 1977. Thus, just the telling of the story is a unique contribution to the field of the history of Mennonites in Canada. Beyond that, I will seek to determine the significance of Vereine for Mennonite women and understand, from the point of view of Mennonite women, why they established gendered societies within the church, why these societies experienced a period of remarkable growth, and why they later declined in significance. Another contribution of my thesis is that the history of Mennonite women's societies will be viewed in the light of changes in women's roles both in Mennonite churches and in society generally.

The thesis will proceed in the following way. The first chapter will lay out the methodology and theoretical framework of the research, situating it within the field of social history and women's history. Chapter Two will discuss the European background of Mennonite women's societies in Canada and the establishment of Mennonite women's Vereine in Canada during the years of Russian Mennonite immigration to Canada (1874-1952). During this time period, Mennonite women's societies followed a consistent pattern of organization and involvement. For this reason the chapter includes such a wide range of years. It was in the 1950s that these societies really came into their own, becoming more firmly established as organizations within the church. Chapter Three deals with this period of flowering, 1952-

1969. Chapter four will discuss the decline of Mennonite women's societies in the 1970s and 1980s. During this time the Mennonite community, most likely affected by the women's movement, was beginning to discuss women's role in the church, society and home. Women's societies did not remain at the same level as they had in the 1950s. It is during this period that we notice a decline in interest in Mennonite women's societies and shifts in focus. We will examine these developments in the light of the changing role of Mennonite women. Chapter Five will develop a portrait of Mennonite women's societies in 1988, examining the degree to which significant trends established in previous years continued into 1988, the year in which the author's survey was distributed to CMC and MB women's societies in Canada.

## Chapter I - Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In the introduction we examined historical and sociological histories of Mennonites in Canada and discovered that women were largely left out of them. Despite the fact that women's societies were the primary context in which Mennonite women served the church, this contribution is only scantily recorded. Besides that, a discussion of the reasons why Mennonite women formed their own groups and what significance membership had for them is entirely left out. With the rise of the disciplines of social history and women's history, it has become possible to give these women a voice.

### *A. Methodology*

This history of Mennonite women's Vereine exemplifies characteristics of both social history and women's history. In order to show that this is so, this chapter begins by identifying the distinguishing characteristics and methodologies of both these fields of history.

#### 1. The Rise of Social History

In the broad sense, the field of historical studies goes back to the 400s B.C.E. when the writing of history was narrative in form and the subject matter was concerned with "the actions and aspirations of the eminent, particularly with the ruling

elites."<sup>1</sup> From the time of the historical writing of Thucydides (c.455-400 B.C.E.) to Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), often regarded as "the founder of the modern discipline of history,"<sup>2</sup> the subject matter of historical studies remained the same; history was a "narration of political and military events."<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century, as historical studies became established as a discipline in the universities, history began to be thought of as a science; its goal was to produce "a scientifically accurate representation of the past."<sup>4</sup> By the late 1800s, the scientific method was also being applied in the area of religious history.<sup>5</sup> But the scientific approach to the study of history

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<sup>1</sup> Georg G. Iggers and Harold T. Parker, eds., International Handbook of Historical Studies: Contemporary Research and Theory (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Marwick, The Nature of History (London: MacMillan Press, 1981), p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> The socio-historical method of the Chicago School, with its beginnings in the late 1880s, was an effort to bring secular historical methods to bear on the study of the New Testament and the history of Christianity, taking into account the social and cultural realities surrounding religious events. While it did represent a shift from traditional institutional history toward the acknowledgment of the importance of social history within religious history, the French Annales school went further, specifically in its inclusion of previously ignored sectors of society and the use of new source material. For this reason the Annales method is more suitable for the social history of Vereine. On the socio-historical method of the Chicago School and its relation to the Annales method, see William J. Hynes, Shirley Jackson Case and the Chicago School: The Socio-Historical Method (Ann Arbor: Scholars Press, 1981), pp. i-86 and Creighton Peden, The Chicago School: Voices in Liberal Religious Thought (Bristol: Wyndham Hall Press, 1987), pp. 1-11.

did not necessarily mean a change in topics which were considered to be of historical significance. Still guided by the elite, "the history of popular culture was not of historical interest."<sup>6</sup> Neither was the work and life of women--

Women were not the focus of historical discourse as long as history was primarily an analysis of wars which women did not fight . . . parliaments in which they did not sit, or of empires that they did not conquer.<sup>7</sup>

The absence of women from history resulted not simply from an accident of omission, but from the dominant view of what history was. As history evolved over the last one hundred years into a scholarly discipline practiced by professionals, it became preoccupied with the study of the exercise of legal, economic, and political power through the chronicle of wars, diplomacy, great ideas, and the rise of the nation-state. . . . Since women so often lacked formal economic and political power, it was easy to exclude mention of them.<sup>8</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, the scientific approach to the study of history was coming under serious criticism.<sup>9</sup> The idea that history was an accumulation of objective facts was gradually beginning to change, with the result that historians took a more analytical approach, seeking historical explanations

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<sup>6</sup> Iggers and Parker, eds., International Handbook of Historical Studies: Contemporary Research and Theory, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> S. Jay Kleinberg, ed., Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society (Great Britain: Berg Publishers Limited, 1988). pp. 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth H. Pleck, "Women's History: Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," in Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History, eds. James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983), p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Georg G. Iggers, New Directions in European Historiography (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), p. 27.

for events.<sup>10</sup> Especially significant at this time was a new historical method developing primarily in France, that of social history.

Social history, as we know it today, has an antecedent in the Annales school of thought which began in 1929 in France with the journal Annales, edited by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch.<sup>11</sup> The beginning years are regarded as the theoretical development of the method; the years after 1949 as the period of consolidation, when, according to Fernand Braudel, a primary actor in the French historical method after 1949, "the program became reality . . . I therefore envisage that period as one of translation into practice."<sup>12</sup> In a radical departure from political and narrative history, it focused on the history of ordinary people, especially on groups which had previously been omitted, thus claiming to include minorities, the working class and women.<sup>13</sup> It was a history "from the bottom up."<sup>14</sup>

The social historical approach to history that had begun in the 1920s developed more fully in the 1960s with a broader range

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Iggers and Parker, eds., International Handbook of Historical Studies: Contemporary Research and Theory, p. 177.

<sup>12</sup> Traian Stoianovich, French Historical Method: The "Annales" Paradigm (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Michelle Perrot, "The Strengths and Weaknesses of French Social History," Journal of Social History 10,2 (1976):168.

<sup>14</sup> Peter N. Stearns, "The New Social History: An Overview," in Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History, eds. Gardner and Adams, p. 4.

of topics to be studied, a proliferation of sources considered acceptable, and an emphasis on process rather than event.<sup>15</sup> Topics now included activities of people of all age categories, all ethnic groups, all classes and both genders--

The ability to generate a steady stream of new topics, in terms of both new groups to analyze and new aspects of the human experience to subject to historical assessment, marks the dynamism of the premise of social history.<sup>16</sup>

. . . in short there is no area of human behavior . . . that cannot be illuminated by historical analysis".<sup>17</sup>

Besides new topics to be studied, many sources were considered legitimate. These included archival materials; routinely generated records; oral tradition; censuses; registers; artifacts; autobiographies; local historical records; letters and diaries; the organizational records of women's clubs, and religious and charitable organizations."<sup>18</sup> In addition to more topics and sources, the approach of social history became increasingly different from that of conventional history which focused on the event--

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Gerda Lerner, "New Approaches to the Study of Women in American History," in Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 353; Iggers and Parker, International Handbook of Historical Studies: Contemporary Research and Theory, p. 182; and Stearns, "The New Social History: An Overview," p. 11.

Compared to conventional historians, social historians are uncomfortable with events. They deal instead with processes, with distinctive trends within the periods they mark out. . . . Social historians rarely explore events for their own sake. Their narrative is more in terms of the unfolding of a process.<sup>19</sup>

The emphasis in social history was more clearly process oriented with an examination of trends.

There is some debate about the extent to which the history of women was included in this new field of social history. While some scholars have credited social historians with attempting to integrate women into history,<sup>20</sup> several others have claimed that the history of women has not been sufficiently represented in the field of social history. For instance, Christine Fauré, a French feminist scholar, contends that Febvre included only the female heroine in his social histories.<sup>21</sup>

The new attention that the Annales school brought to bear on the material aspect of daily life . . . could have been the starting signal for the creation of women's history. In fact, it was nothing of the sort. This new perception of the historian's task gave rise to nothing but the most routine research centering on an exceptional female figure: the heroine.<sup>22</sup>

Another historian, Elizabeth Pleck, argues that social history still remained a history of "man"--

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<sup>19</sup> Stearns, "The New Social History: An Overview," p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Stearns, "The New Social History: An Overview," p. 5 and Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nancy Schrom Dye, "The Problem of Women's History," Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays, ed. Carroll, p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> Christine Fauré, "Absent from History," trans. Lillian S. Robinson, Signs 7,1 (1981):74.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

The reason for the absence of women in both traditional history and the new social history was that males had defined themselves as the subject of history and had ordered historical study to concentrate on male activities. Historians have tended to value those activities in which males predominated and to undervalue those in which women predominated.<sup>23</sup>

Despite these criticisms, the Annales paradigm of Febvre and Bloch at least opened the way for a history in which women's reality could be legitimately recorded; it was "a vision of history as it might be, along with a new and adventurous definition of what constitutes historical evidence."<sup>24</sup>

While women may not have been fairly represented in social historical research, "women's history has benefited substantially however, from the growing importance since the 1960s of social history."<sup>25</sup> It could naturally flow out of the field of social history because of the emphasis on the history of all kinds of experience.<sup>26</sup> Experiences of women were recognized as legitimate

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<sup>23</sup> Pleck, "Women's History: Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Mosher Stuard, "The Annales School and Feminist History: Opening Dialogue with the American Stepchild," Signs 7,1 (1981):137.

<sup>25</sup> Anna Davin, "Redressing the Balance or Transforming the Art? The British Experience," in Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society, ed. Kleinberg, p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, "The Problem of Invisibility," in Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society, ed. Kleinberg, p. 11.

historical phenomena.<sup>27</sup> By stressing the importance of recording the lives of ordinary people and people previously left out of conventional histories, social history gave "academic sanction to the study of many questions which are important to women's history."<sup>28</sup> In addition, its acceptance of source material from everyday life was also important for women's history, since these are often the sources needed to document women's experience. It meant that women's history could now be legitimately written; the history of Canadian Mennonite women's societies is such a history.

## 2. Women's History

The field of women's history, as we know it today, owes its existence partially to the development of social history and partially to the women's movement.<sup>29</sup> With the birth of social history came a legitimization to study the lives of ordinary people and with the women's movement came questions about gender roles.

When feminists began to raise questions about the place of women in Canada, the absence of women from analysis became a challenge to historians. There was a growing

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<sup>27</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, "Women's History and the Rewriting of History" in The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy, ed. Christie Farnham (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Davin, "Redressing the Balance or Transforming the Art? The British Experience," p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman and the New History," Feminist Studies 3 (1975):188.

awareness that the fact of gender made women's lives profoundly different from the lives of men. Women had an identity and a history, both barely represented in the standard studies. In the context of the women's movement and of a general widening of historical inquiry, Canadian women's history flowered.<sup>30</sup>

Prior to these influences, historical writings about women did not ask questions about the uniqueness of women's experience nor did they examine the significance of gender roles.<sup>31</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg calls this earlier form of history traditional women's history because it remained a descriptive history in areas which coincided with significant political events.<sup>32</sup> A few scholars further subdivide this style of traditional women's history into several other categories. Natalie Zemon Davis discusses it under two categories.<sup>33</sup> The first, a style of history dating back to the fourteenth century, she calls "Women Worthies," histories written about queens and other notable women.<sup>34</sup> According to Davis a second category of traditional women's history is that of biographies.<sup>35</sup> Gerda Lerner also divides the field of traditional women's history into two

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<sup>30</sup> Alison Prentice et al., Canadian Women: A History (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada Inc., 1988), p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman and the New History," p. 186.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>33</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," Feminist Studies 3 (Spring-Summer 1976), p. 83.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-84.

categories, but they are different from those of Davis.<sup>36</sup> What Davis refers to as "Women Worthies," Lerner calls "compensatory history," which she describes as histories of exceptional women of the past, written in order to compensate for the lack of the history of women within traditional historiography.<sup>37</sup> Joan Wallach Scott also refers to this as compensatory history--

In a sense, it could be said that the task of making women visible serves a compensatory purpose: it insists that women were actors in the past and provides information to prove that. Its effect is to supplement the picture we have traditionally had; sometimes even to change that picture.<sup>38</sup>

Lerner envisions a second category of traditional women's history, which she calls "contribution history," a history which details the contributions women have made at important male-defined historical junctures.<sup>39</sup> Pleck, on the other hand, refers to all of traditional women's history as "contribution history."<sup>40</sup> Under this rubric she includes histories of exceptional women, biographies of individual women, and other histories which detail women's contribution to society, all written in order to compensate for their invisibility in

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<sup>36</sup> Lerner, "Placing Women in History: A 1975 Perspective," in Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays, ed. Carroll, pp. 357-58.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Scott, "The Problem of Invisibility," p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: A 1975 Perspective," p. 358.

<sup>40</sup> Pleck, "Women's History: Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," pp. 52-54.

historiography.<sup>41</sup>

Whatever we decide to call the earlier style of historical writing, Davis, Lerner, and Pleck agree that traditional women's history did give women a certain amount of visibility. Although anecdotal in nature, former histories of women at least have given "value to an experience that had been ignored (hence devalued)" and have insisted "on female agency in the making of history."<sup>42</sup> They have attempted "to fit women's past into the empty spaces of historical scholarship."<sup>43</sup> But these histories were lacking in several ways. First, they remained primarily histories of exceptional women. The experiences of ordinary women were still left out.

The compensatory approach to women's history, no matter how necessary as a remedy for the invisibility of women and their accomplishments, places too much emphasis on those women whose lives departed most from the typical female experience through activism in public life.<sup>44</sup>

In the second place, traditional women's history was not told from a woman's perspective. It failed to portray women from their own point of view--

Women are described as "also there" or as problems. Their essential role on behalf of themselves and of other women is seldom considered a central theme in

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Lerner, "Placing Women in History: A 1975 Perspective," pp. 358-360.

<sup>44</sup> Pleck, "Women's History: Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," p. 54.

writing their history. Women are the outgroup.<sup>45</sup> In the earlier style of historiography, "never the subject of history, always the object, women lacked the power to include themselves in history and to define the terms for their inclusion."<sup>46</sup> A third difficulty with traditional women's history comes in the concept of periodization. Periods of time used in traditional historiography are not necessarily appropriate for women's history. Fourthly, former histories did not explore the issue of women's roles nor the consequences of gender.<sup>47</sup> Being strictly anecdotal, they failed to analyze gender or determine how history affected definitions of gender.<sup>48</sup> What was missing in traditional women's history, the women's history of the last two decades has begun to address.

The field of women's history as we know it today is what Lerner refers to as "the true history of women", and Smith-Rosenberg calls "the New Women's History."<sup>49</sup> It is, first of all, a history which gives voice to all of women's experience. It is not only the story of exceptional women, but includes the stories of ordinary women, presuming that "the ordinary as well

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<sup>45</sup> Lerner, "Placing Women in History: A 1975 Perspective," pp. 358-360.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>47</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," p. 90.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>49</sup> Lerner, "Placing Women in History: A 1975 Perspective," p. 359; and Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman and the New History," p. 188.

as the unusual life experience of women as a group is worthy of historical inquiry."<sup>50</sup> Second, it is a history told from a female point of view--

Slowly, as the field has matured, historians of women's history have become dissatisfied with old questions and old methods, and have come up with new ways of approaching historical material. They have, for example, begun to ask about the actual experience of women in the past. This is obviously different from a description of the condition of women written from the perspective of male sources. . . . This shift from male-oriented to female-oriented consciousness is most important and leads to challenging new interpretations.<sup>51</sup>

In the third place, women's history utilizes those periodizations which are pertinent to women's life and experience--

What feminist historiography has done is to unsettle . . . accepted evaluations of historical periods. It has disabused us of the notion that the history of women is the same as the history of men, and that significant turning points in history have the same impact for one sex as for the other.<sup>52</sup>

Fourth, women's history deals with questions of women's position and gender roles, beginning with the assumption that there has been "difference, division, and inequality of male to female in history."<sup>53</sup>

When approaching the study of women's history, we must from the outset apply what we know about women's position to our historical investigation. We cannot

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<sup>50</sup> Pleck, "Women's History: Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," p. 55.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 362.

<sup>52</sup> Joan Kelly, Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984). p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> Pleck, "Women's History: Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," p. 57.

uncover the realities of women's past if we look at them as adjuncts to or minor participants in the male power <sup>54</sup>

It probes into the significance of women's activities from the perspective of the fact that they were women. Women's history explores the reasons for prescribed roles and addresses "the consequences of gender,"<sup>55</sup> one of which is that women often lived in two worlds, the male world and the female world.

Did Canadian women devise a culture of their own in which they could feel, not marginal or despised, but whole human beings? Did they live two kinds of lives, one in the male culture where they were controlled by tradition, fear, loyalty, and love, the other in a parallel society of women where their actions could range from intimacy to power? Historians will only understand women's lives when we recognize the dual nature of their existence. Women's historians have not yet begun to grasp that kind of tension.<sup>56</sup>

This question of a dual reality for women is of particular significance for the examination of church women's societies. For church women there was a life within the institutional church, predominantly male controlled, and another life within the context of women's societies.

When we examine the recorded history of Mennonite women's societies in the light of the above discussion of women's history, a survey of the literature shows that to date, the scant

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<sup>54</sup> Hilda Smith, "Feminism and the Methodology of Women's History," in Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays, ed. Carroll, p. 383.

<sup>55</sup> Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case," p. 90.

<sup>56</sup> Elaine Leslau Silverman, "Writing Canadian Women's History, 1970-82: an Historiographical Analysis," Canadian Historical Review LXIII,4 (1982):521.

amount of documented history of Mennonite women which exists has been primarily at a biographical and anecdotal level. Although women in the CMC have written brief accounts of society involvement, trends of growth and decline have not been researched. Neither has there been any analysis of the relationship between the establishment of Vereine and women's position and role in the church. An examination of Vereine from the standpoint of a "parallel society where their actions could range from intimacy to power" has not been done.<sup>57</sup> There is therefore a gap in Mennonite women's history which this thesis begins to fill.

The study of Canadian Mennonite women's Vereine will be situated in the context of women's role within the church institution. From the perspective of women themselves, it will examine the unique experience of Mennonite women as they gathered in their societies and analyze that experience from the perspective of its significance for women. As women's history, my thesis will seek for explanations for the existence of Vereine, their growth, and later declined interest. While addressing these issues, the thesis will also of necessity serve a compensatory purpose in that it will supply an aspect of Mennonite history which is currently missing.

In order to tell this corporate story of Mennonite women's societies, relevant source material is necessary. The variety of sources used in this research is described in the following

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

section.

### 3. Research Methodology

The search to find materials for women's history can be time consuming. It is often necessary to visit archives and search periodicals page by page to find articles pertaining to women's experience. My search for source material included visits to the archives and local churches; the development of a survey instrument; and letters of requests for additional pertinent sources.

I visited three Canadian archives: The Centre for MB Studies (MB archives) in Winnipeg, Manitoba; Mennonite Heritage Centre (CMC archives) in Winnipeg, Manitoba; and the archives at Conrad Grebel College, a Mennonite college in Waterloo, Ontario. In these centres I examined conference yearbooks, local church histories, and church periodicals. These included annual yearbooks of both the MB Church and the CMC for resolutions on women's role and annual reports of women's societies. Annual reports of CWM for the years 1941, 1942, 1945, 1956, 1960-86, and 1988 were found in the yearbooks of the CMC. Reports of the Women's Missionary Service (the name for the provincial organization of MB women's societies in Ontario) were available for the years 1966-87 in Reports to the Annual Provincial

Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario.<sup>58</sup>

Other sources included Mennonite church histories written by local congregations.<sup>59</sup> It has been the custom for local churches to document aspects of their history as churches on anniversaries of their establishment.<sup>60</sup> I paged through all available congregational histories in order to collect from each, the paragraph or two that was written about women's societies in local congregations. In the case of church periodicals, I examined the issues of the Mennonite Brethren Herald, Mennonitische Rundschau, the Canadian Mennonite (an independent inter-Mennonite periodical), and Der Bote for articles about Mennonite women's societies and women's role generally. In the case of the Canadian Mennonite, indexing was incomplete, so I paged through each issue to find articles pertinent to my research. Besides personal visits to these three archival libraries, I borrowed all the issues of The Mennonite Reporter from the archives of the publishers in Waterloo, Ontario. For many members of the CMC, this inter-Mennonite periodical, took the place of the Canadian Mennonite after 1971.

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<sup>58</sup> In the case of the MB Church, only Manitoba and Ontario women's societies report to the provincial conference. Therefore annual yearbooks of the Canadian MB Church were not helpful as source material for MB women's societies.

<sup>59</sup> This includes thirty-eight congregational histories of the CMC. There is no record of how many MB histories have been published.

<sup>60</sup> One example is the history of the First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon by Esther Patkau, First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon, 1923-1982 (Saskatoon: First Mennonite Church, 1982).

Besides archival work, other source material was gathered, some of which was requested when the survey was sent to women's societies. (A discussion of the design and distribution of the survey follows later.) Several women's groups sent pertinent material along with completed surveys. This included minutes and annual reports from thirty-three CMC and nineteen MB groups; financial reports from thirty-seven CMC and nineteen MB groups; constitutions from thirteen CMC and eighteen MB groups; personal letters; lists of members' names; themes of meetings; poems; and songs. Besides material which accompanied completed surveys, I collected the written histories of CWM and provincial CMC women's societies--histories which record the activities of each local society within each province. I obtained access to the minutes of the South Saskatchewan MB Ladies Auxiliary, recorded from its inception in 1959 to 1987. I visited Central MB Church in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and gained access to reports of women's groups to the local congregation from 1976 to 1984; similar reports were obtained from the Herbert MB Church in Herbert, Saskatchewan for the years 1973 to 1987. In Winnipeg, Manitoba I examined archival material of the Women's Conference of the Manitoba MB Churches including correspondence and minutes of their organizational meeting in June, 1976; minutes of their annual conferences in 1968, 1974, and 1976; and president's reports for the years 1968 and 1971 to 1974. I also obtained additional material from CWM offices in Winnipeg: CWM minutes of meetings for the years 1981 to 1987; CWM president's reports from

1978, and 1983 to 1987; and a list of CWM conference themes from 1953 to 1978. In Waterloo, Ontario, I consulted with a group of five female residents of the George Street Senior Home of the Waterloo/Kitchener United Mennonite Church on their experiences in the Mennonite Church upon their arrival to Canada from Russia until the present. Antonio and Benjamin Redekopp of Ste. Catherines, Ontario, post World War II immigrants from the Soviet Union, were consulted about Mennonite women's societies in Russia. However, despite the fact that I had gathered a remarkable amount of evidence, I realized that several aspects of the realities of women's societies were still missing. I had very little knowledge of their present state--their names, purpose, projects, and age of members. Neither did I have a record of how societies had changed through the years. I needed to hear from women themselves; women who were currently members of Mennonite women's societies. For this reason I decided to devise a survey that would be sent to all CMC and MB women's societies in churches that had been established in the immigration years.

A survey instrument was developed in the fall of 1988<sup>61</sup> (see Appendix A). Questions were designed that would uncover aspects of Vereine not readily accessible in other source material. To ensure that survey questions would not be ambiguous and that they would gather the most significant information for an

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<sup>61</sup> Clearance for research involving human subjects was obtained from the University Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Ottawa.

understanding of women's societies, it was pre-tested by current members of Mennonite women's societies. Surveys were sent to women's groups in eighty-five CMC and sixty-nine MB churches in Canada, comprising all CMC and MB societies organized in churches established during the immigration years. A cover letter (see Appendix B), which accompanied the surveys, indicated the intent of the research and requested additional information to be sent, including Vereine constitutions, annual reports, financial reports, and any other pertinent documents. A second letter was sent two months later as a reminder to societies which had not yet completed their surveys (see Appendix C).

Each women's group was requested to complete one survey. This meant that the number of surveys sent to each church varied, depending on how many women's groups were in that church. It was more straightforward to determine the number of women's groups in the CMC than in the MB since access to names of society leaders is readily available in the Yearbook of the CMC. This meant that it was possible to tell exactly how many women's groups were in each congregation.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, the exact number of surveys could be sent to each CMC church, addressed to one of the leaders of one of the societies in the church. In MB churches, however, a comparable list of women's societies did not exist. Therefore, while surveys were sent directly to leaders of CMC women's societies, a different method was used for MB women's societies--

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<sup>62</sup> While the number of women's groups in each congregation varied from one to eight, most churches had one to three women's societies.

surveys were sent to the minister of each church, requesting him (they were all male) to give one survey form to each women's group in his church. Since there was no way of telling how many women's groups were in each church, an approximation was made on the basis of the number of members in each church. One survey per 250 MB church members was sent out, along with the request to photocopy the survey if there were more groups in the church than had been approximated. Phone calls were made in order to determine the total number of MB women's societies in each province.

When all survey responses had been received, the percentage of return was determined. Of the 304 CMC and MB women's societies which could have completed surveys, responses were received from 186 groups, a return rate of 61 percent. The following table indicates percentages of return by denomination and province--

Table 1 - Percentage of Survey Responses

PROVINCE	CMC			MB		
	POSSIBLE RETURN	ACTUAL RETURN	PERCENT RETURN	POSSIBLE RETURN	ACTUAL RETURN	PERCENT RETURN
British Columbia	30	13	43%	34	21	62%
Alberta	17	12	71%	10	7	70%
Saskatchewan	53	34	64%	25	20	80%
Manitoba	54	42	78%	31	19	61%
Ontario	36	13	36%	14	5	36%
TOTAL	190	114	60%	114	72	63%

As stated earlier, the survey enabled the gathering of information that was not accessible either in other published research or in archival materials. It was designed to receive information which would help determine present realities of women's societies and perceived changes through the years. The survey requested the name of the group and the year in which the group was organized. It asked how often the group met and whether the primary language of the group was German or English. Women were requested to indicate the purpose of their group, biblical texts and mottos underlying their motivation, components of meetings, projects undertaken, and methods of fundraising. The survey asked how many women attended group functions, what the average attendance had been every ten years from 1920 on,

what were the ages of women who attended, and how many women were employed outside the home. Groups were asked whether other church activities had affected attendance in their group. Finally, they were requested to name any women's groups in their congregations which had discontinued, and to state when and why they did so. In addition, for each question, where applicable, respondents were asked to indicate specific changes which had occurred and when these took place.

A strategy for the analysis of survey responses was already in place when survey responses began to come in. As surveys were completed and returned, responses were entered on Lotus 123, a data base computer program. Each segment of each survey question was assigned a numerical value. In total 106 subject fields were designated and responses were entered under appropriate fields.

The survey tool served as a useful primary source for the thesis in that a whole new body of knowledge about Mennonite women's societies was obtained for analysis. Hearing directly from 61 percent of all CMC and MB women's societies in Canada within congregations established in the immigration period meant that a history could be written which was based on women's own voices and perceptions of their experiences within Vereine. This does not mean, however, that the survey was without its limitations.

Survey questions pertaining to past changes often required, on the part of members in women's societies, a considerable

amount of time to answer. A remarkable number of women researched these questions thoroughly. For some, however, either the time or the documents were not available in order to answer them sufficiently. Nonetheless, data submitted could still be used to point to significant trends, trends which could often be corroborated by other sources.<sup>63</sup>

In conclusion, this study of Mennonite women's societies in Canada, situated within the fields of social history and women's history, records the experiences of ordinary Mennonite women within the context of their own societies, experiences that are told from their own point of view. Of necessity, because of the lack of research to date on Canadian Mennonite women's societies, the thesis chronicles the growth and development of Vereine. However, it goes beyond a descriptive contribution history. Assuming that the existence of women's societies had something to do with the fact that they were women, my thesis places the emergence and development of Vereine in the context of women's place and role in the institutional church. We will ask why these gendered organizations were established in the first place, why they continued to thrive, and what caused them to experience a decline in attendance in later years. These questions lead us to the overall framework of the thesis, to which we now turn our attention.

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<sup>63</sup> Survey question number twelve was ambiguous and was not used in the analysis.

## B. Theoretical Framework

Implicit in the writing of women's history as we have described it is a feminist approach which places women at the center of historical inquiry.<sup>64</sup> The first task when writing from a feminist perspective is "the simple retrieval of women from obscurity."<sup>65</sup> So much of women's experience remains hidden. While feminists have deemed all of women's experience as valuable and worthy of investigation, the history of non-feminist women's organizations has not been well represented in women's history--

The overwhelming historiographical emphasis on the suffrage movement has precluded study of women in other types of organizations. The women's club movement, the temperance crusade, women's participation in labor unions, and the special role women played in early twentieth-century social reform organizations and the settlement movement are just being written or have yet to be explored.<sup>66</sup>

An even greater lack is in the area of Canadian women's religious non-feminist experience--

There has been a certain tendency to "approve of" women's religious zeal only when and as it has seemed to serve as a way-station on the road to feminist consciousness. Personal spirituality and transcendent concerns have largely been overlooked, along with forms of religious activism that did not necessarily bear

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<sup>64</sup> Ruth Pierson and Alison Prentice, "Feminism and the Writing and Teaching of History," Atlantis 7,2 (Spring, Printemps 1982):41.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Gordon, Buhle, and Dye, "The Problem of Women's History," p. 79.

fruit in a larger sphere for women.<sup>67</sup>

It is to this sphere of women's religious experience that this thesis belongs. Mennonite women's societies were not feminist organizations, neither did they necessarily "bear fruit in a larger sphere for women."<sup>68</sup> But they were a significant avenue of mission and spiritual renewal for Mennonite women.

A second task of a feminist viewpoint is to give women the opportunity to speak for themselves. When they give voice to their own reasons for their action, the results may be quite different than when they are treated as objects of historical inquiry. For example, Soha Abdel Kader, in her analysis of histories of Arab women, states that "questions designed to examine the role and position of women in Middle Eastern society from the standpoint of women themselves" need to be asked.<sup>69</sup> Kader shows that some studies, based on women's own words, have shown "how the conventional veil, rather than restricting women . . . is in fact a means they adeptly use to express themselves and their desires."<sup>70</sup> In a similar way, when Mennonite women are

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<sup>67</sup> Ruth Compton Brouwer, "Transcending the 'Unacknowledged Quarantine': Putting Religion into English-Canadian Women's History," paper presented to the joint session of Canadian Society of Church History/Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting, Queen's University, Kingston, June 5, 1991, p. 2, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Soha Abdel Kader, "The Role of Women in the History of the Arab States," in Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society, ed. Kleinberg, p. 85.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

given a chance to tell their own history, we may discover a different reality than we have heretofore envisioned.

Thirdly, a feminist approach offers "a description of women's oppression and a prescription for eliminating it."<sup>71</sup> At the outset, it would appear that it is not in this sense that I am proceeding, since I am not focussing on the Vereine as oppressive structures, neither am I suggesting a vision of freedom from Vereine for Mennonite women. Vereine were not feminist organizations, and in fact were in many instances opposed to feminist thought. This history could only be considered a history of women's oppression in the sense of the basic definition of oppression as described by Ruth Pierson and Alison Prentice in "Feminism and the Writing and Teaching of History,"--

One of the basic oppressions that women suffer is the silencing of their whole experience, both negative and positive. A basic injustice that feminists wish to redress, therefore, is inequality in terms of visibility. What feminists demand is the right to know and understand the experience of women and to have it analyzed, taken into account, recorded and valued.<sup>72</sup>

In this sense, the history of Vereine will address the oppression of women, oppression in terms of the silencing of women's experience, which until now has not been analyzed nor, as we have noted, even recorded to any great extent.

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<sup>71</sup> Alison M. Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg Struhl, Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), p. xi.

<sup>72</sup> Pierson and Prentice, "Feminism and the Writing and Teaching of History," p. 38.

also explain it.<sup>73</sup> A examination of the work of Ayesha Mei-Tje Imam will be helpful for our discussion of a possible framework for understanding Mennonite women's Vereine.<sup>74</sup> Imam identifies four frameworks according to which the history of African women has been written. These are instructive for us, both in our understanding of histories which have included some references to Mennonite women and in my own thesis on Vereine. The first perspective to which Imam refers is that which is found in literature written from a viewpoint which totally excludes women. The second category are those works which are written from the perspective that women are inferior and subordinate to men. The third portrays women's roles as equal and complementary to men; men are responsible in some areas of life and women in others. A fourth framework perceives women as active participants in history. It focuses on ways in which women have sought to establish their own independence, either as female leaders or as members of groups. In the application of these frameworks to the history of Vereine, we can say that, as a composite body of Mennonite historical literature, the history of Mennonite women's societies has exemplified the approach of the first three of Imam's frameworks. Thus far, Mennonite history has been written

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<sup>73</sup> Jaggar and Struhl, Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men, p. xi.

<sup>74</sup> Ayesha Mei-Tje Imam, "The Presentation of African Women in Historical Writing," in Retrieving Women's History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society, ed. Kleinberg, pp. 30-36.

Imam's frameworks. Thus far, Mennonite history has been written from the perspective of the first three frameworks. In some studies Mennonite women's societies did not receive any mention.<sup>75</sup> When there was any reference to them in Mennonite historical research, they were regarded as auxiliary groups. Vereine was perceived as a context in which women's desire to serve others could be met.<sup>76</sup> It was "women's work." The literature has only briefly summarizing the efforts of Mennonite women's societies to raise money for mission projects.<sup>77</sup> They have not viewed women as fully active participants in the church, neither have they discussed Vereine in the context of women's restricted church roles. They have not inquired why these societies began in the first place, nor why they have continued to exist. It is from the fourth framework that my work on Vereine is developed. I will argue that Mennonite women, while being restricted from the leadership of the church institution, were full participants within Vereine, through which they were able to respond to God's call to service and participate in a quality of worship that they were unable to achieve in the

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<sup>75</sup> See the Introduction, Previous Research in the Field, pp. 17-27 for the ways in which the history of Mennonite women's societies has been approached in Mennonite historiography.

<sup>76</sup> Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival, p. 458.

<sup>77</sup> In four pages of discussion, Pannabecker summarizes the contribution of Mennonite women's societies in the United States and Canada from the late 1800s to 1975. See Pannabecker, Open Doors: The History of the General Conference Mennonite Church, pp. 288-91.

institutional church. Implicit is the realization that participation in Vereine was a religious experience for Mennonite women which included service, worship, and fellowship. With this as an overall framework for the thesis, we can now address the background of Mennonite women's societies in Europe and their establishment in Canada.

## Chapter II - Historical Background and Establishment of Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada

In order to trace the development of women's societies from 1874-1988 among Russian Mennonite immigrants in Canada, it is essential to examine the historical background for precedents which may have helped to shape their initial formation. This chapter begins with the European context from which these immigrants came through three major migrations ending in 1952 and continues with an analysis of the emergence of women's societies in Canada.

The "European Background" will include a historical review of Mennonite women's societies and a discussion of the role of Mennonite women in the church from the time of the beginnings of the Mennonites in the 1500s in the Netherlands to their presence in Prussia until the late 1700s and finally to their life in Russia in the 1800s. After a brief discussion of the Russian reality, the focus will shift to Canada and the initial establishment of Vereine during the immigration years, with an analysis of the reasons for organizing women's societies, their biblical orientation, and the focus of their action. We will show how Vereine became a type of parallel church structure for women, a context within which women could be active participants in many of the same aspects of church life and worship to which they were denied participation in the local congregation.

## A. European Background

The discussion of the role of Mennonite women in the church in Europe begins with the genesis of the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands, since it is from Dutch Anabaptism that the religious tradition of Russian Mennonites originates.

### 1. Women's Role in Dutch Anabaptism

While our knowledge of the role of women in Dutch Anabaptism is very limited, three major sources are helpful. The Complete Writings of Menno Simons contains all the written works of Menno Simons, a leader of Dutch Anabaptists, later known as Mennonites.<sup>1</sup> From this source we can determine what one important leader of Dutch Anabaptism believed and taught about women's role. A second source, Martyr's Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, deals with Christian martyrdom from the first to the fifteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> Included are stories of martyrs, official court records, and personal letters of Dutch

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<sup>1</sup> J.C.Wenger, ed. The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1956).

<sup>2</sup> Thieleman J. van Braght, Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Lancaster County: n.p., 1837). The reliability of Van Braght's work has at times been questioned. Besides mistakes in recording names and dates of execution, some martyrs were omitted because the author did not want to include the Münsterites nor those who were anti-trinitarian. See Harold S. Bender and C. Henry Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 4 vols. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955-57), 3:527. Since the particular errors and omissions discovered do not pertain to women's role in Anabaptism, there is no reason to suspect information which is pertinent to the present study.

Anabaptist martyrs. It is from this source that we learn what women believed and to what extent they participated in the Anabaptist movement of the 1500s. A third useful source is the Mennonite Encyclopedia which contains a few entries on the role of Anabaptist women in the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup>

In the early years of Dutch Anabaptism, we find no evidence that women formed their own societies. The work that women did later on in the context of women's societies, such as giving resources to the less privileged, was at this time considered an integral part of true discipleship for both men and women.<sup>4</sup> The practice was this--at secret meetings in cellars and forests, money, food, and clothing for the needy were placed in boxes and sacks. These were then distributed by the leading minister or an appointed Seckelmeister (treasurer).<sup>5</sup>

What was then the distinct role of women in Dutch Anabaptism in the sixteenth century? We will examine both the prescriptions for their role and what they actually did. First, we will examine the doctrines and letters of Menno Simons to see how the proper role of women was perceived. In his treatise of 1556, "The True Christian Faith," Simons used ten examples of

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<sup>3</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia.

<sup>4</sup> Menno Simons, "Foundation of Christian Doctrine," pp. 167, 200 and "Why I do not Cease Teaching and Writing," pp. 305-307 in The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, ed. Wenger.

<sup>5</sup> Peter James Klassen, The Economics of Anabaptism 1525-1560 (London: Mouton and Co., 1964), p. 43.

biblical characters to illustrate the qualities of true faith.<sup>6</sup>

In one of these, he gave advice to Christian women--

Do not adorn yourselves with gold, silver, costly pearls and embroidered hair, and expensive, unusual dress. . . Be obedient to your husbands in all reasonable things . . . Remain within your houses and gates unless you have something of importance to regulate, such as to make purchases, to provide in temporal needs, to hear the Word of the Lord, or to receive the holy sacraments, etc. Attend faithfully to your charge, to your children, house, and family.<sup>7</sup>

We also have access to two of his letters to women. In the first, addressed to a widow, Simons refers to "the weakness of the womanly nature" and encourages the widow to "carry on bravely, . . . Take good care of your labor, your household and children. Diligently avoid all immodesty, gossip, pride, and vanity."<sup>8</sup> In another letter, addressed to the wife of a man who was contemplating becoming a pastor of a church, Simons opposes her opposition to her husband's calling as pastor, stating that "the love to God and our brethren must be considered first of all."<sup>9</sup> From these few references to women in Menno Simons' writings, we can gather that he believed women's primary role was in the home, that women should be supportive of their husbands' calling to pastoral work, and that they should dress in a simple,

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<sup>6</sup> Menno Simons, "The True Christian Faith," in The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, ed. Wenger, pp. 343-91.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>8</sup> Menno Simons, "Comforting Letter to a Widow," in The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, ed. Wenger, p. 1028.

<sup>9</sup> "Sincere Appeal to Leonard Bouwen's Wife," in The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, ed. Wenger, p. 1038.

modest fashion. While this gives us an indication of the thoughts of a Dutch Anabaptist leader on women's role, we need to determine what women actually did.

From the entries in Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians and the Mennonite Encyclopedia we have an indication of the extent to which Anabaptist women actually participated in religious life.<sup>10</sup> We learn that Anabaptist women in the Netherlands read theological documents and wrote testaments of faith to their children.<sup>11</sup> In one instance, a particular woman appeared to be more skilled than her husband, a minister, in locating biblical texts--"whenever he could not find a passage, he would ask his wife, Claudine, who would at once clearly indicate to him what he sought."<sup>12</sup> Since there was an emphasis on the authority of scripture and the priesthood of all believers at the time of the Reformation, it became important for men, women, and children to learn to read and write. Even an opponent of Anabaptism took note of their sudden ability to read.<sup>13</sup> Along with reading the biblical text, women boldly expressed their

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<sup>10</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia and Braght, Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, pp. 413-1100. I perused pages 413-1100 and examined every court record, story, and letter for indications of women's role within early Dutch Anabaptism.

<sup>11</sup> Braght, Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, pp. 453, 668, 1080.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 737.

<sup>13</sup> A.L.E. Verheyden, Anabaptism in Flanders, 1530-1650: A Century of Struggle (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1961), p. 5.

faith in speaking and singing.<sup>14</sup> When brought to trial, both women and men defended their positions with lengthy quotations from the Bible.<sup>15</sup> In a mixed group of men and women, speaking was not necessarily left to the men. In fact, on one occasion, when four women together with two men were brought to trial, "the two brethren, Bruyn and Anthonis the weaver, who were brought out with them, were very sorrowful and did not speak; the women, however, spoke much and greatly reprovved the monks."<sup>16</sup> Besides speaking of their faith, women sang of their faith and composed religious songs. One such song writer was Soetken Gerrits of Rotterdam who composed approximately one hundred hymns which, in 1592, were compiled into a hymn book entitled Nieu Gheestelijck Liedboexken.<sup>17</sup> But even though women seemed free to speak of their faith in public and even though they were addressed as "coworkers and followers of the gospel,"<sup>18</sup> men were the elders in the church and heads of households. They were responsible for the spiritual well being of church members; men, women and children were expected to submit to male elders. In the home, the husband was head of wife and children, just as Christ was the

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<sup>14</sup> Braght, Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, pp. 738, 842, 495, 522, 1092.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 495, 653, 481-482.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 886.

<sup>17</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 4:570.

<sup>18</sup> Braght, Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, p. 711.

head of the church.<sup>19</sup> It was the husband's responsibility to nurture the family through scripture and prayer. Husbands were to love, protect, and support their wives; wives were to be submissive and obedient to husbands.

In spite of the fact that men were the official church leaders, some women appointed themselves to church leadership positions, and seem to have been accepted as such.<sup>20</sup> One such woman was Elizabeth of Leeuwarden, a leading figure in Dutch Anabaptism, who travelled and worked with Menno Simons.<sup>21</sup> In her court trial she is referred to as Leeraresse, (teacheress), someone who taught publicly. Aeffgen Lystyncx and Elizabeth Dirks also taught and preached in Anabaptist meetings.<sup>22</sup> Lystyncx was said to have organized Anabaptist conventicles and is called a "prophetess."<sup>23</sup> Another woman, Digna Pieters, "held conventicles, contrary to the faith, holy sacraments, and other services and ceremonies of the holy (Roman) church."<sup>24</sup> These

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 712.

<sup>20</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 4:972; and Keith L. Sprunger, "God's Powerful Army of the Weak: Anabaptist Women of the Radical Reformation," in Triumph Over Silence, Women in Protestant History, Richard L. Greaves, ed. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Braght, Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, p. 481.

<sup>22</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 1:19 and 4:973.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1:18-19.

<sup>24</sup> Braght, Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians, p. 551.

examples indicate that at least some women were involved in leadership roles in early Dutch Anabaptism.

It appears that in the later 1500s, after persecution in the Netherlands had abated, the diaconate was open to women.<sup>25</sup> From the Dordrecht Confession of Faith of 1632, the basis of union of Frisian and Flemish Mennonites in the Netherlands, we learn about the role of deaconess in Dutch Anabaptism--

Also that honorable old widows be ordained and chosen as servants, who besides the almoners, are to visit, comfort, and take care of the poor, the weak, the afflicted, and the needy, as also to visit, comfort, and take care of widows and orphans; and further to assist in taking care of any matters in the church that properly come within their sphere, according to their best ability.<sup>26</sup>

Duties of the deaconess seemed to include care of the sick and needy. It is not altogether clear what else was considered part of her work, but it appears that duties were an extension of women's role in the home--they were caregivers. The concern of the church was that they remain "properly . . . within their sphere."<sup>27</sup>

Thus we see that the role of Dutch Anabaptist women included both restrictive and liberating elements. From the beginning of the Anabaptist movement women had an active role. While on the one hand they were to submit to male church elders, on the other hand they were known to read the Bible and speak freely of their

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<sup>25</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 4:973.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 2:22.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

faith, even to the point of teaching and conducting religious meetings. We have no record of the existence of separate women's societies during this period. As Mennonites<sup>28</sup> fled persecution in the Netherlands, some as early as 1540, and immigrated to Prussia and later to Russia, the church moved towards institutionalization and restrictions in women's church roles became more pronounced,<sup>29</sup> and it is in Russia that we first hear of the establishment of women's societies among the Mennonites.

## 2. The Role of Mennonite Women in Prussia and Russia

During the two hundred years of Mennonite history in Prussia there is no evidence of the establishment of Mennonite women's societies. It is difficult to determine the nature of women's participation in church life because of the lack of source material, but we do have some indication that male authority became firmly entrenched in the church. This is seen in the practice of Bruderschaft (a decision making body composed of all adult males in the church)<sup>30</sup> and symbolized in the design of the

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<sup>28</sup> In the Netherlands during the 1500s, those Dutch Anabaptists who were affiliated with the teachings of Menno Simons were known as "Mennists". In Prussia, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they were known as "Mennonit", and in Russia, from the nineteenth century it was replaced by "Mennonite". See Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 3:586-87.

<sup>29</sup> Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Peter M. Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910), trans. and eds. J.B. Toews et al. (Fresno: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), p. 51.

church interior. Males sat on one side of the church on elevated seats; females sat on the other side of the church at a lower level.<sup>31</sup> Thus women did not have a vote in the church nor did they officially have any influence in church decisions--

By majority vote the "brotherhood" (Bruderschaft) decides, in the final analysis, all important financial matters, the excommunication of erring and readmission of penitent members, matters of dogma and church governance, and the acceptance or rejection of the church council's resolutions . . . The brotherhood elects its elders, teachers and deacons.<sup>32</sup>

Mennonites remained in Prussia until the late 1700s. Here they were granted military exemption, were relatively free to practise their religion, and could purchase as much land as they wished. When in 1744 Frederick the Great passed a regulation forbidding further purchase of land by the Mennonites, they were very distressed. So in 1789, when Catherine the Great of Russia invited Prussian communities to come to Russia, Mennonite people responded positively. Within fifty years, half the Mennonite Prussian population, approximately six thousand people, had immigrated to Russia.<sup>33</sup>

Poor and landless Mennonites were the first to leave Prussia for Russia, where they were granted their own educational system, the right to local self-government, religious freedom and exemption from military service. By 1789, eight Mennonite

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 60, 68, 72.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> C. Henry Smith, The Story of the Mennonites (Newton: Mennonite Publication Office, 1950), p. 289.

villages had been established in the Chortitza colony and by 1812, Molotschna colony had twenty villages.<sup>34</sup> Unique in its emphasis on spiritual renewal was the village of Gnadenfeld, one of the two major administrative and communication centers of the Molotschna colony, settled in 1835 by both Lutherans and Mennonites--"the consecration of children, mission festivals, emphasis on temperance, and other practices generally unknown among Mennonites were adhered to in Gnadenfeld."<sup>35</sup> Mennonites in Gnadenfeld met for worship so often that their opponents called them "meeting-goers"; besides weekly meetings they held monthly conferences.<sup>36</sup> An influential figure was the Lutheran evangelist, Eduard Wuest, who came to Gnadenfeld in 1845 and was a frequent speaker at Mennonite mission festivals.<sup>37</sup> It was at these events that participants became interested in supporting foreign missions and it was in this context that Mennonite women's societies had their birth--

It was agreed to organize a Women's Society during the winter months to enable the women to meet once a week in the afternoons to knit and sew for missions. . . . The working period of the sisters was preceded by prayer and singing led by a brother; missionary news was read from time to time while the women worked. The

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<sup>34</sup> James Urry, None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889 (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989), pp. 56-57.

<sup>35</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 2:531.

<sup>36</sup> Jacob P. Bekker, Origin of The Mennonite Brethren Church, trans. D.E. Pauls and A.E. Janzen (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1973), pp. 25-26.

<sup>37</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 2:531.

meetings closed with song and prayer.<sup>38</sup>

While we cannot be sure of the exact date that Mennonite women's societies were established here, we know that it occurred between 1835, the settlement of Gnadenfeld, and the later 1840s, when the influence of Eduard Wuest was felt in the village. With their roots in the spiritual renewal movement in Gnadenfeld, the emphasis of Mennonite women's societies was the support of foreign missions. While it is not explicitly stated, it appears that the idea to form women's societies came from male church leaders, since they were the heads of churches; the fact that males led prayer and singing at women's society meetings indicates a degree of male leadership within the first Mennonite women's societies in Russia.

Not only was the spiritual awakening in Gnadenfeld the beginning of Mennonite women's societies, it was also the context out of which the MB church developed. After signing a document of secession from the Mennonite Church in 1860, the MB Church was formed, a church characterized by a greater attention to Bible study, conversion, and moral living.<sup>39</sup> The new MB movement was criticized by other Mennonites for extreme applications of biblical texts--"one notices a one-sided, literal interpretation of the Scriptures amongst them."<sup>40</sup> Husbands were accused of

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<sup>38</sup> Bekker, Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church, pp. 25-26.

<sup>39</sup> Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910), pp. 230-232.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

threatening their wives with death if they weren't satisfied with them, but leaders in the MB church denied the allegation. In defense they quoted biblical texts as evidence for the belief that wives should submit to husbands.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, in the church community, MB women had liberties which they were previously unaccustomed to in the Kirchliche (KM)<sup>42</sup> Mennonite church--

The emphasis on spontaneous conversion and antipathy toward tradition . . . promoted equality between the sexes. . . . With the introduction of Bible study, prayer meeting, Sunday school, and mission societies, a wide field was opened for Mennonite women. Now they could express their views in Bible studies, they participated audibly in prayer meetings, they taught Sunday-school classes, discussed missionary affairs in sewing circles and many other organizations, and as mission workers engaged in direct evangelism and teaching.<sup>43</sup>

Mennonites who were not part of the renewal movement were critical of the new found freedom for women in the MB church group and reported to their churches that

the so-called believers . . . organized meetings among themselves in which every member of the congregation, regardless of age or sex, as an equally qualified priest anointed with the Holy Spirit, explained the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> After the separation of the MB from the established Mennonite church in Russia, the main body of Mennonites was designated Kirchliche (churchly) Mennonites. The CMC eventually became the largest Canadian Mennonite denomination of what were the Kirchliche Mennonites. Hereafter, the standard designation of Kirchliche Mennonites (KM) will be used when referring to these Mennonites in Russia..

<sup>43</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 4:973.

Scriptures and prayed aloud.<sup>44</sup>

Women in the MB church were also known to study theology alongside of men. For instance, it was during this time that Katharina Zacharias Martens, together with her husband--"pored over sermons and textbooks . . . they prepared to attend the highly esteemed Bielefeld School in Germany."<sup>45</sup> But, while it is true that when the MB church was first established, MB women were able to participate more freely in the church, we know that by the end of the century men held positions of authority and were the decision makers--"women had no vote in church affairs, there was just Bruderschaft. Women were Sunday School teachers, otherwise they had no leadership positions in the church."<sup>46</sup>

By the late 1800s, in Russia, Mennonite women had roles in the church which were exclusively for women. One such role was that of deaconess, prompted by the deaconess movement in the Netherlands.<sup>47</sup> Its biblical basis was Rom. 16:1 where Phoebe is referred to as a deaconess. An institution for training deaconesses called, "Moria Society of Evangelical Sisters of Mercy" was established in 1909 in Halbstadt, Molotschna. Here

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<sup>44</sup> Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910), p. 377.

<sup>45</sup> Hilda J. Born, "Plant Trees Wherever You Go: Katharina Zacharias Martens (1867-1929)," in Women Among the Brethren, ed. Katie Funk Wiebe, p. 133.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Catherine Klassen, a leader within MB women's societies, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 25 April 1989.

<sup>47</sup> Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910), p. 828.

single women could enrol in a three year nurses' training course as well as have their physical needs provided for as long as they remained members of the Moria society.

Following the precedent of Gnadenfeld, women's Vereine were established within local congregations among the KM and MB. Catherine Klassen, a Canadian immigrant from Russia, notes that women's societies probably were first organized "when people became missionary minded."<sup>48</sup> The KM sent out their first missionaries in 1871 and the MB in 1885, when Abraham and Maria Friesen were sent to India.<sup>49</sup> In fact, Klassen refers to Abraham Friesen in her letter, "Mother's cousin Abraham Friesen was missionary in India. When they reported back, there would be an incentive to have collections, support to give to missions."<sup>50</sup> According to her, Vereine were organized in the late 1800s out of a desire to support missions.

It is uncertain whether Mennonite women's societies continued from their origin in the 1840s in Gnadenfeld to the late 1800s, but we know that by 1902 women's missionary circles existed in many villages.<sup>51</sup> In Gortchakov, a Schwestern Verein

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<sup>48</sup> Letter from Catherine Klassen.

<sup>49</sup> Dyck, ed., An Introduction to Mennonite History, p. 136 and Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 99.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Catherine Klassen.

<sup>51</sup> Waldemar Janzen, "Foreign Mission Interest of the Mennonites in Russia Before World War I," Mennonite Quarterly Review 42,1 (1968):63.

(Sister's Society) was established before World War I.<sup>52</sup> In Davlekonovo, a cultural and economic center of the Mennonite settlement in the Russian province of Ufa, both KM and MB Nähvereine (sewing societies) were established and a Yungfrauenverein (Young Women's Society) was organized between 1913 and 1916.<sup>53</sup>

Vereine meetings were held regularly in members' homes in order to work for missions.<sup>54</sup> Not only did Mennonite women sew, knit and crochet articles of clothing for missions, but they also developed a worship ritual. In MB societies--

There would be singing, prayer, reading of Scripture, missionary reports from the Friedenstimme (a German-language MB periodical), or a good book. Somebody would tell of her experience with the Lord or a poem. Coffee and Zweiback (rolls) would end the meeting.<sup>55</sup>

In KM societies the pattern was similar. Sometimes called Arbeitsstunde (Work Hour) women would work on quilts while one member read from a book.<sup>56</sup> Completed articles were later auctioned off in the local school building, and the proceeds from auctions were given to missions. In cities where women could walk

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<sup>52</sup> Letter from Catherine Klassen.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Catherine Klassen; and Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 2:20.

<sup>54</sup> Consultation with Antonio and Benjamin Redekopp of Ste. Catherines, Ontario, 24 May 24 1989.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from Catherine Klassen.

<sup>56</sup> Consultation with Katharine Langeman, Helen Peters, Hedio Wiens, Margaret Wiens, and Anna Fast of the George Street Senior Home of the Waterloo/Kitchener United Mennonite Church, Waterloo, Ontario, 19 March 1989.

to church, regular meetings were held in the church, but in rural areas, women did the work by themselves in their own homes, and assembled as a group only for the annual auction.<sup>57</sup>

Besides working for the cause of missions, Mennonite women's societies in Russia helped out in times of war. They made clothing, bandages, linen and bedding for victims of the Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the Russian-Japanese War of 1904.<sup>58</sup> During World War I they knit scarves and mittens for men in the military;<sup>59</sup> in the village of Millerovo Mennonite women's groups organized for the care of wounded soldiers in a Mennonite owned flour mill.<sup>60</sup>

What is striking about these Vereine is the similarity between components of Verein gatherings and those of the larger church. Worship elements in the Sunday morning church service in Russian Mennonite churches included combinations of preaching, teaching, prayer, reading from the Bible, and singing.<sup>61</sup> Although there was no preaching as such in women's societies, most of the aspects of Sunday morning worship were included in Mennonite women's Verein meetings. This similarity leads us to

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910), pp. 583-585, 830.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Catherine Klassen.

<sup>60</sup> Consultation with Antonio and Benjamin Redekopp.

<sup>61</sup> Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, pp. 57, 70 and Bekker, Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 145.

question whether women's society meetings functioned as a parallel church for women, a question we will address later in our discussion of Vereine in Canada.

In our review of Vereine in the European context, we have determined that Mennonite women's societies have their roots both in spiritual renewal and an interest in mission. This was the case for the first Mennonite women's society in Gnadenfeld as well as in the later 1880s when Mennonites sent out their first missionaries. We must note that this renewed missionary zeal in Russia in the latter part of the nineteenth century did not happen in a vacuum. Missionary activity was also occurring elsewhere, as historian John Webster Grant points out--

Missionary enthusiasm inevitably overflowed the boundaries of Canada to claim a share in the effort to propagate Christianity throughout the world that was then engaging the interest of Christians everywhere. . . . Within a few decades there was a tremendous scattering of missionaries out of Christendom.<sup>62</sup>

It was during this time of missionary zeal that Russian Mennonites were beginning to immigrate to Canada, so it comes as no surprise that Canadian CMC and MB women, following the lead of their sisters in Russia, began to establish mission societies when they arrived in Canada.

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<sup>62</sup> John Webster Grant, The Church in the Canadian Era (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company Inc., 1988), p. 55.

## B. Establishment of Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada

In order to set the stage for a discussion of the establishment of Mennonite women's societies in Canada, we need to understand the circumstances under which Russian Mennonites immigrated to Canada and the formation of the CMC and MB conferences. After this discussion we will situate the organization of Mennonite women's societies in the context of the age of missionary zeal and the growth of Protestant women's societies in Canada. Finally, Vereine established in Canada during the three periods of Russian immigration to Canada will be examined in order to determine their foci and what participation in Vereine meant for Mennonite women.

### 1. First Mennonite Immigration to Canada

With the entry of Manitoba into Confederation in 1870 and the Manitoba School Act guaranteeing private schools, conditions were ripe for the settlement of approximately eight thousand Mennonites who left Russia for Manitoba between 1874 and 1880. The package offered by the Canadian government was appealing-- exemption from military service, free land, freedom to educate their own children, the right to affirm instead of swear in taking an oath, and financial help for the voyage to Canada.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People, p. 192.

Complete Russian colonies were transplanted in Canada<sup>64</sup> and it was the amalgamation of two particular colonies that led to the formation of the CMC. One of these was the Bergthal colony, to which approximately half of the eight thousand immigrants of this period belonged. In 1903, this colony joined with Rosenorter churches (Mennonites in Saskatchewan who had immigrated from Prussia before World War I) to form Die Konferenz der Mennoniten im Mittleren Kanada (The Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada).<sup>65</sup> This group was later called the CMC.

The Canadian MB Church began in a different way. By the 1870s, ten thousand Russian Mennonite Brethren immigrants had already arrived in the United States from Russia.<sup>66</sup> Some of these came to Canada as missionaries in order to proselytize among the KM. Subsequently, those who converted to the MB Church organized MB churches in Canada. By this method, the first MB church was established in Canada in Burwalde, Manitoba in 1888.<sup>67</sup>

By 1952 (the last year of the third immigration of Russian Mennonites to Canada) there were eighty CMC and 108 MB churches in Canada.<sup>68</sup> In our discussion of the establishment of Mennonite

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>66</sup> Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 131.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Bender and Smith, eds., Mennonite Encyclopedia, 1:671 and 1952 Yearbook of the Forty-Second Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America (Winnipeg: The Christian Press, 1952), pp. 128-133.

women's societies in Canada, we are concerned with Mennonite women's societies organized within these two Mennonite denominations--the CMC and the MB churches.

As previously indicated, the late 1800s was a period of great missionary zeal. Many Protestant women's societies throughout Canada contributed to the mission cause and Mennonite women's societies were no exception.

## 2. Proliferation of Women's Societies in Canada in the Late 1800s

By the late 1800s in Canada, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches were already involved in fairly extensive overseas missions programs.<sup>69</sup> Church historian John Webster Grant notes that "as in earlier periods of missionary enthusiasm, a number of new enterprises stemmed from the initiative of individuals or small groups."<sup>70</sup> Women were among these; in fact,

among Protestants, women were the first to organize for the furtherance of the missionary cause and in Canada they have always been the chief instigators of enthusiasm for missions. . . . Such groups, although largely dependent on mite boxes and voluntary projects, raised astonishing sums for missionary purposes.<sup>71</sup>

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Christian Press, 1952), pp. 128-133.

<sup>69</sup> Ruth Compton Brouwer, "Canadian Women and the Foreign Missionary Movement: A Case Study of Presbyterian Women's Involvement at the Home Base and in Central India, 1876-1914," p. 52.

<sup>70</sup> Grant, The Church in the Canadian Era, p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

During this time two categories of Protestant women's groups were organized: missionary societies which concerned themselves with raising funds to support missionaries, and ladies aids which assisted with local church needs.<sup>72</sup> The first local women's missionary association was established by Presbyterian women on Prince Edward Island in 1825,<sup>73</sup> and by the 1880s a number of Protestant women's societies had organized national societies.<sup>74</sup> Alongside of missionary societies in local congregations, ladies aid societies were also established. These assisted in the affairs of the local church, such as supplying furnishings, paying for repairs, and visiting the sick. By the 1890s there were 1,350 ladies aid societies in Canadian Methodist churches alone.<sup>75</sup>

In the late 1800s, in Canada, other women's societies, not directly affiliated with specific Protestant traditions, had also been established, some to improve society's moral standards and others to work for suffrage. Some of these societies had the effect of extending their caregiver role in the home to all of

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<sup>72</sup> Cramp. Retrospects, A History of the Formation and Progress of the Missionary Aid Societies of the Maritime Provinces, p. 29.

<sup>73</sup> Mitchinson, "Canadian Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," p. 61.

<sup>74</sup> Grant, The Church in the Canadian Era, p. 57.

<sup>75</sup> Nancy Hall, "The Professionalisation of Women Workers in the Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Churches of Canada," in First Days Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History, ed. Mary Kinnear (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1987), p. 122.

society. One example is the formation of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, its first local association beginning in 1874, with prohibition as its main objective.<sup>76</sup> Two years later, the first suffragette society was established under the name, Toronto Women's Literary Club, which in 1889 evolved into the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association.<sup>77</sup> With the proliferation of women's groups in Canada, the National Council of Women was established in 1893 as an umbrella organization for Canadian women's associations; its objective was to apply "the Golden Rule to society, custom and law."<sup>78</sup>

Reaction of women in Protestant traditions to societies not directly associated with the church, was mixed. While Methodist and Church of England Women's Missionary Societies endorsed enfranchisement for women, Presbyterian women were reluctant to associate themselves with the suffragette movement.<sup>79</sup> It appears that Methodist women's societies were the only societies which supported the National Council of Women.<sup>80</sup> While we know of one MB male minister in Ontario who encouraged MB women to join the

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<sup>76</sup> Alison Prentice, et al. Canadian Women: A History (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p. 172.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>79</sup> Brouwer, "Canadian Women and the Foreign Missionary Movement: A Case Study of Presbyterian Women's Involvement at the Home Base and in Central India, 1876-1914," p. 452.

<sup>80</sup> Mitchinson, "Canadian Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," p. 68.

Woman's Christian Temperance Union, generally, they were to avoid membership in non-Mennonite societies, particularly suffragette societies, which, according to Mennonite historian Frank H. Epp, were considered "unnecessary, if not dangerous."<sup>81</sup> The prevalence of caution such as this is illustrated in the effects of Mennonite women's participation in the Women's Institute in Altona, Manitoba, an institute organized in 1936 to help the needy.<sup>82</sup> This institute was not looked upon favourably by some Mennonite church leaders, who opposed it on the grounds that it was a secular organization which included non-Christian and non-Mennonite women.<sup>83</sup> In an attempt to convince women to withdraw their support from such women's institutes, male leaders appealed to the biblical text--"Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus." (Col. 3:17) It is not clear how many women left this particular women's institute--"from time to time some of the women withdrew their membership, particularly those whose husbands were important figures in the church"--but we do know that a few Mennonite women were strong leaders in the movement.<sup>84</sup> They did not understand why they should not associate with non-Mennonite women whom they knew as neighbors, with whom they had attended school, and to whom they related to

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<sup>81</sup> Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival, p. 52.

<sup>82</sup> Esther Epp-Tiessen, Altona: The Story of a Prairie Town (Altona: D.W. Friesen and Sons, 1982), pp. 180-183.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

on a social level.<sup>85</sup>

Thus, Mennonite women's societies emerged in an era when missionary zeal in Canada was high and women in other Protestant traditions were also organizing for missions. To determine what membership in these societies meant for Mennonite women, we will discuss circumstances around which they began, their religious motivation, and the foci of their involvement.

### 3. Circumstances of the Emergence of Mennonite Women's Societies

As new Mennonite churches were established in Canada, Mennonite women's societies were organized within them, sometimes initiated by Mennonite men and other times by women. Organization of women's groups by male church leaders was a common phenomenon in Protestant traditions. For example, the Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Church was established in Ontario when in 1880, Rev. A. Sutherland, a Methodist minister, "pleaded the need of woman's energy in mission work."<sup>86</sup> Similarly, in 1876, the Foreign Missions Committee of the Presbyterian Church initiated the organization of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society--"Two leading churchmen, Rev. Dr. William MacLaren and Rev. Dr. Alexander Topp, conveyed the Foreign Mission Committee's desire that such a

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Graham, *Forty-Four Years Effort of the Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, Canada 1881-1925*, p. 4.

society be organized."<sup>87</sup> It was not surprising that in the first decades of Mennonites in Canada, numerous Mennonite women's societies were also started by men. In 1915, a women's society was formed in Drake, Saskatchewan, when Rev. Mike Horsch from the CMC mission board asked women to sew clothing for a mission station in Busby, Montana.<sup>88</sup> Another was instigated by a pastor in Eigenheim, Saskatchewan, who suggested that women organize a Nähverein.<sup>89</sup> In Herbert, Saskatchewan, a women's group was initiated by a male missionary who pled for funds for missions in India.<sup>90</sup> In Crystal City, Manitoba, a ladies aid was organized when C.F. Klassen reported on the plight of refugees in Europe.<sup>91</sup> In Osler, Saskatchewan, in 1949 during a Sunday morning church service, the minister of the church "invited all interested ladies to rise and thus indicate they were willing to further God's work."<sup>92</sup> The result was the establishment of a women's society in a Mennonite church in Osler. In these cases, male church leaders saw needs they felt would be appropriate for women to fulfil. Women were asked specifically to participate in the cause of missions by sewing, an activity viewed as a suitable one

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<sup>87</sup> McPherson, "Head, heart and purse: The Presbyterian Women's Missionary Society in Canada, 1876-1925," p. 151.

<sup>88</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 17.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>91</sup> Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission, p. 27.

<sup>92</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 54.

for women. And women seemed pleased to participate in the work of the church in this way.

While some women's societies in Protestant traditions were initiated by men, others were organized by women themselves. For instance, the first missionary society of the Baptist church was established in 1870 by Hannah Maria Norris who, although she felt called as a missionary, was refused financial support of the Mission Board, so she asked women to support her.<sup>93</sup> That year in New Brunswick, her home province, she organized thirty-three "circles" for her own missionary support.<sup>94</sup> Likewise, a few accounts of Mennonite women's societies indicate they were initiated by women. For example, in 1929, a woman in a Mennonite church in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan, having determined that women did not have a place in the already existent programs of the church, suggested to other church women--"why could not we women get together, and get some kind of ladies aid or sewing circle going and get busy doing something in an organized way?"<sup>95</sup> As a result, a women's society began in that church. A similar incident occurred in Sardis, British Columbia--

It was in the year 1930. Coming from the Sunday morning service, Mrs. Katharina Friesen (wife of Rev. B.B. Friesen) felt a burden on her heart. What could they do to get their own church? . . . Could they organize a sewing circle and start raising money for

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<sup>93</sup> Merrick, These Impossible Women. 100 Years. The Story of the United Baptist Woman's Missionary Union of the Maritime Provinces, p. 19.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 50.

this project?<sup>96</sup>

In this instance there was a need for a church building and a woman decided to form a woman's society to raise money to meet that need.

Whether instigated by women or men, most Vereine were organized in order to meet a particular need, either locally or in other countries where Mennonite missionaries were working. But what was the motivation for their involvement? What motivated them to serve as they did?

#### 4. Religious Motivation of Mennonite Women's Societies

As Wendy Mitchinson has noted, women who formed missionary societies did so because "they believed that they had a direct command from God to spread his gospel."<sup>97</sup> Their impetus was a faith experience based on biblical understandings. This was no less the case in Mennonite women's societies, whose biblical orientation can be noted by several indicators. The first is that women explicitly stated that their service was biblically motivated. Second, some groups implied a biblical basis for service in their choice of biblical texts as group mottos. A third indicator of biblical motivation is seen in the names women

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<sup>96</sup> A History of the First Mennonite Church Greendale B.C. (Greendale: First Mennonite Church, 1976), p. 8.

<sup>97</sup> Mitchinson, "Canadian Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," p. 73.

gave to their societies.

First then, women explicitly related the work of their societies to their biblical commitment. For example, "love to God" was the reason for the organization of the first women's group of the Clearbrook MB Church.<sup>98</sup> And in 1936, the Naomi-Ruth Verein of the First United Mennonite Church in Vancouver expressed their service in this way--"With God's help, we too, even if we are few in numbers, want to try to add our coins to help build the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>99</sup> In Altona, Manitoba, the Mary Martha Mission Group claimed that the work of mission societies stood within a tradition of Christian women in the past who had served God--

Since the beginning of Christianity, women have had their own special role to play in the service of the Master. Much of it was lowly work, perhaps, but they did not consider it so for they were serving the One they loved.<sup>100</sup>

In 1944, the president's report of the Ebenezer Verein in Steinbach, Manitoba, made it clear that the work of their women's society was considered to be an important part of the total mission of the church--

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<sup>98</sup> Louise Enns, "Ladies fellowship groups, Clearbrook MB Church," History of the Clearbrook MB Church: 1936-1986, (n.p., 1986), p. 97.

<sup>99</sup> Rempel, History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976), p. 74. The reference to "coins" probably refers to Jesus' observation that the woman who dropped two "mites" into the temple treasury gave more than the wealthy because she gave all she had. More than likely, this inspired the women to think they could make a difference.

<sup>100</sup> Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977), p. 16.

Even though the women work separately from the rest of the congregation, we still feel that we are very much a part of the whole. . . . the women do their part and the men, theirs. . . . The congregation had the responsibility to pay its debt. We women felt the responsibility as much as the men, and we decided to help. How could we help? Through the work we do in the Aid.<sup>101</sup>

Women's biblical motivation for service was also expressed in their defense against the accusations of male church members who considered their groups gossip sessions. Such male criticism of Vereine is evident in a segment of a poem written in the late 1940s--

Why do they sew so much?  
It's just to pass the time,  
They only gossip and turn their heads.<sup>102</sup>

The Ebenezer Ladies Aid in Steinbach, Manitoba, was also aware of this perception of women's groups--

Sometimes the Ladies Aids are ridiculed and sarcastically spoken of as being mere "coffee-klatsches" but that is not true of our congregation. Neither is that remark deserving of any Ladies Aid. . . . The field of service for everyone, but especially for the women, is very big and no doubt the future will offer many opportunities of service for which God may grant us willing hands and hearts.<sup>103</sup>

In the 1930s Vereine came under criticism in the church periodical, Mennonitische Rundschau, and was subsequently defended by a member of a Verein, who wrote that not one Verein

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<sup>101</sup> Nettie Neufeld and Jessie Peters, Fifty Years Ebenezer Verein 1936-1986 (Steinbach: Ebenezer Verein, 1987), p. 14.

<sup>102</sup> Heinz Janzen, Gedicht [Poem], a poem on donations by Mennonite women's societies of the Waterloo-Kitchener Mennonite Church to replace the church roof, Waterloo, Ontario, late 1940s.

<sup>103</sup> Neufeld and Peters, Fifty Years Ebenezer Verein 1936-1986, p. 14-15.

deserved to be thought of as self righteous.<sup>104</sup> Against accusations such as these, Mennonite women affirmed their religious motivation for service through women's society involvement.

A second indication of the biblical motivation for Mennonite women's societies is found in the selection of biblical texts chosen by women's groups as mottos.<sup>105</sup> The following biblical references were chosen as mottos--

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:9,10)

Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did. (Acts 9:36)

And whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father by him. (Col. 3:17)

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. (Matt. 7:12)

Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:2)

Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good,

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<sup>104</sup> See "Frauenvereine," Mennonitische Rundschau (7 März 1934):5 and "An die Frauenvereine!" Mennonitische Rundschau (16 Januar 1935):6.

<sup>105</sup> Of the 120 CMC women's societies and forty MB women's societies established between 1874 and 1952, our sources show that twelve CMC groups and one MB group chose biblical texts for mottos. Since we are limited in the availability of source material from these early years, we cannot tell how many groups had biblical mottos.

that he may have to give to him that needeth. (Eph. 4:28)

I must work the works of him (Jesus) that sent me while it is day; night cometh when no man can work. (Jn. 9:4)

But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. (Gal. 6:4)

Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest. (Matt. 9:38)<sup>106</sup>

Women's understanding of these biblical texts will have been informed by what they learned from preachers and from their own study of the Bible. While it is difficult to say exactly what these texts meant to them, we observe by their choices that they connected their own work with biblical injunctions.<sup>107</sup>

A third indication of the biblical motivation of women's societies is in the choice of names of women in the Bible as names for their groups--Tabitha, Naomi, Ruth, Salome, Lydia, Mary, and Martha. Mennonite women would have been taught the significance of these names and on that basis chose them as names for their societies. While it is difficult to state precisely in which ways women's groups identified with these biblical women the fact that they chose names of biblical women indicates that

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<sup>106</sup> Since Mennonites used the King James version of the Bible during this time period, references are from that version. At that time the references to humans as "man" were assumed to include women.

<sup>107</sup> We note how often words of "doing" and "working" appear in the mottos--"doing," "do good," "good works," "deed," "do," "labour," "working," "work," and "labourers." The fact that the text of Gal. 6:9 was chosen by three societies and Gal. 6:9,10 was chosen by two groups shows the popularity of a text which refers to doing good deeds.

they were motivated by women whose stories appear in the Bible, and thus were biblically motivated to serve. This motivation informed the specific foci of their groups, to which we now turn our attention.

## 5. Foci of Mennonite Women's Societies

While the most obvious focus for Mennonite women's societies was service, women also organized societies for the purpose of, in their words, "fellowship." In their regularly held gatherings, they could support one another through difficult times. But besides raising money for missions and supporting each other, the groups provided an opportunity for women's spiritual expression in the worship times which customarily were part of their meetings. These three foci, which we will now discuss, were primary for Mennonite women's societies.

Through their societies Mennonite women served the church, often supporting a number of projects at once--

Minutes of 1925 reveal the buying of medicines for a sick child or adult; articles of clothing and food for a poor family; glasses for several people, and other such like. Monies to other countries went to Russia, Germany, India and Africa. "Biblische Geschichte" (Bible stories) were bought for the Sunday School, recitation books for the Jugendverein (youth society) and subsequent needs of our local church.<sup>108</sup>

In some instances, Mennonite women's societies chose to assist

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<sup>108</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 12.

financially in the construction of a church building.<sup>109</sup> For example, in 1940, the Ladies Fellowship of the Clearbrook MB Church raised the entire amount needed for the material for the first church sanctuary.<sup>110</sup> In Swift Current, Saskatchewan, the Senior Ladies Aid raised money to support the construction of a Bible school in the area.<sup>111</sup> Another women's group sold a quilt they had made and donated the proceeds to the church pastor so that he could buy himself a suit.<sup>112</sup>

However, by far the most important area of service for Mennonite women in the early years was the support of foreign missions through the sale of their own handwork. In some cases this involved sending clothing directly to missionaries,<sup>113</sup> but the most common method to support the missions effort was to sew, knit or crochet articles to be sold at an annual missions auction sale, the proceeds of which would be sent to a support missions projects. In the early years, societies collected small amounts of money from their members and purchased fabric remnants from Eaton's catalogue, which were then sewed into articles to be

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<sup>109</sup> A History of the First Mennonite Church Greendale B.C., p. 8; and Rempel, ed., History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976), p. 23.

<sup>110</sup> History of the Clearbrook MB Church 1936-1986, p. 97.

<sup>111</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 80.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>113</sup> Mission Workers of Swift Current, Saskatchewan sent articles of clothing directly to missionaries. See Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 82.

auctioned.<sup>114</sup> As in other Protestant traditions, the annual mission sale became a common way for women across Canada to sell articles they had sewn and knit during the year.<sup>115</sup>

In addition to supporting Mennonite missions and local churches, Mennonite women were quick to respond to other needs of which they became aware. During World War I, knitting and sewing was done at the request of the Red Cross--"We were asked by the Rosthern Branch (of the Red Cross) to knit and sew for the men overseas."<sup>116</sup> Similarly, women participated during World War II--

During the war years the women also did a lot of sewing and knitting for the Red Cross. Many boxes of yarn were brought to the church to be divided among the sisters and worked into hats, scarves, mitts, gloves and socks in varying sizes.<sup>117</sup>

Between the wars, during the depression of the 1930s, the Young Women's Charity Club in Rosthern, Saskatchewan, gave food and clothing to families hardest hit.<sup>118</sup>

That service was central for Mennonite women's societies is evident by the names they chose to identify their groups. The act of naming their societies was not unique to Mennonite women; women's societies of other Protestant traditions also gave names

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<sup>114</sup> A History of the First Mennonite Church Greendale B.C., p. 9.

<sup>115</sup> National Council of Women of Canada, Women of Canada, Their Life and Work (n.p.: National Council of Women of Canada, 1900; reprint ed., 1956), p. 298.

<sup>116</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 12.

<sup>117</sup> Leamington MB Church, p. 38.

<sup>118</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 62.

to their organizations. In the Methodist, Presbyterian, Church of England, and Baptist denominations, women's groups were of two kinds. Those which were organized to support missions were called Women's Missionary Society, Women's Foreign Missionary Society, or Women's Home Missionary Society.<sup>119</sup> Those established in order to support local church needs in Canada were called simply Ladies Aid.<sup>120</sup> One exception was among Methodist groups in which Dorcas societies were organized to care for the sick and poor.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, names of Mennonite women's societies expressed the groups' function, with one obvious difference-- there was no differentiation between missionary societies and aids. Generally, most Mennonite societies, whether they were called mission societies or ladies aids, attended to both local church needs and missions. Another difference between the naming of Mennonite women's societies and that of other Protestant women's groups was that there was a greater variety of names among Mennonite women's societies. The following tables illustrate this variety and indicate the percentage distribution of names exemplifying similar foci.

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<sup>119</sup> National Council of Women of Canada, Women of Canada, Their Life and Work, pp. 303, 305, 307, 309.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Davey, Women Work and Worship in the United Church of Canada, p. 71; and National Council of Women of Canada, Women of Canada, Their Life and Work, pp. 304-305, 307.

Table 2

Percentage Distribution of Names of CMC Women's Societies  
1874-1952

CATEGORY	NAMES	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
Missions	Junior Ladies Mission Society, <u>Missionsverein</u> (3x), Marissa Mission Group, Women in Mission (2x), Women's Missionary Society (2x), The Missionary Circle, Mission Helpers, Women's Mission Society, Missions <u>Frauenverein</u> , Ladies Mission Club, Missionary Society, Mission Workers	16	13%
Sewing	Sewing Circle (6x), <u>Nähverein</u> (8x), <u>Abendkränzchen</u> , <u>Edelweisskränzchen</u> , <u>Kränzchen</u> (3x), Girls' Sewing Club, <u>Frauen Nähverein</u>	21	17%
Aid/Help/Service	Ladies Aid (22x), Senior Ladies Aid (6x), Junior Aid (2x), Willing Helpers (3x), <u>Hilfsverein</u> , <u>Willigen Hände</u> , <u>Verein Helfende Hände</u> , <u>Wohltätigkeitsverein</u> , Willing Helpers Ladies Aid, Busy Bees Circle, Merry Co-Workers Club, Goodwill Society, Goodwill Ladies Aid, Women's Auxiliary, Ladies Auxiliary	44	37%
Missions & Aid	Mission Ladies Aid	1	1%
Missions & Biblical Woman's Name	Tabitha Mission Society, Mary Martha Mission Group, <u>Tabea Missionsverein</u>	3	2.5%
Biblical Woman's Name	<u>Maria-Martha Verein</u> (3x), Dorcas Circle, Lydia <u>Verein</u> , <u>Tabea Verein</u> (2x), Tabithian Followers	8	7%
Fellowship	<u>Gemeinde Verein</u> , Ladies Fellowship, Women's Christian Fellowship	3	2.5%
Other	<u>Frauenverein</u> (7x), Schnetke Conference, <u>Mädchen Verein</u> , <u>Stadt's Verein</u> , <u>Verein</u> (10x), <u>Sonnenstrahl Verein</u> , Friendly Hour, Young Women's Club, Younger Group	24	20% <sup>122</sup>
Total		120	100%

Translations for German names are as follows: Missionsverein (Mission Society), Frauenverein (Women's Society), Nähverein (Sewing Society), Abendkränzchen (Evening Sewing Circle), Edelweisskränzchen (Edelweiss Sewing Society), Kränzchen (Sewing Society), Frauen Nähverein (Women's Sewing Society), Hilfsverein (Helping Society), Willigen Hände (Willing Hands), Verein Helfende Hände (Helping Hands Society), Wohltätigkeitsverein (a society which extends charity), Tabea Missionsverein (Tabitha Missionsverein), Gemeinde Verein (Fellowship Society), Schnetke Conference (a conference with a variety of components), Mädchen Verein (Girls' Society), Stadt's Verein (Town Society), and Sonnenstrahl Verein (Sunbeam Society). The word Kränzchen literally means "a party", but women translate it "sewing circle."

<sup>122</sup> The high percentage in the "Other" category is due to the fact that ten groups were simply called Verein.

Table 3

Percentage Distribution of Names of MB Women's Societies<sup>123</sup>  
1874-1952

CATEGORY	NAMES	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
Missions	<u>Missionsverein</u> (3x), Young Ladies Mission Group, Women's Missionary Service, Mission Group	6	15%
Sewing	<u>Nähverein</u> (3x), <u>Schwestern Nähverein</u> , <u>Blumenkränzchen</u> , <u>Kränzchen</u> , Sunshine Sewing Circle	7	17.5%
Missions & Sewing	<u>Missionskränzchen</u> (2x), Missions <u>Nähverein</u>	3	7.5%
Aid/Help/Service	Ladies Aid (3x), Junior Ladies Aid, Senior Ladies Aid (2x), Willing Workers Aid Society, Willing Helpers Club, Christian Service Club	9	22.5%
Missions & Fellowship	Ladies Missionary Fellowship	1	2.5%
Biblical Woman's Name	<u>Tabea Verein</u> (2x), <u>Salome Verein</u>	3	7.5%
Fellowship	Ladies Fellowship(2x), Ladies Christian Fellowship, Women's Christian Fellowship	4	10%
Biblical Woman's Name & Fellowship	Mary Martha Fellowship	1	2.5%
Other	<u>Verein</u> , <u>Frauenverein</u> (3x), <u>Jung Frauen Verein</u> , <u>Schwestern Verein</u>	6	15%
Total		40	100%

Translations for German names not already translated are as follows: Schwestern Nähverein (Sisters Sewing Society), Blumenkränzchen (Flowers Sewing Society), Missionskränzchen (Mission Sewing Society), Salome Verein (Salome Society), Jung Frauen Verein (Young Women's Society), and Schwesternverein (Sisters Society).

As shown in tables 2 and 3, names which implied a service orientation (names referring to missions, sewing, aid, help, or service) comprised 70.5 percent of CMC names and 65 percent of MB names. Not as common were names designated as fellowship groups,

<sup>123</sup> There are fewer names for MB women's societies because of the lack of source material on the early years of MB women's societies.

with only 15 percent of MB groups and 2.5 percent of CMC groups doing do. But that does not mean that fellowship was not an important aspect of women's purpose for gathering. Because of the isolation they felt in the early years, women felt the need to communicate with other women. This held true, whether they were Mennonite, Presbyterian, Methodist, or Baptist--

Whatever their stated purposes for organizing, women hungered for the companionship of their sisters . . . for fellowship was so necessary in those early days when distances were travelled by foot.<sup>124</sup>

The importance of fellowship for Mennonite women is illustrated in the meaning which Mennonite women attributed to the word Verein--

Literally translated the word Verein means a union, society, or club. However, to the women in the Vereine, the word has come to mean much more. As we know it, it is a group that works together for a common goal, yes, but it is also a group whose members give each other friendship and support as they experience the various stages of their lives and the joys and struggles they bring.<sup>125</sup>

An account of the first Mennonite sewing circle in Port Rowan, Ontario in 1926 explicitly states that the group organized for the sake of fellowship--

A feeling of loneliness is often experienced when one moves to a new country with a foreign language, and as a result of this a deep need for fellowship with those of your own kind develops . . . Out of this need arose

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<sup>124</sup> Davey, Women Work and Worship in the United Church of Canada, p. 18.

<sup>125</sup> Toews, ed. South Western Ontario Women in Mission: 1925-1987, p. 5.

the formation, in those early years, of the Kränzchen.<sup>126</sup>

The need for fellowship was even more acute immediately after immigration. Getting together with other women was a special occasion--

The earliest record of minutes we have are from 1924, . . . Bearing in mind that much of the travelling was done by horse and buggy, or sleigh, it really was a day off, . . . This, of course, meant that they were at your house for dinner as well as faspa (an evening meal of rolls, cheese, and cake). But knowing women, once they had the idea, any sacrifices made were not too much to ask, and the end result was the more blessed, and life more enjoyable for having been together and shared.<sup>127</sup>

As far back as I can remember the ladies have gathered together to have fellowship. We ladies seem to have a greater need to share our joys and sorrows, our ups and downs than the men have.<sup>128</sup>

It is not only an organization to do good work and support missions, but for the woman the Ladies Aid has great personal value. Once or twice a month she frees herself from her household tasks and gets together with her sisters. She leaves her troubles at home, shares with her fellow sisters and then arrives back home refreshed.<sup>129</sup>

The fellowship and support women experienced was not the only personal benefit, however, that women received in their regular meetings. Just as important to them was the spiritual nourishment they obtained through their worship rituals.

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<sup>126</sup> David Telgrob, What Mean These Stones? Mennonite Brethren Church Port Rowan (1927-1977) (Ste. Catharines: Knight Publishing and Lincoln Graphics, 1979), p. 78.

<sup>127</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 12.

<sup>128</sup> Mary Pauls, "The Arnaud Mennonite Brethren Ladies' Fellowship," in Arnaud Through the Years, ed. Christine M. Nichols (Steinbach: Derksen Printers, 1974), p. 75.

<sup>129</sup> Neufeld and Peters, Fifty Years: Ebenezer Verein, p. 13.

The religious aspect of the Vereine meetings, sometimes referred to as Christian or spiritual fellowship,<sup>130</sup> was a common component for Mennonite women--"Meetings always had a strong spiritual emphasis with different sisters taking part in scripture reading, devotionals and prayers and singing our favorite hymns."<sup>131</sup> Members of a Verein in Winnipeg in the late 1920s wrote about it in this way--

On Thursdays we are drawn to the Verein where we sing, read and pray and often voluntary recitations are presented. Then we depart feeling blessed and renewed.

The evenings at the Verein are always hours of blessing for us. Many a girl arrives tired, discouraged, in need of comfort and hungry but she leaves the church refreshed by food from heaven, courageously determined to follow the way He leads--to work and to serve in the strength of the Lord.<sup>132</sup>

Attending Verein meetings certainly had spiritual benefits for Mennonite women. These they obtained through the various aspects of their worship ritual.

Early on, women developed a worship pattern for their meetings. Commonly, meetings began with Bible reading, prayer, and singing.<sup>133</sup> This was often followed by a Bible study or devotional. Business matters were discussed and an offering was

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<sup>130</sup> Esther (Bergman) Rempel, "Ladies Aid," in Borden Mennonite Brethren Church: Precious Memories (1905-1980), ed. Orla Block (n.p.: n.d.), p. 41.

<sup>131</sup> Leamington Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 38.

<sup>132</sup> Thiessen, The City Mission in Winnipeg, pp.90-91.

<sup>133</sup> Katherine Harder, ed. The Greendale Mennonite Brethren Church (1931-1981) (Cloverdale: Greendale Mennonite Brethren Church, 1981), pp. 166-67.

taken. For a portion of the meeting, women would work on their handwork while one member read from a devotional book or the Bible. In one instance books included Women of the Old Testament and Women of the New Testament.<sup>134</sup> Meetings generally closed with prayer and eating together--

When the first Ladies Aid started in Greendale the ladies met in the homes. They would open the meetings with a short Bible study and prayer. Then one of the ladies would read an interesting spiritual book or portion of Scripture while the rest of the ladies did handwork. The meeting was closed with song and prayer. An offering was taken and refreshments were served most of the time.<sup>135</sup>

Song, scripture and prayer opened the meeting, a Bible verse was quoted by each member, the business was discussed and then each took up some needlework. All members united to pray the Lord's prayer at the close and then a fellowship Faspa followed.<sup>136</sup>

It is understandable that components of the worship time in Mennonite women's societies turned out to be strikingly similar to the elements of worship in weekly Mennonite church services. What Mennonite women knew about worship they had learned from the church, where services included prayer, scripture reading, singing, an offering, and the sermon(s). Periodically the Lord's supper (a non-sacramental form of Eucharist) was shared. All of these components of church worship were male led. While these elements, in one form or the other, were present in the worship

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<sup>134</sup> John D. Rempel, A History of the Hague Mennonite Church, Hague Saskatchewan 1900-1975 (Rosthern: Hague Mennonite Church, 1975), p. 59.

<sup>135</sup> Harder, ed. The Greendale Mennonite Brethren Church (1931-1981), pp. 166-67.

<sup>136</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 39.

practised in Mennonite women's societies, the difference was that here women could participate more fully than in the local church. Within the context of their societies, Mennonite women could make their own decisions about the details of their worship. Although records indicate that in the early years men often were responsible for opening and closing women's meetings with Bible reading and prayer (a discussion of the participation of men follows), the women's society became a context in which women could determine how their spiritual needs would be met. They could study the Bible for themselves, decide which songs they would sing, and choose which religious books they would read. In so doing, Mennonite women seemed to be engaging in a parallel church, although they would have been unlikely to express it in those terms. While they seem to have accepted their role in the larger church institution, they made up for it inadvertently in their own Verein meetings, in which, de facto, they conducted their own church.

## 6. Male Control of Mennonite Women's Societies

In the church, men were in control and for the most part, women accepted it that way. That women's role within the formal church structure was minimal is exemplified in the concept of Bruderschaft which continued when Mennonites immigrated to

Canada. The resolution of the 1879 MB General Conference of North America allowed for women to "take part in church activities as the Holy Spirit leads. However, they should not preach nor take part in discussion in business meetings of the church."<sup>137</sup> The prevalence of male control within the church in the early years is explicitly stated in the history of the Whitewater Mennonite Church--"like the majority of churches, the Whitewater Mennonite congregation was led strictly by men."<sup>138</sup> In Canada, no specific resolution gave women the vote in all Mennonite churches, but gradually, as circumstances changed in local churches, they were granted the right to vote. In at least two instances it was a mission society which requested a voice for women. One such instance was in the Naomi Mission Society of the First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon, when in 1949, and repeatedly in subsequent years, the society requested the church to grant women the right to vote, because, as they argued, widows and single women had no one to represent them at church business meetings.<sup>139</sup> A similar situation occurred in Kitchener/Waterloo in the early 1900s, when employed immigrant women requested the right to vote; the rationale being that since they were contributing to the church treasury, they should have the right

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<sup>137</sup> General Conference Yearbook, 1879, p. 4.

<sup>138</sup> Henry Albrecht et al., History of the Whitewater Mennonite Church Boissevain, Manitoba 1927-1987 (Boissevain: Whitewater Mennonite Church, 1987), p. 86.

<sup>139</sup> Esther Patkau, ed., First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon 1923-1982, p. 104.

to vote.<sup>140</sup> How widespread this phenomenon was is hard to say. More commonly accepted was the notion that men were supposed to run the church, a common understanding among women in other Protestant denominations as well--

They felt no need to question the values of their own society concerning women . . . This unquestioning acceptance of their own lives made it easier for them to become involved in the lives of others . . . the members of the missionary societies did not consider themselves participants in the woman's movement.<sup>141</sup>

Neither did Mennonite women consider themselves part of the women's movement, in the words of a Mennonite woman writing the history of Verein of her local church--"we find no mention of women's liberation."<sup>142</sup> For the most part, Mennonite women accepted the paradigm that men had certain responsibilities in the church and women had others; both were important--

Even though the women work separately from the rest of the congregation, we still feel that we are very much a part of the whole . . . the women do their part and the men, theirs.<sup>143</sup>

If women were so restricted in the church setting, were they completely free to act within the context of their own societies?

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<sup>140</sup> Consultation with Katherine Langeman, Helen Peters, Hedio Wiens, Margaret Wiens, and Anna Fast of the George Street Senior Home of the Waterloo/Kitchener United Mennonite Church.

<sup>141</sup> Mitchinson, "Canadian Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," p. 73.

<sup>142</sup> H.T. Klassen, Birth and Growth of the Eigenheim Mennonite Church 1892-1974 (Rosthern: Eigenheim Mennonite Church, 1974), p. 9.

<sup>143</sup> Neufeld and Peters, Fifty Years Ebenezer Verein, p. 14.

To answer this question, we will examine the structural relationship of Vereine to the church, the method of selection of mission projects, the disbursement of funds, and finally the meetings themselves. First then, what was the relationship of Vereine to the church? The names of women's societies give us an initial clue as to their status. Just the fact that some Mennonite women's societies were identified as aids, helping societies and auxiliaries, suggests a support function in relation to a greater body, in this case, the institutional church. A more explicit reference to the relationship of Vereine to the church was spelled out in the CMC by-laws at the time of the incorporation of CMC in 1947, which explicitly stated that CMC women's societies, referred to as "Subsidiary Organizations," were answerable to the church for the nature of their activities--"the activities of the organizations shall be in harmony with the constitution and aims of the conference (i.e., conference of the church)."<sup>144</sup> That they were called "Subsidiary Organizations" indicates that they were considered structurally subordinate to the larger church. What women did in the context of Vereine was to be in line with what the church felt was important.

Male control was also evident in how women's societies selected projects to support. Mennonite male leaders were known to suggest projects for women's societies to support. In 1943, at the occasion of the organization of the CMC Saskatchewan Women

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<sup>144</sup> "Bill C. An Act to Incorporate Conference of Mennonites in Canada," in Konferenz (Coaldale: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1947), p. 40.

in Mission, Rev. J.J. Thiessen suggested that their first project be the Margaret Toews Scholarship.<sup>145</sup> They followed his advice. Likewise, at the request of Rev. Mike Horsch, the CMC Nähverein in Drake, Saskatchewan, sewed clothing for the needy in Montana.<sup>146</sup> MB women's societies generally became aware of potential mission projects through the Board of Foreign Missions of North America.<sup>147</sup> In fact, this male controlled board of missions considered Mennonite women's societies "a channel through which the Board of Foreign Missions and missionaries could make their needs known."<sup>148</sup>

While in these and other instances, selection of projects occurred through males, there were exceptions. Some societies, as they became aware of needs, chose whatever missions projects they wished to support --

At that time there was no MCC (Mennonite Central Committee) or women's conference, but we had direct contact with missionaries. We made and sent layettes and print dresses for children. On July 12, 1917, we made a direct offering to missionary Penners in India

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<sup>145</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 1.

<sup>146</sup> "Report of the North Star Senior Ladies Aid," North Star Mennonite Church, Drake, Saskatchewan.

<sup>147</sup> Walter Wiebe, ed., A Century of Grace and Witness (1860-1960) (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1960), p. 72. This was further corroborated in a class on MB history at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in 1981 offered by J.B. Toews, who had been General Secretary of the MB Board of Missions in the late 1950s. He reported that when there was a financial crisis, he would send word to all MB women's societies, which he found to be more effective than a mailing to pastors.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

toward the buying of a cow.<sup>149</sup>

That they had a certain amount of direct communication with missionaries is evident by the fact that during meetings of Mennonite women's societies, letters from missionaries would often be read. Later, Mennonite women's societies also received ideas for projects from the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)<sup>150</sup> and from their own provincial organizations which, among CMC women's societies, began to be established in the late 1930s.<sup>151</sup>

Besides male involvement in the selection of Vereine projects to support, there is also evidence that in some instances funds collected by women's societies were processed through church treasuries. But here again, there were exceptions. A comparison with other denominations is instructive. Some Protestant women's societies in the late 1800s and early 1900s had control of the funds they raised, while others did not. Baptist women's societies developed quite separately from the church and were financially independent at the outset, whereas those in the Presbyterian and Church of

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<sup>149</sup> Leamington Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 86.

<sup>150</sup> Mennonite Central Committee was established in 1920. See Bender and Smith, eds., The Mennonite Encyclopedia, 3:605.

<sup>151</sup> N.N. Driedger, The Leamington United Mennonite Church: Establishment and Development 1925-1972 (Altona: D.W. Friesen and Sons, 1972), p. 124; and The Niagara United Mennonite Church 1938-1988, (Niagara: Niagara United Mennonite Church, 1988), p. 84.

In the CMC, women in British Columbia were the first to organize provincially in 1939 and Alberta the last in 1948. Women in the MB church did not organize provincially until the late 1950s.

England channelled their moneys through the institutional church and had a great deal of difficulty becoming independent.<sup>152</sup> In accounts of Mennonite women's societies, however, it is not often stated how funds were disbursed. But we do have evidence that in some cases it was done through church treasuries and in others women's groups gave money directly to recipients. Just as they had been dependent on male mission boards to alert them to projects they could support, they were also likely to process their funds through these same mission boards. For example, the history of CMC Women in Mission indicates that in the late 1920s in Southwestern Ontario, money from mission sales "was passed on to the men who gave it to worthy charities."<sup>153</sup> While this method was common, it appears that in the early 1900s societies also had direct links to missionaries and sent some monies directly to them.<sup>154</sup> After women's organizations were established provincially, local women's groups channelled money through their own provincial organizations.<sup>155</sup>

To this point, the kind of male control we have been discussing is not directed related to women's society worship services. Did men also have control of their regular meetings?

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<sup>152</sup> Mitchinson, "Canadian Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," pp. 60, 69-70.

<sup>153</sup> Toews, ed., South Western Ontario Women in Mission (1925-1987), p. 11.

<sup>154</sup> Leamington MB Church, p. 86.

<sup>155</sup> Neufeld, ed., History of Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), pp. 9, 73.

We have already referred to instances in which males initiated the formation of Mennonite women's societies, but did they remain involved after groups were established? As mentioned earlier, it was common in the early 1900s for Mennonite male ministers to take part in women's meetings. In one society, the minister was in attendance during the election of the President and he was also the treasurer of the group.<sup>156</sup> Males would often open women's meetings with Bible reading and prayer and/or to close meetings with prayer.<sup>157</sup> This was not the case only in Mennonite women's societies. Men were also participants in women's societies of other denominations. For example, men chaired public meetings of the Presbyterian Women's Foreign Missionary Society until the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>158</sup> To some degree, men's involvement was a matter of convenience, since men would often drive their wives to Verein meetings and stay in another room of the house until the women's meetings were over. This meant that men were already there and could open women's meetings with Bible reading and prayer, although it appears that sometimes ministers in particular were invited to open women's meetings--

Our meetings took place every second week, and since

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<sup>156</sup> Mennonite Church Rosemary (Altona: D.W. Friesen and Sons, 1980), p. 51.

<sup>157</sup> Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission, pp. 44, 59; Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, pp. 53, 79.

<sup>158</sup> Mitchinson, "Canadian Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," p. 70.

this always entailed driving, the husbands of the members were present also, as were the ministers. Our meetings were opened by singing, scripture reading and prayer. This was generally done by one of the ministers.<sup>159</sup>

Sources do not tell us whether men suggested this be their role or whether women asked them to do it. Neither is there any indication that women objected to this practice, but it gradually changed until women took responsibility themselves for every aspect of their meetings. For instance, by the late 1940s records indicate that Mennonite women in the Mennonite Ladies Aid of Gem, Alberta, began to take charge themselves of the opening of their meeting.<sup>160</sup>

While the involvement of men in Mennonite women's societies in the early years of their establishment did not generally continue into the 1950s, other aspects of Vereine, which we have discussed in this chapter, continued throughout the immigration years. In the era of the establishment of Mennonite women's societies, societies became a context for Mennonite women to live out their identity as Christian women in a way that was considered appropriate by both themselves and the institutional church.<sup>161</sup> Being restricted in their roles within the formal

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<sup>159</sup> Helena Friesen, "The Hochfeld Sewing Circle," in A History of the Hague Mennonite Church (1900-1975), ed. Rempel, p. 59.

<sup>160</sup> Neufeld, ed., History of the Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), p. 85.

<sup>161</sup> This is alluded to in article about the value of the sale of women's handwork for missions as the primary way Mennonite women had to do the work of God. See "Frauenvereinsarbeit," Mennonitische Rundschau (23 Mai 1934):34.

structure of the church, they participated in their own worship, a worship that was similar in many ways to worship services in Mennonite churches. For Mennonite women, membership in women's societies meant an opportunity to obey the call of God in their support of mission projects, have fellowship with other sisters, and receive spiritual nourishment through their times of worship together. The trends established in the areas of naming, biblical motivation and service orientation continued into the next era, the period of flowering.

## Chapter III - The Flowering of Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada: 1953-1969

The characterization of the development of Mennonite women's societies between 1953 and 1969 as a period of flowering is due to the fact that this was the time when Mennonite women lived out to the full the paradigm that had been established in the first half of the twentieth century. It was not until the 1970s that Mennonite women's groups experienced a marked decline in interest and began to reassess their goals and activities; thus the choice of the year 1969 as the end of this period of development. During these years of flowering, Mennonite women's societies experienced a consistent pattern of growth in several areas. This chapter will discuss the specific ways in which Mennonite women's societies flowered during these years and discuss possible reasons for their growth, all the while trying to discover what participation in Vereine meant for Mennonite women.

### *A. Evidence of the Flowering of Mennonite Women's Societies*

During this period, the growth of Mennonite women's societies was realized in several ways. First, there was a substantial increase in the number of local church Mennonite women's groups established between 1953 and 1969. Second, there continued to be strong support for missions, motivated by the biblical text. Finally, there was an increase in the structural organizational development of Mennonite women's societies, which

included the formulation of constitutions, the establishment of provincial women's organizations, and the development of formal links with the institutional church.

## 1. Numerical Increase in Mennonite Women's Societies

Canadian Mennonite women's societies were not unique in their experience of numerical growth in the 1950s and 1960s. Other women's organizations, both secular and religious, were flourishing. For example, during this time Women's Institutes in Canada expanded their activities as they tried to improve the quality of life for Canadian women.<sup>1</sup> In the religious world, church women's groups were also thriving; membership in United Church women's groups reached an all time high in 1962.<sup>2</sup> In the Mennonite community participation in women's societies was also on the rise. The following table shows the increase in the number of CMC and MB Mennonite women's societies between 1953 and 1988 among churches meeting the criteria of the present study.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Prentice et al., Canadian Women: A History, p. 334.

<sup>2</sup> Gillian Sniatynski, "UCW at 25: Marys or Marthas?" The Observer (1987):30.

<sup>3</sup> Obtained from information in Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission; Neufeld, ed., History of Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), Fiss, The Story of Women in Mission (Southwest Ontario); Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977); Rempel, History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976); histories of CMC and MB local churches; and responses to my survey on CMC and MB women's societies..

Table 4 - Increase in Mennonite Women's Societies

Time Period	Increase in CMC Women's Societies	Increase in MB Women's Societies	Total Increase
1953-1959	46	17	63
1960-1969	23	16	39
1970-1979	9	6	15
1980-1987	4	7	11
1988	0	0	0

Table 4 shows that while there was an increase of 102 Mennonite women's societies in the CMC and MB between 1953 and 1969, only twenty-six new groups were formed between 1970 and 1988. This significant increase in the numbers of societies was due to the fact that between 1953 and 1969, most Mennonite women were members of a women's Verein, with the result that groups were becoming too large<sup>4</sup> and the age difference among members was too great.<sup>5</sup> For these reasons, additional groups were formed for younger women--

The reasons for organizing another Aid were several. Young married women with similar interests wanted to get together for fellowship. The existing group was quite large, and some women did not want to belong to

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<sup>4</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, pp. 19, 23, 41; and Neufeld, ed., History of Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 41; and Rempel, History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976), p. 53.

the same group as their mothers.<sup>6</sup>

This meant that many CMC and MB churches now had two or more women's societies. Along with this numerical increase, Vereine tended to clarify and articulate their sense of mission. This was evident in statements of purpose, naming of societies, biblical texts chosen for mottos or conferences, and the number of service projects supported. A discussion of these follows.

## 2. Purpose of Mennonite Women's Societies

That Mennonite women remained strongly committed to their goals of support for mission projects and fellowship is indicated in their explicit statements of purpose--

On February 22, 1960, a small group of sisters felt led of the Lord to gather for fellowship and prayer. . . . The purpose of the Mission Group is not only to fellowship but also to further the interest in missions.<sup>7</sup>

The Arnaud Christian Fellowship was organized on November 27, 1962 . . . The purpose of the group was to help with mission projects at home and abroad, to promote and encourage interest in missions and to further our own Christian growth.<sup>8</sup>

While some societies stated their purpose at the time of establishment, others did so when they adopted a constitution for their group. Such was the case in the Goodwill Club of Coaldale

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<sup>6</sup> Neufeld, ed., History of Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Mennonite Brethren Church Winkler, Manitoba (1888-1963) (n.p., n.d.), p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977), p. 21.

Mennonite Church, which stated the following objectives in their constitution--

1. To have Christian fellowship with other women.
2. To have group discussions, including Bible studies, and guest speakers.
3. Through an organized group to become an integral part of the work of the church:
  - a. in the church structure - participating in church activities
  - b. in the community - i.e., hospital visitation
  - c. in foreign mission fields<sup>9</sup>

Of the sixty-nine CMC groups and thirty-three MB groups established between 1953 and 1969, fifty-three explicitly stated their purpose.<sup>10</sup> The following table shows the distribution of stated primary purposes. Sometimes both mission support and fellowship were mentioned as group purposes.

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<sup>9</sup> Neufeld, Alberta Mennonite women in Mission, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> Information on the purpose of Mennonite women's societies was obtained from the following sources: Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission; Neufeld, ed., History of Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), Fiss, The Story of Women in Mission (Southwest Ontario); Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977); Rempel, History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976); histories of CMC and MB local churches; and responses to my survey on CMC and MB women's societies.

Table 5 - Stated Purposes of CMC and MB Women's Societies  
Established Between 1953 and 1969<sup>11</sup>

Purpose	Number of CMC Women's Societies	Number of MB Women's Societies	Total Societies	Percent of Societies
Support of Missions	31	6	37	70%
Fellowship	9	3	12	23%
Support of Missions and Fellowship	4	0	4	7%
Total	44	9	53	100%

Clearly, a higher number of women's societies said the purpose of their group was to support mission. Thirty-seven societies (70 percent) said their purpose was to support missions and twelve (23 percent) said they met primarily for fellowship.

Not only did local Mennonite women's societies state their group purpose; national and provincial groups also did. In 1953, one year after the organization of Canadian Women in Mission (CWM), a constitution was accepted which outlined two purposes for the organization--

(a) To encourage a personal dedication of each member to Christ and His work.

(b) To support and promote missions and other

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<sup>11</sup> The fewer number of stated purposes of MB women's societies does not imply that they did not state their purposes as readily as CMC women's societies. Rather, it is probably related to the lack of sources for MB women's societies and therefore the unavailability of information.

conference causes in our churches.<sup>12</sup>

The 1964 Constitution of the Women's MB Missionary Auxiliary of South Saskatchewan stated its purpose as follows--

1. To promote unified spiritual fellowship with all the individual groups participating.
2. To engage in practical work, working toward unified projects for our MB mission fields. These projects are:
  - a. outfitting missionaries going to the foreign field from our district
  - b. new projects as agreed upon at our meetings<sup>13</sup>

At the first Manitoba MB women's conference women decided that "mission effort and enterprise . . . should continue to receive major emphasis at these conferences."<sup>14</sup> In Ontario as well, the focus was missions. A 1963 provincial conference of the Ontario Women's Missionary Service expressed their goal in this way--"to serve the Lord heartily and willingly."<sup>15</sup> Thus, an emphasis on the support of missions appears to have been a primary focus of Mennonite women's societies organized between 1953 and 1969.

The purpose of Mennonite women's societies was also evident

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<sup>12</sup> "Constitution of Canadian Women in Mission," Canadian Women in Mission, 1953.

<sup>13</sup> "Constitution of the Women's MB Missionary Auxiliary of South Saskatchewan," Women's Mennonite Brethren Missionary Auxiliary of South Saskatchewan, 1964.

<sup>14</sup> "Women's Conference: MB Churches of Manitoba," in 1967 Yearbook of the Thirty-Third Annual Manitoba Conference of MB Churches (Winnipeg: Conference of MB Churches of Manitoba, 1967), p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Yearbook of the Thirty-Fifth Annual Provincial Conference of the MB Churches of Ontario, (n.p.: Conference of the MB Churches of Ontario, 1966), p. 90.

in naming, both in societies which changed their names and those which were newly formed during this era. Of the identified 120 CMC and forty MB Mennonite women's societies established between 1874 and 1952 (see tables 2 and 3 of Chapter II), thirteen changed their names between 1953 and 1969.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Information from the author's survey of CMC and MB women's societies.

Table 6 - Mennonite Women's Society Name Changes  
1953-1969

DENOMINATION	ORIGINAL NAME OF WOMEN'S SOCIETY	NAME CHANGE	DATE OF CHANGE
CMC	<u>Frauenverein</u>	Mission Sewing Circle	1955
CMC	Goodwill Society	Ladies Aid	1958
CMC	Ladies Aid	Senior Ladies Aid	1957
CMC	<u>Missionsverein</u>	Senior Ladies Aid	1960
CMC	Merry Co-Workers Club	Junior Ladies Aid	1955
CMC	Women's Missionary Society	Women's Missionary Association	1953
MB	<u>Missionsverein</u>	<u>Tabca Verein</u>	1956
CMC	<u>Tabca Verein</u>	Eden Ladies Fellowship	1955
CMC	Busy Bees Circle	Women's Fellowship	1968
MB	<u>Tabca Verein</u>	Dorcas Fellowship	1968
MB	<u>Nähverein</u>	Ladies Fellowship	1950
MB	<u>Frauenverein</u>	Ladies Fellowship	1968

From Table 6 we can see that almost half of the name changes during this time period was a change to names denoting fellowship. An examination of names of new groups formed during this time period will give us an indication of how widespread the change to an emphasis on fellowship was between 1953 and 1969. The following tables show the percentage distribution of names of Mennonite women's societies established between 1953 and 1969.

Table 7

Percentage Distribution of Names of CMC Women's Societies  
1953-1969

CATEGORY	NAMES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Missions	Sunshine Mission Circle, Loving Doods Mission Circle, Women's Missionary Society, Mission Helpers (2x), Goodwill Mission Circle, Women in Mission, Mission Circle, Ladies Mission Group, Missionettes, <u>Missionsverein</u>	11	16%
Sewing	Sunbeam Sewing Circle, Junior Sewing Circle, Busy Fingers Sewing Circles, <u>Nähverein</u>	4	6%
Aid/Help/Service	Young Women's Charity Club, Willing Hands Ladies Aid, Women's Christian Endeavour, Servettes, Willing Workers, Helping Hands (4x), Willing Hands, Goodwill Society, Goodwill Club, Good Samaritan Club, Willing Helpers (2x), Goodwill Workers, <u>Wohltätigkeitsverein</u> , Women's Auxiliary, Ladies Aid (6x)	24	35%
Biblical Woman's Name & Aid	Magdalene Ladies Aid	1	1%
Biblical Woman's Name	Tabitha Circle, Maria Martha Women's Society, <u>Tabea Verein</u> ,	3	4%
Fellowship	Harmony Hearts, Homemakers Fellowship (3x), Fellowship Group, Friendship Circle, Women's Christian Fellowship, Ladies Fellowship, <u>Koinonia</u> Ladies Group, Women's Fellowship, Christian Fellowship	11	16%
Other	Young Women's, Guiding Mothers, Morija Circle, Homemakers, <u>Verein</u> (11x)	15	22% <sup>17</sup>
TOTAL		69	100%

<sup>17</sup> The percentage of the "Other" category is high because eleven women's societies called their groups simply, Verein.

Table 8

Percentage Distribution of Names of MB Women's Societies  
1953-1969

CATEGORY	NAMES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Missions	Junior Ladies Missionary Prayer Group, Ladies Missionary Prayer Group, Missionary Prayer Group, Sunbeam Mission Band, The Mission Group, Ladies Mission Circle, Mission <u>Verein</u>	7	21%
Sewing	Ladies Sewing Circle	1	3%
Aid/Help/Service	Women's Ministries, Willing Helpers (3x), Good Samaritan Club, Christian Service Club, Work and Prayer Group, <u>Frauendienst</u> , Ladies Aid, Auxiliary	10	31%
Missions & Fellowship	Missionary Fellowship Group	1	3%
Biblical Woman's Name	Dorcas Ladies Group (2x), Mary Martha Group, Mary Martha <u>Verein</u>	4	12%
Fellowship	Ladies Fellowship (2x), Christian Fellowship, Christian Fellowship Guild, Ladies Christian Fellowship Group, <u>Schwesterbund</u>	6	18%
Other	Pleasant Hour, Sunshine Club, Marantha, <u>Verein</u>	4	12%
TOTAL		33	100%

The above tables show three major changes in the naming of Mennonite women's societies. The first is a decrease in the number of groups which refer to themselves as sewing societies. While 17 percent of CMC societies and 25 percent of MB societies were called sewing societies between 1874 and 1952 (see tables 2 and 3) now only 6 percent of CMC and 3 percent of MB societies were designated in this way. That this shift represented a change in focus is corroborated in an article on the first one hundred years of the MB church (1860-1960)--

There has been a change in recent years. The shift of emphasis has been from sewing circles to mission circles. Greater emphasis is being placed on study, devotions and programs of activity which shall not

supplant but be complementary to the working with hands.<sup>18</sup>

The reference here to a shift from sewing to missions is reflected in the naming of Mennonite women's societies in two ways. The percentage of names referring to sewing decreased substantially, whereas the number of names exemplifying a missions, aid, help, or service focus decreased only slightly.

The second major change, at least in CMC women's societies, was a shift to names denoting fellowship. We have already noted that among societies who changed their names during this time, the most significant change was to names designating fellowship. Similarly, among women's societies established between 1953 and 1969, there was an increase in names denoting fellowship--among CMC groups, fellowship groups comprised only 2.5 percent of names between 1874 and 1952, but 16 percent between 1953 and 1969; among MB groups 15 percent of names were fellowship groups between 1874 and 1952 and 21 percent between 1953 and 1969. This trend was to continue in the 1970s and 1980s, as the next chapter will show. Despite the trend toward names of fellowship, a missions/service emphasis still remained predominant between 1953 and 1969, with 58 percent of CMC and MB women's societies functioning under the rubric of mission, sewing, aid, helping, or service (see tables 7 and 8).

A third change in naming was a change from German to English names. With the gradual shift from German to English in the

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<sup>18</sup> Wiebe, ed., A Century of Grace and Witness (1860-1960), p. 74.

church in the 1960s, women's groups followed suit. Until 1952, 45 percent of names were in German, whereas between 1953 and 1969 only 13 percent were still in the German language. While this shift does not represent a change in focus, it does indicate that Mennonite women were feeling more comfortable with the English language and thus doubtless had more association with English people who were outside of the Mennonite community.

The commitment to service, evidenced in the naming of Mennonite women's societies, was also expressed in women's choice of biblical texts as group mottos and as themes for conferences and retreats. It was customary for a women's societies to chose a biblical text as a motto at the point of the establishment of the group. The story of the Women's Auxiliary of the First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon serves as an example--

Nineteen years ago the Women's Auxiliary came into being. It was founded on January 13, 1958, with 16 ladies in attendance who preferred English at the meetings. . . . We adopted as our motto: "Serve him with a perfect heart and willing mind." I Chr. 28:9<sup>19</sup>

Of the 102 CMC and MB Mennonite women's societies established between 1953 and 1969, available sources identify the specific biblical mottos of twenty-four groups. These include the following biblical texts--<sup>20</sup>

By love serve one another. (Gal. 5:13)

She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she

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<sup>19</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> The King James version of the Bible continued to be used during this time and the male language of the text was assumed to be inclusive of women.

reacheth forth her hands to the needy. (Pro. 31:20)

But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. (Heb. 13:16)

For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. (I Cor. 3:9) (Motto of three groups)

And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not unto men. (Col. 3:23) (Motto of two groups)

Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. (Matt. 28:19,20)

Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:2)

Serve him with a perfect heart and willing mind. (I Chr. 28:9)

And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. (Col. 3:17)

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:9, 10) (Gal. 6:9 chosen by two groups; Gal. 6:10 chosen by one group; and Gal. 6:9, 10 chosen by one group)

For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. (II Cor. 5:15, 20)

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord. (I Cor. 15:58) (Motto chosen by two groups)

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matt. 5:16)

Serve the Lord with gladness: come before his presence with singing. (Ps. 100:2)

. . . And who is my neighbour? . . . Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise. (Lk. 10:28-37)

Whatever therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. (I Cor. 10:31)

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matt. 6:33)

While we do not know the full significance these texts had for Mennonite women, we can conclude that Mennonite women linked their acts of service to biblical texts.<sup>21</sup> According to them, their work had a biblical basis; through their societies they felt they were living out a biblical faith.

Biblical texts also formed the basis for themes at retreats and conferences of Mennonite women's societies. This is illustrated by topics chosen for CMC and MB provincial and national women's conferences between 1953 and 1969--"Women's Service for God" (Lk. 10:38-42); "Motive and Objective of Missions" (I Cor. 3:9; II Cor. 5:14); "Give Ye Them to Eat" (Lk. 9:13); and "Who is My Neighbor?" (I Pet. 2:17a).<sup>22</sup> That

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<sup>21</sup> Twelve of these mottos emphasize service, with words such as the following appearing in the biblical texts cited--"serve," "stretcheth out her hand," "reacheth forth her hands to the needy," "do good," "labourers," "Serve him," "word or deed," "well doing," "work of the Lord," "your labour," "good works," and "do thou likewise."

<sup>22</sup> Minutes of the South Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren Ladies Auxiliary; Martha Rempel, History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976), pp. 20-21; and "Women's Conference Themes," Canadian Women in Mission.

Mennonite women chose biblical texts to motivate them to service shows that they felt they were mandated by the Bible. They felt responsible to obey it and believed that their service efforts were in fact an expression of obedience to the word of God, as they understood it. The texts chosen for mottos and themes are consistent with group identity as expressed in names and, as we will see below, expressed in actions which supported missions and responded to service needs.

When we examine Mennonite women's societies at local, provincial, and national levels, we discover that the overwhelming majority continued to be committed to service oriented projects between 1953 and 1969.<sup>23</sup> Women's groups often responded to several needs at a time<sup>24</sup>--foreign missions projects, home missions projects,<sup>25</sup> Mennonite Central Committee initiatives,<sup>26</sup> denominational schools, community needs, and local church needs. For example, the 1961 financial report of the Friendly Hour Club of First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon, showed

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<sup>23</sup> Obtained from information in Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission; Neufeld, ed., History of Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), Fiss, The Story of Women in Mission (Southwest Ontario); Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977); Rempel, History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976); histories of CMC and MB local churches; and responses to my survey on CMC and MB women's societies.

<sup>24</sup> "Die Arbeit der Frauenvereine der 'Ersten Mennonitengemeinde' in Winnipeg," (Der Bote (8 Dezember 1959):1.

<sup>25</sup> Home missions refers to mission programs in Canada, as opposed to foreign missions, which focussed on mission programs overseas.

<sup>26</sup> The Mennonite Central Committee is a joint relief and service agency of nearly all North American Mennonites.

the following distribution of funds--

\$65.00 for two radio programs  
\$100.00 for missions  
\$15.00 for Rosthern Junior College  
\$20.00 for Winnipeg Bible College  
\$10.00 for the Seminary  
\$10.00 for the British and Foreign Bible Society  
\$15.00 for the general fund in First Mennonite Church  
\$15.00 for the building fund at First Mennonite Church<sup>27</sup>

That support of missions remained strong in this society is shown by the high percentage of money designated for missions--\$100.00. Similarly, at the provincial level, a large proportion of funds was collected for missions projects. In 1961, the two thousand dollar budget of the South Saskatchewan MB Ladies Auxiliary went entirely for missions projects; two-thirds of it was earmarked for foreign missions (including mission work in Japan, Peru, and Columbia) and one-third for home missions (including salaries of Saskatchewan MB missionaries).<sup>28</sup> At a national level, in 1967, CWM of the CMC designated all of its funds to service oriented projects--

Total Income	\$185,324.61
Foreign Missions	33,320.94
Home Missions	21,382.51
Local Needs	27,122.57
Schools: Bible, High, College, etc.	6,768.41
Relief -- Cash	10,756.16
Cash for Christmas Bundles	11,7333.35
Total Disbursement	168,952.48

not to mention the pounds of bandages rolled, blankets and

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<sup>27</sup> Annual report of Friendly Hour Club, First Mennonite Church, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1961.

<sup>28</sup> Minutes of the South Saskatchewan MB Ladies Auxiliary, 1961.

layettes sewn, soap donated, et cetera.<sup>29</sup>

While the support of missions/service projects remained strong in the 1950s and 1960s, the methods of fundraising underwent substantial changes. Changes in fundraising methods were mentioned by sixty-eight CMC women's societies (60 percent) and thirty-five MB women's societies (49 percent) which completed my survey. Consistently, the direction of change was from raising money through auctions, bake sales, bazaars, and catering through fundraising by cash donations or offerings. Of those who identified changes, only forty-nine CMC groups (43 percent of respondents) and twenty-one MB groups (29 percent of respondents) cited dates when their methods of fundraising changed. The following table shows the years when changes in fundraising were implemented--

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<sup>29</sup> Mrs. P. Redekopp, "Canadian Women's Missionary Conference--1967," Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1967.

Table 9

Changes in Fundraising from Auctions, Bake Sales,  
Bazaars, and Catering to Cash Donations  
1953-1969

Year of Change	Numbers of CMC Women's Societies	Number of MB Women's Societies	Total
1874-1952	2	1	3
1953-1969	21	8	29
1970-1979	11	5	16
1980-1988	15	7	22
Total	49	21	70

The table indicates that the greatest changes in fundraising began to take place after 1953, with twenty-nine out of seventy groups (41 percent) making the change between 1953 and 1969. This shift is substantiated in reports of Mennonite women's societies. For instance, in the Clearbrook MB Church a woman's group reported that "mission sales were popular and raised a lot of money. These continued till nearly 1970. They have phased out."<sup>30</sup> The Bergthal Sewing Circle of the Bergthal Mennonite Church in Didsbury, having begun mission sales soon after the

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<sup>30</sup> Louise Enns, "Ladies Fellowship Groups, Clearbrook MB Church," History of the Clearbrook MB Church: 1936-1986, p. 98.

organization of their group in 1929, referred to a change in fundraising in the late 1960s--"as times changed, so did our methods of operation. 1968 saw our last Mission Sale, and we now use the 'donation' system to raise money."<sup>31</sup> Clearly, methods of fundraising had changed; but what lay behind the changes?

There were two primary reasons why fundraising methods began to change. The first had to do with auctions in particular. There developed in the late 1940s a sense that having auctions was not a proper way for church groups to raise money for missions. This trend among Mennonite women's societies, originating in the General Conference Women's Missionary Association (WMA) Executive of North America,<sup>32</sup> resulted in a cessation of this method in the United States by 1947.<sup>33</sup> Marie Lohrentz, WMA president of North America, also came to Canada to try to convince CMC women that auctions were not appropriate ways to raise money.<sup>34</sup> Lohrentz was not entirely successful at first, but eventually, auctions became a less popular mode of fundraising among CMC women's societies as well. In the MB community, sources do not indicate the reasons for a decrease in fundraising auctions, but we do know that the same phenomenon

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<sup>31</sup> Neufeld, Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> This was the equivalent of the executive of CWM in Canada; members in both organizations belonged to the General Conference Mennonite Church of North America.

<sup>33</sup> Goering, Women in Search of Mission: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Women's Organization, pp. 60-61.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

occurred among MB women's societies, i.e., a decline in having auctions as a method of raising money for missions.<sup>35</sup>

A second reason for the change in fundraising is that women did not seem to have time to keep up with quilting and baking as is suggested in this portion of a poem written by one local Mennonite women's society--

In February '67 we'd just had enough  
Of ordering remnants and sewing stuff  
To make clothes for children and also for us  
It wasn't worth the bother--just too much fuss.<sup>36</sup>

While the focus of Mennonite women's societies in these years continued to have a strong service element, women continued to participate in regular meetings which had a strong spiritual focus. The format for the worship ritual remained essentially the same as before--

The meetings were opened by the president with scripture reading, prayer and singing. During the meeting one member would read aloud from an inspirational book while the rest knitted and sewed for the Red Cross and for MCC. A collection was taken at every meeting and a lunch served.<sup>37</sup>

As in the past, Mennonite women's societies continued to be contexts in which women felt they could receive spiritual nourishment. That Mennonite women considered their meetings to be significant worship is illustrated in a discussion in a church

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<sup>35</sup> Indicated by responses to author's survey sent to CMC and MB women's societies in Canada.

<sup>36</sup> Lillian Patkau, et al., "Constitution," Magdalene Ladies Aid and Hanley Ladies Aid, 1982.

<sup>37</sup> Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977), p. 30.

periodical in 1966, in which the author, a member of a Mennonite women's society, referred to first century worship in Corinth and suggested that Mennonite church services were not sufficiently styled on the New Testament pattern. She stated that a New Testament worship style would be more likely to happen in the context of women's society meetings than within the larger church context.<sup>38</sup> The fact that she would even compare women's society meetings to New Testament patterns of worship indicates that she felt women's societies were forums to experience worship similar to that of the church. This gives further confirmation to what was alluded to earlier--that Mennonite women's societies functioned as a parallel church for Mennonite women. In fact, in a recent book on the ministry of women in the MB church, Katie Funk Wiebe, reflecting on the experiences of Mennonite women suggested that women's societies may in fact have operated as a parallel congregation--

These women's groups were transplanted to America from Russia and here underwent various transformations, sometimes functioning as an auxiliary to the church and later on sometimes almost as a church in themselves, operating almost parallel to the congregation with its own budget, aggressive program, membership list, and annual meetings and retreats.<sup>39</sup>

In any case, Mennonite women's societies became a context where Mennonite women could be full participants in every aspect of

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<sup>38</sup> Lillian Giesbrecht, "What makes a ladies aid profitable?" Mennonite Brethren Herald 5,22 (10 June 10 1966):16-17.

<sup>39</sup> John E. Toews, et al., Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1992), p. 183.

worship.

We have seen how Mennonite women's societies flowered between 1953 and 1969, increasing in numbers, and continuing with a strong missions emphasis and worship component. Along with this, came a further sign of flowering--strengthening of organizational structure, both within women's associations and in links to the institutional church. The formalizing of structural links was evidence of a firmly established group identity.

### 3. Increase in Structural Organization

Women's societies in the CMC had already been organized provincially in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario in the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>40</sup> and had just recently, in 1952, established a national organization, namely, CWM.<sup>41</sup> Women in the MB tradition, however, were not organized provincially until the 1950s. The first to do so were MB women's societies in British Columbia who formed the MB Church Ladies Aid of British Columbia in 1953-1954.<sup>42</sup> In Saskatchewan, because there were two district church conferences (one in the north and one in the south), two women's conferences were formed--Women's Missionary Fellowship in the north, organized in 1958,

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<sup>40</sup> Hooge, The History of the Canadian Women in Mission: 1952-1977, pp. 4, 7, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Hooge, The History of the Canadian Women in Mission (1952-1977).

<sup>42</sup> Wiebe, ed., A Century of Grace and Witness: 1860-1960, pp. 74.

and Women's MB Missionary Auxiliary in the south in 1959.<sup>43</sup> In 1960 and 1967 respectively, provincial MB organizations were established in Ontario and Manitoba.<sup>44</sup> No formal provincial body was ever formed in Alberta, although women's groups have met for annual rallies.<sup>45</sup>

The purpose of establishing provincial and national organizations was so that women could work more systematically and more effectively for the cause of missions. The goal of the Manitoba MB women's organization was "to unite their efforts more effectively and to be able to promote the cause of missions more effectively."<sup>46</sup> When MB women's societies formed a provincial organization in British Columbia, their plan was to "unite as a provincial group to augment the activities of the many women's groups in the local churches."<sup>47</sup> In southern Saskatchewan, MB women stated that they hoped "to work more efficiently in the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-74.

<sup>44</sup> "Report of the Women's Conference of the Manitoba MB Churches," Women's Conference of the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Churches, 17 June 1967.

<sup>45</sup> Consultation with Heidi Kornelsen, a woman who attends Alberta women's conferences of MB churches, Edmonton, Alberta, August 1987.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from Mrs. W. Regehr, President of the Women's Conference of the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Churches, to Board of Missions and Services, "Women's Conference of the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Churches Minutes and Correspondence," 1967-1969.

<sup>47</sup> Mrs. Ernest Dyck, "Women's meeting in BC," Mennonite Brethren Herald 3,19 (8 May 8 1964):13.

interest of missions."<sup>48</sup> Women in Ontario viewed their organization as "a means of co-ordinating activities among ladies' groups and initiating projects in which all could participate."<sup>49</sup> Provincial and national structures were regarded as vehicles through which women's societies' work for missions could be improved.

Not only did women organize themselves internally; links were also being established between Mennonite women's societies and the institutional church. The instigation by the church of linkages with women's societies was not unique to the Mennonites. In 1960 the Board of World Mission of the Presbyterian Church decided to assume the function of sending out missionaries, a job which until then had been the responsibility of the Women's Missionary Society.<sup>50</sup> In 1962, the United Church of Canada decided to amalgamate the Women's Association and the Women's Missionary Society into one group called United Church Women (UCW).<sup>51</sup> While this union was designed to make women's work more efficient, the Women's Missionary Society lost its administrative and financial autonomy.<sup>52</sup> Now moneys were channelled through the

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<sup>48</sup> Minutes of the South Saskatchewan MB Ladies Auxiliary.

<sup>49</sup> Neoma Jantz, "Ontario ladies meet for spring rally," Mennonite Brethren Herald 3,17 (24 April 24 1964):13.

<sup>50</sup> Consultation with Joan Sampson, Vice President of Women's Missionary Society (Western Division), Ottawa, Ontario, 1988.

<sup>51</sup> Davy, Women, Work and Worship in the United Church of Canada, p. 53.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

finance committee of each congregation--

the larger institution (the church) was swallowing the smaller (the woman's organizations) in a process of cooptation . . . many WA and WMS women still felt no ownership of the new organization. It was, in their view, something imposed on them by 'head office'.<sup>53</sup>

Whether intentionally or not, in both the Presbyterian and the United Church the new arrangements meant greater control for the church.

The phenomenon of closer linkages, perhaps even control, of women's societies by the institutional church was also a reality in the Mennonite community. Official links with the church were formed both by inclusion of Mennonite women's societies in church constitutions and by requests that women's societies give official reports of their activities at annual provincial and national church conferences.<sup>54</sup> In 1961 the CWM began to report to the CMC at annual conferences--

The Board of Missions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada had made the request that a report on the activities of the women's mission societies be read at the general session of the conference during the period allotted to the Mission Board, and so this was done.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike the discomfort the United Church women felt with the intervention of the institutional church, Mennonite women seemed to welcome these closer links and did not view it as negative

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 53-54.

<sup>54</sup> Hooge, The History of the Canadian Women in Mission: 1952-1977, p. 19; and Edward Boldt, ed. A History of the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches 1957-1982 (n.p., 1982), p. 36.

<sup>55</sup> Hooge, The History of the Canadian Women in Mission: 1952-1977, p. 19

control. They felt it gave value to their work--

We are . . . thankful that an article concerning the Women's Missionary Service has been added to the constitution (of the Conference of the MB Churches of Ontario). We are a part of the conference structure (Conference of the MB Churches of Ontario). We appreciate this.<sup>56</sup>

Since Mennonite women's societies considered themselves to be a vital part of the church's program, they were happy to support the church's projects through the conference structures--

. . . as an auxiliary of the Mennonite Conference of Alberta, we have supported the Conference projects to the best of our ability.<sup>57</sup>

To serve the Lord heartily and willingly has been the concern of the Women's Missionary Service of the Ontario Mennonite Brethren Church. It is also our concern that we do this primarily through our Conference (Conference of the MB Churches of Ontario).<sup>58</sup>

Closer structural links with the church meant a recognition by the church that their work was indeed an important contribution. It put an official stamp of approval on their work as legitimate and important.

While it is evident that Mennonite women welcomed the closer ties to the church, it is more difficult to determine the church's motivation for wanting more structural links. According to male church leaders, their desire for linkages was that they

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<sup>56</sup> Olga G. Enns, "Women's Missionary Service," in Yearbook of the Thirty-Fifth Annual Provincial Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches in Ontario (n.p.: Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario, 1966), p. 90.

<sup>57</sup> Neufeld, Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Olga G. Enns, "Women's Missionary Service," p. 90.

felt some responsibility to improve the effectiveness of women's societies. This is shown in the suggestion by the provincial conference of the MB church in Manitoba that a provincial women's groups be established, as they put it, to "help the ladies to have a closer connection with the Conference and also work under a more stable organization."<sup>59</sup> Did this mean the church felt Mennonite women's societies were unstable or was this an effort to control Mennonite women's societies which were now in a state of flowering? The factors that lay behind their initiative was never made explicit. In another instance, in a history of the MB church from 1860 to 1960, MB women's societies were accused of being merely social organizations lacking spiritual focus and purpose.

. . . More than ever before they (MB women's societies) must also find in the worship and study program of the group a source of strength and power for the living of the Christian life. . . .

. . . Women's groups are more active than they have ever been, but with this increased activity comes the humbling knowledge that activity is never a criterion of the worth of an organization. . . .

. . . Therefore, some of the traditional attitudes and activities of women stand under review and are subject to modification. . . .

. . . In which direction does their future course lie? They can become stranded in a morass of mediocrity, of purposeless activity as some women's groups have done, or they can move forward on the firm ground of a Christ-directed program.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Letter from I.W. Redekopp to the leaders of women's groups in Winnipeg MB churches, 2 March 1967.

<sup>60</sup> Wiebe, ed., A Century of Grace and Witness: 1860-1960, pp. 74.

We have no indication of the reason for this strong indictment of MB women's societies, but according to our findings thus far, it seems that they were hardly the social purposeless organizations that they are accused of in this article. Nor had their groups been lacking in spiritual focus.

In our discussion of the flowering of Mennonite women's societies between 1953 and 1969, we have noted an increase in the number of societies, a continued missions focus, the beginning of a trend towards more emphasis on fellowship, and an increase in structural organization. Next, we might well ask why, during this period of time, Mennonite women's societies flourished.

### ***B. Reasons for the Flowering of Mennonite Women's Societies***

In the 1950s there was an increased emphasis in Canadian society on women's place in the home.<sup>61</sup> While this was the case in society generally, churches also added their voices to the chorus, emphasizing the importance of women's role as mothers. Because Mennonite women were relegated to domestic affairs in the home, and at the same time limited in their roles in the institutional church, increasingly they may have viewed their societies as their primary outlet for service, spiritual expression, and regular fellowship with other women. These factors may have been among the reasons for the flowering of Mennonite women's societies between 1953 and 1969.

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<sup>61</sup> Prentice, et al., Canadian Women" A History, p. 316.

After examining what the Mennonite church had to say about women's role in the church and in the home, we will explore women's own perception of their role, all the while inquiring whether there was a relationship between women's roles and the flourishing of women's societies.

## 1. Women's Role in the Church

The flowering of Mennonite women's societies occurred in an era in which the role of women in the church was limited. This phenomenon of restricting women within the church was not unique to Mennonite communities. Although women had been ordained in the United Church of Canada since 1936, an article in a 1963 church periodical specifically encouraged women to work for the church in areas other than pastoral leadership--"Christian education, social service, teaching, nursing, evangelism and other educational fields."<sup>62</sup> In both CMC and MB traditions, women were encouraged to take subordinate, support roles. In a 1962 editorial of The Canadian Mennonite, CMC church secretaries were portrayed as modern deaconesses in their support role to church pastors--"they make possible the work of many modern apostles."<sup>63</sup>

Church leaders encouraged the subordination of women as they

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<sup>62</sup> Davy, Women, Work and Worship in the United Church of Canada, p. 55.

<sup>63</sup> Larry Kehler, "The secretary," The Canadian Mennonite 10 (23 March 1962):2.

appealed to biblical texts. In 1963, I.W. Redekopp, in "The Woman's place in the church," differentiated between 'service' and 'position' of women. Referring to Gal. 3:28 and to specific women who were teachers, prophetesses and deaconesses (Acts 1:14; 12:2; 16:1,14; 18:26; 21:8,9), he encouraged women to use their gifts in the service of the church. On the other hand, on the basis of Pauline texts (I Cor. 12:12-14; 14:34; I Tim. 2:12; Tit. 2:3-5), he concluded that women's position should be one of submission--"it is a woman's gift to serve through submission. The desire to be led is in her nature. If she grasps for leadership she leaves her greatest gift."<sup>64</sup> Thus, concluded Redekopp, singing, mission work, and teaching women and children were appropriate areas of service for women, "as long as it is not done in such a way as to set herself up as an authority over man in the church."<sup>65</sup>

In 1966, David Ewert, an MB New Testament scholar, basing his study on biblical exegesis, affirmed the role of women as ministers of Jesus who cared for his physical needs (Lk. 8:3), as deaconesses (Rom. 16:1; I Tim. 3:11), "firstfruits of the gospel" (Acts 1:14; 17:12; I Cor. 16:19), and participants in worship (Acts 21:9; I Cor. 11).<sup>66</sup> While acknowledging these areas of service for women, Ewert maintained that the subordination of

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<sup>64</sup> I. W. Redekopp, "The Woman's Place in the Church," Mennonite Brethren Herald 2,11 (15 March 1963):5.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> David Ewert, "Women in the Church," Mennonite Brethren Herald 5,8 (25 February 1966):6.

women was biblical. Quoting from I Timothy 2 and I Corinthians 14, he tried to show the link between the principle of subordination and restrictions for women in church leadership--

(Paul) establishes the principle of subordination--not inferiority--which is inherent in the order of creation . . . if the practice of the early church is to be our guide, then women should not lead in any way in public worship, whether in preaching or praying.<sup>67</sup>

But the discussion of women's ordination in the MB church had already begun in the 1950s.

Prior to 1957, both married and single MB female missionaries were ordained for mission work; the ordination procedure was the same for both men and women.<sup>68</sup> Between 1919 and 1956, thirty-seven women, nineteen of whom were single, were ordained in the MB Church in Canada.<sup>69</sup> It is not readily apparent why in 1954, a suggestion was made at the General Conference level "that the Conference consider whether it wouldn't be better that women missionaries be commissioned and not ordained".<sup>70</sup> After three years of study, a resolution on the ordination of women was accepted, changing the former method of ordination to commissioning--

In view of the fact that we as an MB Church, on the basis of clearly conceived scriptural convictions, do

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Year Book of the Forty-Sixth General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1954), p. 6.

not admit sisters to the public gospel preaching ministry on par with brethren, we as a Conference designate the fact of setting aside sisters to missionary work "a commissioning" rather than "an ordination".<sup>71</sup>

The only explicitly expressed grounds for the rescindment of women's ordination seemed to be "clearly conceived scriptural convictions."<sup>72</sup> Presented as part of a larger set of recommendations clarifying MB policies with regard to licensing and ordination, the context for the resolution on women's ordination was a general tightening of control in order to ensure responsible leadership--

It (licensing) authorizes a given person to preach the Gospel . . . but only within the confines of said Christian work project.

Ordination to the gospel ministry should be extended exclusively to Christian workers who are acceptable for the ministry . . . and who are definitely and honestly desirous to labor within the said framework.<sup>73</sup>

While on the one hand Mennonite women were restricted in the institutional church, on the other hand, their work within women's societies was at times encouraged and even commended. In 1966, John H. Redekop, in "Women--second class citizens," referred to the fact that at annual conferences, MB women, who were not official delegates, were relegated to rear pews while their husbands, who were delegates, were ushered to front row

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>72</sup> Specific biblical texts were not mentioned in the recommendation.

<sup>73</sup> Yearbook of the Forty-Seventh General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1957), p. 106.

seats.<sup>74</sup> Redekop was concerned that an outsider to the Mennonite tradition "might well conclude that our whole denomination is one great big men's fellowship."<sup>75</sup> But rather than advocating that women join their husbands in the front seats as delegates, Redekop suggested that women needed be affirmed in "women's work," i.e., the work of Ladies' Aid groups, a work which he felt should be "fully recognized as a regular branch of the church."<sup>76</sup> In the same year, the annual conference of the Ontario Conference of MB Churches made a public statement about the work of women's societies--"The Conference commends you for your many hours of labor and sacrificial giving in support of our institutions and the missions program."<sup>77</sup> On another occasion, a male speaker at the 1964 BC annual MB women's meeting referred to women's society work as "their rightful place in Christian service."<sup>78</sup> Thus, Mennonite women were encouraged to continue their work as participants in women's societies. This was considered to be their appropriate place of service in the church.

Concurrent with the church's encouragement that women continue their work through women's societies was an elevation of

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<sup>74</sup> John H. Redekop, "Women--Second Class Christians," Mennonite Brethren Herald 5,23 (24 June 1966):2.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Boldt, ed. A History of the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches: 1957-1982, p. 37.

<sup>78</sup> Mrs. Ernest Dyck, "BC Missionary Fellowship annual meeting," Mennonite Brethren Herald, 3,42 (23 October 1964):17.

their role as homemakers and mothers, which too was supported by references to biblical texts.

## 2. Women's Role in the Home

The role of Mennonite women as mothers and homemakers was discussed frequently in church periodicals during this time period. In a CMC paper, a two part article in 1954 by a male minister, underlined the extent to which this belief was based upon biblical teaching. The first article, "The husband's part in happy home building," based on Eph. 5:22 and I Cor. 11:3, emphasized the husband's role as "head" both in the home and in the church--"as men we are to assume the final leadership in the home and the church because God has endowed us with qualities of leadership and strength for such tasks."<sup>79</sup> As head of the wife, the husband was seen as the senior partner in the marriage--"in case of a tie, we (husbands) may cast the deciding vote."<sup>80</sup> The second article in the series, "The wife's part in happy home building," was also based on biblical texts.<sup>81</sup> Referring to Eph. 5:23 and I Pet. 3:1,2, the author stressed the importance of subjection of wives to husbands--"when a wife will not live in subjection to her head, she is disobeying God and will suffer

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<sup>79</sup> B. Charles Hostetter, "The husband's part in happy home building," The Canadian Mennonite 2 (27 August 1954):6.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> B. Charles Hostetter, "The wife's part in happy home building," The Canadian Mennonite 2 (3 September 1954):6.

consequences."<sup>82</sup> Based on Tit. 2:4-5 and Proverbs 31, he concluded that if a wife failed in her responsibility of making the home a cheerful, clean place, "she is out of the will of God."<sup>83</sup> In addition, the author claimed that according to I Tim. 5:14 and Ps. 127:3, it was women's "ordained responsibility to bear children willingly and rear them in the fear of the Lord."<sup>84</sup> That care of children was specifically women's work and a degrading thing for men to do is illustrated in the story of a new immigrant to Canada--

Henry did not so much mind the farm work on the yard and on the fields, but when he was assigned to the dark Sommerstube (summer room) to sit between two cradles and rock the twins, while his employers slept, his warm blood turned warmer--if he was destined to make his living babysitting in this new country, he would soon return to where he came from.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, in MB church periodicals, biblical texts were quoted to advance the belief of husband as head of the wife and the wife as submissive to her husband's authority--"The wife must remember that leadership also means authority. . . . someone must cast the deciding vote. This responsibility God has given to the husband."<sup>86</sup> Besides the injunctions in church periodicals,

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> "Portrait of a Pioneer: Heinrich H. Hamm pioneered in civic and church affairs," The Canadian Mennonite 2 (20 August 1954):4.

<sup>86</sup> Jacob Suderman, "Christian Authority for Marriage and the Home," Mennonite Brethren Herald 1, 36 (28 September 1962):6,7. Eph. 5:22; 6:4; and I Cor. 11:3 are used to defend husbands'

Mennonite women will have heard similar themes in sermons. One such address, given to MB women's societies in 1957, reinforced women's subordinate role and duties in the home--

Although women will always continue to be subordinate to men in the actual work of teaching, and directing in the church, they are the ones who will through the home provide the main motivation for missions in their influence upon others.<sup>87</sup>

While a survey of church periodical literature gives us an indication of the perception of women's role from the perspective of Mennonite male writers, we need to ask what women themselves believed their role to be. Were they satisfied with their subordinate role? Did they believe that homemaking and mothering were their biblical responsibilities?

### 3. Women's Perception of Their Role

Based on the words and writings of Mennonite women, we can conclude that the role suggested by male church leaders was generally accepted by Mennonite women. In the 1968 Canadian Women's Conference of the CMC, the importance of women's influence in the home was affirmed--

But our most effective field of service is the home. Our Christian witness can be reflected through the lives of our children and influence of our husband. We feel a need to commit ourselves anew to the

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authority.

<sup>87</sup> "The place of women in church work today," The Canadian Mennonite 5 (18 October 1957):1.

faithful service of dedicated builders of the home.<sup>88</sup>

Several articles in the Canadian Mennonite elevated the career of homemaking, indicating its complexities, value, and fulfilment.<sup>89</sup>

In 1956 and 1957, Anne Barga used her regular column, "Conversation with mothers," to discuss various aspects of woman's role as wife and mother. In one of the articles, "Too gifted to become a mere housewife?", Barga challenged her readers to contemplate the fact that it had been because of mothers that great men of the past had been able to make significant contributions.<sup>90</sup> In "Making a marriage last," another article in this series, we have an indication of the extent to which women themselves believed they should be subject to their husbands and please them--"if your husband wishes you different, why not change now?"<sup>91</sup> The "Prayer of a Young Wife" shows the lengths to which women believed they should go in order to serve their husbands--

Oh may he (husband) never find  
That I am less than what he thinks!  
Lord, help me to be kind.

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<sup>88</sup> Mrs. Henry Funk, "Women stress foreign missions and the home," The Canadian Mennonite 16 (13 August 1968):14.

<sup>89</sup> Helen Dick, "A mother and her career child," The Canadian Mennonite 17 (26 September 1969):11; "What's a good wife worth," The Canadian Mennonite 13 (28 September 1965):12; and Hedy Durksen, "Is life passing you by?" The Canadian Mennonite 9 (3 February 1961):1.

<sup>90</sup> Anne Barga, "Too gifted to become a mere housewife?" The Canadian Mennonite 4 (7 September 1956):2. Barga refers to mothers of Moses, Wesley, Moody, and Lincoln.

<sup>91</sup> Anne Barga, "Making a marriage last," The Canadian Mennonite 4 (28 September 1956):4.

I must have faith to meet his doubt,  
And strength, when he is weak.

Lord help me always to maintain  
The standards of his creed,  
And give me courage, strength and love,  
To answer constant need.<sup>92</sup>

In the 1960s, other regular columns designed to appeal to female readers, appeared in church periodicals. In the CMC church periodical, Hedy Durksen's column, "Just around the house," continued from 1961 through 1962.<sup>93</sup> Then from 1965 to 1970, Anna L. Schroeder was responsible for the column, "In and out of my window."<sup>94</sup> Throughout this time period, both writers discussed topics such as motherhood, housework, music, plants, and cooking.<sup>95</sup> The MB Church periodical also carried a regular column for women called, "Homemakers." A 1964 article in this serial affirmed that woman "was created for the help and happiness of man and for the glory of God" and that "motherhood is the highest calling to which a woman can attain."<sup>96</sup> These

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> "A new feature begins in this issue," The Canadian Mennonite 9 (3 February 1961):1.

<sup>94</sup> Anna L. Schroeder, "In and out of my window," The Canadian Mennonite 13 (7 September 1965):12.

<sup>95</sup> Anna L. Schroeder, "Professionals," The Canadian Mennonite 17 (25 July 1969):7. In this article Schroeder advocated the professionalisation of household help, elevating it to the level of other occupations such as nursing, with standardization, higher pay, and maybe uniforms.

<sup>96</sup> Hilda Froese, "The Ministry of Women in the Christian Church," Part 1, Mennonite Brethren Herald 3,21 (22 May 1964):13. Reference is made to Eve and Rebecca as women who influenced others to do evil; Ruth, Mary, and Eunice as women who were good mothers.

articles, written by Mennonite women show that they accepted their role as mothers and homemakers and considered them to be important.

Just as women seemed to accept their role in the home, so they did in the church. Assuming male interpretations of biblical texts to be true, they did not question their invisibility in church leadership. Instead, they emphasized other opportunities of service and looked for other ways to make their contribution. In a three part series entitled, "The Ministry of Women in the Christian Church", an MB woman suggested prayer, hospitality, missions, music and literature as important areas for women to become involved in the church.<sup>97</sup> Manitoba women of the CMC affirmed that although women's role appeared at times to be insignificant "work behind the scenes is often the most important."<sup>98</sup> On another occasion Hedy Durksen advocated that churches organize separate Sunday School classes for women, a method which had been successful in the church she attended. This would enable women to participate more freely--

Whereas before we ladies could sit quietly by and let the menfolk do all the talking, we now find that the discussion in class depends on us . . . granted, that our thoughts and expressions are not as profound and deep as those of our men, but I dare to think that we are perhaps more practical and down-to-earth in our

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<sup>97</sup> Hilda Froese, "The Ministry of Women in the Christian Church," Parts 1-3, 3,21 (22 May 1964):13; 25 (19 June 1964):13; 27 (3 July 1964):12. Reference is made to Hannah (I Sam. 1:27), the Shunamite woman, Lydia (Acts 16:15), Priscilla (Rom. 16:3) and to the woman of Prov. 31:20.

<sup>98</sup> Elsie Neufeld, "Manitoba women met at Boissevain," The Canadian Mennonite 11 (7 June 1963):3.

approach.<sup>99</sup>

The value of a separate class for women, according to Durksen, was that women were able to express themselves freely, something she said had been lacking in Mennonite churches.<sup>100</sup>

In Durksen's suggestion of a separate class for Mennonite women we find a clue as to why Mennonite women's societies flourished during this period. At a time when Mennonite women were being restricted in church roles, here was a forum in which women could express themselves freely. Just like Sunday School classes for women, the Mennonite women's society was a context in which Mennonite women could freely express their opinions, make their own decisions, and assume leadership roles. It gave them an outlet for service at a time when homemaking, motherhood, and subordination in church and home were not only encouraged but also biblically defended.

While the dominant trend in the 1950s and 1960s was for Mennonite women to accept their role in the church and home, nonetheless, here and there we get a glimpse of discontent. The seeds of questioning were being sown.

### ***C. Seeds of Questioning***

The 1960s saw the beginning of the seeds of questioning which would continue to develop in the next two decades.

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<sup>99</sup> Hedy Durksen, "The ladies' class," The Canadian Mennonite 9 (23 June 1961):7.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

Mennonite women wrote of the quandary in which they found themselves--

The trouble seems to be that we women are no longer quite sure whether we belong in the home, whether we should be out getting more education so as to keep up with our well-educated husbands, or maybe have a career outside the home.

Do we still teach our daughters that they are to be keepers of homes and the mothers of future generations, or is this being hopelessly old-fashioned? Just where do we go from here?<sup>101</sup>

One specific issue that was being contended was that of women's employment outside the home. The fact that an article in the 1950s argued that married Christian women should not be employed outside the home, indicates that this was probably beginning to happen in Mennonite circles.<sup>102</sup> Reference was made to women's

God-designated place and responsibilities . . . Kirchen, Küchen and Kinder (the church, the home and the family). And what a noble, biblical and satisfying calling this is! But it doesn't seem to satisfy the modern, trained, professing Christian woman.<sup>103</sup>

Sometimes men and women disagreed on the advisability of becoming employed outside the home. The editor of The Canadian Mennonite felt women should be employed only in the case of financial need--

but this should never be considered a desirable arrangement . . . raising children requires more

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<sup>101</sup> Hedy Durksen, "Where do we stand?" The Canadian Mennonite 10 (30 March 1962):8.

<sup>102</sup> "Why Christian married women work," The Canadian Mennonite 3 (21 January 1955):7.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

imagination, creativity, patience, and any intellectual activity you can name, than almost any other occupation in the world.<sup>104</sup>

Anna L. Schroeder found this attitude perplexing and suggested that women's employment might be threat to males--"A great many women have no ambition to step outside their own homes, but just as many long to do something besides housework. Not just for the money they might earn, but for interest and enjoyment."<sup>105</sup>

While it was assumed that married women would be full time homemakers, single women could be employed outside the home with the church's blessing. In fact an article on "The single girl" appeared in 1957 which emphasized the importance of the secretary to the Canadian businessman--"his 'girl Friday' who gives her undivided attention to his every beck and call."<sup>106</sup> A church vocation program was even instigated to assist single Mennonite women to find church related jobs.<sup>107</sup>

Besides employment outside the home, some Mennonite women

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<sup>104</sup> Larry Kehler, "Mere motherhood?" The Canadian Mennonite 9 (4 August 1961):2.

<sup>105</sup> Anna L. Schroeder, "My husband won't let me," The Canadian Mennonite 14 (12 July 1966):20.

<sup>106</sup> "The single girl," The Canadian Mennonite 5 (4 October 1957):2.

<sup>107</sup> "Newton pioneers work program for women," The Canadian Mennonite 5 (25 January 1957):1; and "Women in Church Vocations--A service and fellowship opportunity for girls," The Canadian Mennonite 6 (1 August 1958):5. The program, entitled Women in Church Vocations, was initiated in 1957 by the General Conference Board of Christian Service (a board of the North American General Conference Church). Its aims were to recruit, train and place interested single women.

were interested in furthering their education--"Some are sick of concerning themselves solely with marshmallow and jelly salads, and would prefer something which challenges their intellect."<sup>108</sup> Women's desire for self development and intellectual growth led to an increase in the number of Mennonite women returning to school to pursue further studies.<sup>109</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe noted that the church was reluctant to condone this change because of its fear that women would neglect the home.<sup>110</sup>

At the same time as Mennonite women became interested in careers outside the home and additional educational opportunities, some were also beginning to question the role of women's societies. In 1963, a full page article in the Canadian Mennonite by Katie Funk Wiebe, debated the effectiveness of the sewing circle.<sup>111</sup> Wiebe referred to the sewing circle as a tradition that had enabled women "to use their skills as a homemaker in the service of the church," noting that in the past "they (women) have accepted thankfully and humbly the unique place of service" but now were questioning whether it still was as appealing for women--

Does the traditional women's society invite the interest of the so-called "intellectual" . . . Is the

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<sup>108</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "The Women's Class," Mennonite Brethren Herald 6,1 (6 January 1967):16.

<sup>109</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "Unfinished Business," Mennonite Brethren Herald 8,26 (26 December 1969):18-19.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "The place of women in the work of the church," The Canadian Mennonite 11 (1 March 1963):5.

women's church organization of today really the vital arm of Christ it purports to be or merely a crutch under the arm of the men?<sup>112</sup>

The seeds of questioning had been sewn.

However, while some women were raising questions about the roles to which they had become accustomed, it is difficult to tell how widespread this new thinking was, or how much of it had to do with the women's movement. The majority of Mennonite women seemed content to make their primary contribution to the church through the forum of women's societies. In 1969, the secretary-treasurer of the CMC Canadian Women's Missionary Conference defended women's groups as the best way for women to be involved in the church, and at the same time declared that women were not even aspiring to be ministers.<sup>113</sup> That some Mennonite women were at least aware of the issues of the women's movement is indicated in a book review of Betty Friedan's, The Feminine Mystique which appeared in The Canadian Mennonite in 1966. The writer, Katie Funk Wiebe, admitted that suffragettes had gained certain privileges for women, even though, according to her, their methods and goals were not always right.<sup>114</sup> Wiebe agreed with Friedan that women were living below their capabilities and queried whether the Mennonite church had been guilty of asking too little of Mennonite women--"too many women in our churches

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Elaine Penner, "Few church women aspire to 'male' jobs-- at least not yet," The Canadian Mennonite 17 (9 May 1969):5.

<sup>114</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "The feminine mystique (1)," The Canadian Mennonite 14 (29 March 1966):52.

have yielded to an image which is less than biblical--their silence is empty and they have little to submit . . . Is there a Mennonite feminine mystique?"<sup>115</sup> Implicit in Wiebe's discussion was a critique of the biblically supported subordinate role of Mennonite women. Here is a sign not only that women were beginning to question male centered biblical interpretation and traditionally held positions in the church but also that Mennonite women were being influenced by society around them, in particular, the women's movement.

In the 1960s, there was a greater likelihood that Mennonite women would be influenced by society. This was partially due to the gradual language change in Mennonite churches from the use of the German language to English. In the MB church, the change at the national conference level began in 1953 with annual conference proceedings recorded in both German and English until 1968, when a complete switch was made to English.<sup>116</sup> In the CMC, annual conference proceedings were in both languages until 1979.<sup>117</sup> Mennonite women's associations followed the churches' initiative and gradually changed to the use of the English language as well. Not only did Mennonite women's societies

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<sup>115</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "The feminine mystique (2)," The Canadian Mennonite 14 (5 April 1966):10

<sup>116</sup> Yearbook of the Forty-Third Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1953) and Yearbook of the Fifty-Eighth Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1968).

<sup>117</sup> Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1979).

change the names of societies from German to English during this time, as has already been noted, but also the language spoken in their meetings was also changing to English. My survey responses indicated that of the eighty-three women's groups which originally met in the German language, forty-seven groups made the change from German to English. Table 10 shows the years when the shift in language was made in Mennonite women's societies.

**Table 10**  
**Language Change in Mennonite Women's Societies**  
**From German to English**

Year of Change	Number of MB Women's Societies	Number of CMC Women's Societies	Total Changes	Percent of Change
1874-1952	3	6	9	19%
1953-1969	7	15	22	47%
1970-1987	5	10	15	32%
1988	1	0	1	2%
Total	16	31	47	100%

The table indicates that the highest percentage of groups changed from the German language to English between 1953 and 1969. This meant that Mennonites were not as isolated as when they first

immigrated to Canada. Increasingly, they shared a common language with their neighbors.

Thus, the time period between 1953 and 1969 was an era when Mennonite women remained strong in their participation in women's societies. Names of societies and goals of organizations continued to indicate that support of missions was a primary focus of women's groups. Increased structural organization meant that women could work more efficiently for the cause of missions. Mennonite women were pleased with official linkages to the institutional church since it confirmed for them that they were a vital part of the church.

While it is difficult to make causal links, it is noteworthy that increased involvement in women's societies coincided with an increased affirmation of the importance of women's place in the home and statements of restrictions in church leadership. If women could not serve God within the local church, they certainly could within the context of their societies. While this seemed to be the experience of most Mennonite women who were members of Mennonite women's societies, a few lone voices, in both the CMC and MB Church, had begun to question the assumption that women should devote all their energies to homemaking, mothering, and women's societies. One writer had even questioned the validity of male interpretation of biblical texts on women's role. The following decades would witness a continuation of the discussion of the role of women and more widespread questioning of the place of women's societies.

## Chapter IV - Mennonite Women's Societies from 1970 to 1987: Significant Trends and Decreasing Interest

In the previous chapter it became apparent that from 1953 to 1969 Mennonite women's societies flourished, but we also noted the first indications of self-questioning.

The 1970s and 1980s was a time of significant change for women within Canadian society generally and within the Christian community in particular. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women, reporting in 1970, brought a number of women's issues to the fore, among them that "women should be free to choose whether or not to take employment outside their homes," and that "the care of children is a responsibility to be shared by the mother, the father, and society."<sup>1</sup> In this time period, women were increasingly becoming employed outside the home, and issues such as abortion and sexist language were raised.<sup>2</sup> At the same time anti-feminist groups were also established.<sup>3</sup> In the church, by the late 1970s, women were admitted to ordination in several Protestant denominations, and women's issues raised in secular society were beginning to penetrate the Christian community.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see in this chapter, the Mennonite community, in

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1970):p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> Prentice, et al., Canadian Women: A History, pp. 369, 392, 396.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 364-365.

<sup>4</sup> Grant, The Church in the Canadian Era, p. 234.

particular Mennonite women's societies, did not remain unaffected by the women's movement.

Between 1970 and 1987, despite the trend in Mennonite women's societies to focus on spiritual growth, fellowship, and Bible study; despite the continued emphasis on support for missions; and despite increased recognition and affirmation by the institutional church of the work of Mennonite women's societies, they experienced a decline. This chapter will discuss the dynamics of these trends--spiritual growth, service and decline. First, then, we will discuss the movement in Mennonite women's societies towards an increased emphasis on fellowship, spiritual growth, and Bible study.

### ***A. Fellowship, Spiritual Growth, and Bible Study***

Between 1970 and 1987, Mennonite women's societies were placing a greater emphasis on fellowship, spiritual growth, and Bible study. This trend was expressed in the naming of their organizations, stated purposes, themes for meetings and conferences, and biblical texts chosen for mottos.

Between 1970 and 1987, there was a significant shift in naming, both among newly organized Mennonite women's societies and among those which chose to change the names of their organizations during this period, a shift from service oriented names to names denoting a fellowship focus. The following tables show the distribution, categorized by function, of the names chosen by the fourteen CMC and thirteen MB groups organized in

immigration churches between 1970 and 1987.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 11**  
**Percentage Distribution of Names of CMC Women's Societies**  
**Organized Between 1970 and 1987**

CATEGORY	NAME	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Fellowship	Friendship Circle, Ladies Fellowship (3x), <u>Koinonia</u>	5	36%
Service Aid	Loving Deeds Ladies Group, Ladies Aid Group	2	14%
Biblical Woman's Name	Dorcas Circle	1	7%
Other	<u>Verein</u> (3x), The Tuesday Group, Love and Light, Evergreen Circle	6	43%
TOTAL		14	100%

**Table 12**  
**Percentage Distribution of Names of MB Women's Societies**  
**Organized Between 1970 and 1987**

CATEGORY	NAME	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Fellowship	Ladies Fellowship (2x), Maranatha Ladies Fellowship, Ladies Friendship Hour, Young Ladies Fellowship, Grace Fellowship, Open Door Fellowship, Women's Fellowship, <u>Koinonia</u> Fellowship	9	69%
Fellowship & Service	Women's Service and Fellowship	1	8%
Biblical Woman's Name	<u>Maria Martha Verein</u>	1	8%
Other	Elim <u>Verein</u> , Gals with God	2	15%
TOTAL		13	100%

What is striking in the naming of these newly organized societies

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<sup>5</sup> Documentation is from provincial histories of CMC women's societies, local church histories, and my survey.

is the lack of mission/service oriented names. There were no names explicitly denoting mission and only two CMC societies and one MB society had names denoting service or aid. Just as striking is the dramatic increase in names that were fellowship oriented. Whereas only 16 percent of CMC women's societies and 21 percent of MB women's societies organized between 1953 and 1969 had names denoting fellowship (see tables 7 and 8 in Chapter III), there was an increase to 36 percent of CMC societies and 77 percent of MB societies which were called fellowship groups between 1970 and 1987. Thus, the naming of Mennonite women's societies organized between 1970 and 1987 is one indication of a trend to place fellowship needs ahead of service. But we need to also examine name changes within groups already in existence before 1970, to determine whether these exemplify the same trend.

According to my survey of Mennonite women's societies, eleven (16 percent) of the sixty-nine CMC and fourteen (42 percent) of the thirty-three MB women's societies established between 1953 and 1969 (see tables 7 and 8 in Chapter III) changed their names between 1970 and 1987. Table 13 shows name changes in these women's societies.

Table 13  
Mennonite Women's Society Name Changes  
1970-1987

NAME CHANGE	CMC WOMEN'S SOCIETIES	MB WOMEN'S SOCIETIES	TOTAL NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
To Fellowship/Bible Study: Ladies Fellowship (3x), Koinonia Ladies Group, Women's Christian Fellowship (2x), Women's Fellowship (2x), Fellowship, Friendship Circle, (2x), Ladies Bible Study Group	3	9	12	48%
To Mission/Aid/Service: Ladies Aid, Willing Workers, Women's Auxiliary, Women in Mission (3x), Women's Mission Circle, Women's Ministries	6	2	8	32%
To a Combination of Missions & Fellowship: Missionary Fellowship (2x)	1	1	2	8%
Other Name Changes: Church Women, Women Alive, Ladies Group	1	2	3	12%
Total	11	14	25	100%

From Table 13 we can see that there was a higher percentage of name changes to names denoting fellowship and Bible study than to names suggesting a service orientation. This trend was more evident among MB women's societies than among CMC women's societies; and the tendency to changes in naming to service/mission/aid was greater among CMC women's societies.<sup>6</sup>

Not only was a shift to a more explicit fellowship focus evident in naming, women's groups also stated that fellowship, spiritual growth and Bible study were primary functions of their groups--"Our first meeting was held October 4, 1976, with fifteen present. At that meeting we held elections and decided on the

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<sup>6</sup> One factor to keep in mind, however, is that local CMC women's societies were prone to change their name to Women in Mission after 1975, the year when the national CMC women's organization changed its name to Canadian Women in Mission.

name 'Friendship Circle' which is the theme and purpose of our group."<sup>7</sup> In 1977, the Arnaud Christian Fellowship expressed their purpose in this way--"One purpose of our Fellowship is to further each members' spiritual growth and lead us to a closer fellowship with Christ and each other."<sup>8</sup> The Arelee MB Women's Missionary Fellowship reported in 1982 that since "the Bible is our key to living, each time we gather we have a Bible study and a time of sharing."<sup>9</sup> A 1972 Newsletter of the Women's Missionary Service of the Ontario MB Conference reinforced the priority of fellowship--

(T)he aspect of Christian fellowship is emphasized at the monthly meetings where more and more time is devoted to Bible study and prayer, discussion of specific questions, and the sharing of experiences. Very real spiritual needs have been met during these meetings.<sup>10</sup>

The priority given to fellowship and spiritual growth concerns can also be noted by the fact that after 1970, constitutions and reports of Mennonite women's societies often mentioned these before referring to goals of mission and service. At the provincial level, one example is found in the stated aims of the

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<sup>7</sup> John Giesbrecht et al., Highlights of the Vineland United Mennonite Church (1936-1986) (n.p., 1986), p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> "Arelee MB Missionary Fellowship," Arelee and District History (n.p., 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Mary Dueck, "Report," in Yearbook of the Forty-First Annual Provincial Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario, (n.p.: Conference of the MB Churches of Ontario, 1972), p. 25.

1980 constitution of the Women's Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba--"To unite the women of the churches for the purpose of promoting spiritual growth and fellowship; to assist in the various needs and programs of our conference with prayer, practical work and donations."<sup>11</sup> The 1976 report of the Ontario MB Women's Missionary Service likewise gave priority to fellowship in its stated purpose--

1. promote spiritual growth and inspiration for service through the fellowship of women in our conference.
2. help various needs of the church and conference with prayer, interest and financial support.<sup>12</sup>

In local churches, as well, women's groups gave preeminence to fellowship and spiritual growth in their reporting--"At a recent re-organizational meeting we were asked to share our reasons for attending. The reasons given were: for fellowship, to become better acquainted and to become involved in the mission of the church."<sup>13</sup> The same was true for the Junior Ladies Aid of Herbert MB Church, who indicated their two fold purpose--"a) To enjoy and practise Christian fellowship and b) To give a helping

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<sup>11</sup> "Constitution of the Women's Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba," Women's Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba, 1980.

<sup>12</sup> Elva A. Suderman, "Women's Missionary Service Report," Yearbook of the Forty-Fifth Annual Provincial Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario (n.p.: Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> Froese, History of Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977), p. 25.

hand whenever and wherever we are able to."<sup>14</sup> In 1980, the Homemakers of the Dalmeny Community Church stated its aim--"to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to put that growth into action."<sup>15</sup> In the same year, the Magdalene Ladies Aid in Hanley, Saskatchewan ended their annual report with--"We appreciate the fellowship and are thankful to be able to contribute to the work of our church."<sup>16</sup> In all these instances, the fact that the goals of fellowship and spiritual growth were mentioned before service probably signals a priority of fellowship.

Another indication of the shift to a fellowship and spiritual growth emphasis is seen in the themes for meetings and conferences of Mennonite women's societies and in biblical texts chosen as group mottos. Women chose to address issues and participate in events which would build them up as Christian women. At the provincial level, Saskatchewan Women in Mission conference themes between 1972 and 1976 included "Christ as Lord of Life," "Today's Christian Woman," "Rejoice, and Again I say Rejoice," and "Coping with Life Through the Power of the Spirit."<sup>17</sup> In 1971, the theme of the Women's Missionary Service

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<sup>14</sup> Tina Block, "Junior Ladies Aid Report," Minutes, Herbert MB Church, Herbert, Saskatchewan, 1977, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Lepp, "Homemaker's Report," Minutes, Dalmeny Community Church, Dalmeny, Saskatchewan, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Froese, "Report of the Magdalene Ladies Aid for 1980," Minutes, Hanley Mennonite Church, Hanley, Saskatchewan, 1980.

<sup>17</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 8.

of the Ontario MB Conference was "God's Woman for the 70s," and included topics such as "Understanding Myself," and "New Directions for My Life."<sup>18</sup> In 1984 the theme was "Be Still and Know That I am God," and explored the management of stress in daily living.<sup>19</sup> In the 1974 Women's Conference of Manitoba MB Churches, a physician spoke to the group on dreams, bio-feedback, crying as therapy, and communications.<sup>20</sup> We notice the same trend at a local level. The Arnaud Christian Fellowship chose the theme "Be all you can be" in 1984.<sup>21</sup> In 1977 Boissevain Women in Mission decided to study the stories of biblical women during group meetings.<sup>22</sup> In 1982, the Ladies Aid of Main Centre, Saskatchewan, studied the book The Fragrance of Beauty in order "to help each woman conquer through Christ personal fear, worry, inferiority or anger which may be threatening her inward and

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Dueck, "Women's Missionary Service of the Ontario Mennonite Brethren Conference," in Yearbook of the Fortieth Annual Provincial Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario (n.p.: Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario, 1971), p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> Loretta Heide, "Women's Missionary Service of the Ontario Mennonite Brethren Conference," in Yearbook of the Fifty-Third Annual Provincial Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario (n.p.: Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> "Minutes of the Eighth Annual Women's Conference of Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Churches," Women's Conference of Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1974.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Kathler, "Arnaud Christian Fellowship," Report, Arnaud Mennonite Church, 1984.

<sup>22</sup> Froese, History of Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977), p. 25.

outward beauty."<sup>23</sup>

The same shift in emphasis can be seen in biblical texts chosen as group mottos. Of the fourteen CMC and thirteen MB women's societies organized between 1970 and 1987 (see tables 11 and 12), a few specified biblical texts as mottos.<sup>24</sup> Texts chosen were--<sup>25</sup>

But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isa. 40:31)

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. (I Thess. 5:11)

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works. (Heb. 10:24)

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Gal. 6:10)

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. . . . above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. (Eph. 2:8; 6:16)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. (Gal. 5:22)

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly

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<sup>23</sup> Diane Unruh, "Ladies Aid Report," Minutes, Main Centre Mennonite Brethren Church, Main Centre, Saskatchewan, 1982.

<sup>24</sup> Sources are reports of Mennonite women's societies found within histories of local Mennonite churches, my survey, and reports of women's groups which accompanied survey responses.

<sup>25</sup> These texts are quoted from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. In the 1970s and 1980s, contemporary versions of the Bible were being introduced into Mennonite churches. The language of these versions was not inclusive; women generally still felt included within male exclusive terminology.

passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you. (Tit. 2:11-15)

What is evident from these choices of biblical texts is that there was a subtle shift in emphasis such that the degree of emphasis on service was not as substantial as in former years; mottos reflect a shift toward spiritual growth concerns.<sup>26</sup>

It is difficult to determine what caused the shift to an increased emphasis, in Mennonite women's societies, on fellowship and spiritual growth. While not many groups stated explicitly why this occurred, the report of the Happy Homemakers of First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon indicated that women had a sense that there was "a lack of growth and development in spiritual matters, and so in 1981, their perspective shifted from being a fund-raising organization to a Bible study group that meets once a week for prayer and study."<sup>27</sup> A further indication of why this shift in emphasis occurred was raised in the opening address

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter III on an analysis of the biblical texts chosen for mottos by Mennonite women's societies organized between 1953 and 1969. Service oriented terms--"good works," "do good," and "good deeds"--each appear only once in biblical mottos chosen between 1970 and 1987, whereas themes of spiritual growth predominate--"they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength," "they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint," "taking the shield of faith," "the fruit of the Spirit is love . . .," and "live sober, upright, and godly lives."

<sup>27</sup> Esther Patkau, ed., First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon (1923-1982), p. 198.

the 1979 annual conference of CWM--

Women in Mission speaks of action and involvement. We have been known to reach out. But, to reach out effectively we need to grow inwardly. For our inward journey we need the refreshing resources that come from God through His Word (through meditation and fellowship). . . . We want to have His message so deeply rooted in our lives that it governs our thinking. This will be to us individually, and as WM corporately, joy and encouragement in our services to one another and to our sisters around the world.<sup>28</sup>

It appears that women were feeling a need to have their actions of service grounded in personal spiritual experience; thus the change in emphasis to fellowship and spiritual growth and development. While this shift was common in Mennonite women's societies, some elements did not change. To these we now turn our attention.

### ***B. Elements That Remained the Same***

While fellowship and spiritual growth seemed to receive greater emphasis between 1970 and 1987, other aspects of Mennonite women's societies remained the same. First, many Mennonite women's societies continued to have a strong biblically motivated emphasis on service. Second, regular meetings followed the same format as they had in the past; and third, Mennonite women's societies continued to have significant meaning for women who attended.

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<sup>28</sup> Anne Neufeld, "Canadian Women in Mission Minutes--27th Annual Conference," in Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1979).

The strong service orientation had two aspects--the motivation based on biblical texts and themes; and a praxis which retained the character of the previous decades. Mennonite women continued to view their service initiatives as biblically motivated. We have already noted specific biblical texts chosen as group mottos. In addition, Mennonite women's societies explicitly stated that their work was God directed. For instance, the Mission Sisters of the Niverville Mennonite Church stated that their 1980 report was designed in such a way as "to show how our activities have been organized in our effort to fulfil Christ's command to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick, go to the prisoner (Matt. 25:35-36)."<sup>29</sup> In 1972, the president of the women's auxiliary of the Leamington MB Church reported that the work of the women's groups was "a labour of love for Christ"--

A brief, cold report cannot reflect the enthusiasm with which our ladies work in their various ways, but it is encouraging to see our young married ladies, and our older grandmothers joining wholeheartedly in the work which we ladies feel is a labour of love for Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Of the women's societies in the Bethel Mennonite Church it was said--"They love to serve God and seem to possess a special

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<sup>29</sup> Helen Friesen, "Mission Sisters Report," Minutes, Niverville Mennonite Church, Niverville, Manitoba, 1980, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> N.N. Driedger, The Leamington United Mennonite Church: Establishment and Development (1925-1972), p. 125.

compassion for people and children in need."<sup>31</sup> In 1977, the Tabea Mission Circle in Coaldale, Alberta stated that members considered their service as good stewardship of God given gifts-- "In all that we do, we hope we are good stewards of the time, opportunities and talents God has given us."<sup>32</sup> Thus, biblical motivation for service remained strong.

The motivation to serve prompted significant support for missions and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)<sup>33</sup> through fundraising, just as it had in the past. Women's societies supported mission projects of the CMC and MB churches, as well as projects of MCC.<sup>34</sup> They continued to contribute with large amounts of money;<sup>35</sup> in 1972 the amount CWM raised (\$245,000) was two-thirds of the figure for the total budget for CMC in that year.<sup>36</sup> MCC was also supported; a typical list of items produced for MCC is found in the 1979-80 report of the Missionsverein of the Sargent Ave Mennonite Church:

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<sup>31</sup> Bethel Mennonite Church (1936-1980); Aldergrove, B.C. (Altona: D.W. Friesen and Sons, 1980), p. 40-41.

<sup>32</sup> Neufeld, Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> The Mennonite Central Committee is a joint relief and service agency of nearly all North American Mennonites.

<sup>34</sup> Nordheimer Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan (1925-1975) (Hanley: Nordheimer Mennonite Church, 1975), p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> Documentation obtained from financial reports of Mennonite women's societies who completed my survey and sent in financial reports along with the completed surveys.

<sup>36</sup> Menno Wiebe, "Women's Conference more than peripheral," Mennonite Reporter 2,15b (24 July 1972):4.

"seventy layettes, fifty school kits, 15 Patch Baby blankets, 10 large blankets, and 35 pounds of bandages."<sup>37</sup> Several groups continued having mission sales and catering for church functions,<sup>38</sup> but in several locales, the "arena sale" began to take the place of local church mission sales.<sup>39</sup> These were MCC annual mission sales for which an arena or other large building was utilized. It included sale of handmade articles, food booths, and auctions; they were supported by most of the Mennonite churches in a designated area and women's groups became involved in various aspects of the sale. For example, in the Leamington area, one women's group was in charge of the Rollkuchen (a deep fried flat pastry) booth.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the emphasis on mission and service to others remained strong in many Mennonite women's societies between 1970 and 1987.

A second aspect of Mennonite women's societies which was constant and at times seemed to be even more highly structured, was the worship format of society meetings, both at the local church level and at provincial conference levels. In 1976, the Junior Ladies Aid of the Herbert MB Church listed the components

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<sup>37</sup> Tina Friesen, "Missionsverein," Minutes, Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1979-80.

<sup>38</sup> Bartel Saskatchewan Women in Mission, pp. 67, 72.

<sup>39</sup> Toews, South Western Ontario Women in Mission (1925-1987), p. 53; Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 91; Neufeld, Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), p. 110; Gert Dyck, "Wymark Ladies Mission Club," in Patchwork of Memories (n.p., n.d.), p. 873.

<sup>40</sup> Toews, South Western Ontario Women in Mission (1925-1987), p. 53.

of their worship in a similar fashion as the order for Sunday morning worship service would appear in a church bulletin--

"Our meetings went as follows:

- Singing of two songs
- Opening prayer
- Thoughts and verses (also prayer requests)
- Devotional
- Prayer Session
- Minutes
- Business
- Offering
- Prayer
- Coffee"<sup>41</sup>

Components of meetings included prayer, reading from the Bible, singing, a devotional talk, business, an offering, a closing prayer and coffee. The Senior Women's Fellowship of the Central MB Church in Saskatoon reported--"We always open our meetings with singing a few songs, scripture and prayer, a devotional from the Word of God and a time of sharing. We have prayer requests and then unite in prayer."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the Willing Hands Ladies Aid of Yarrow, British Columbia--

We meet in homes and our evening begins with singing and prayer; followed by the reading of the minutes; business; special numbers such as: a poem, song or testimony. During our devotional, we study a book of the Bible, which has been chosen at the beginning of the year. At each meeting one lady leads in the study of one chapter.<sup>43</sup>

The tendency to conduct structured meetings was also seen at

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<sup>41</sup> "Junior Ladies Aid," Minutes, Herbert MB Church, Herbert, Saskatchewan, 1976, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Andres, "Senior Women's Fellowship," Minutes, Central MB Church, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1982.

<sup>43</sup> Rempel, History of BC Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976), p. 91.

the provincial conference level. For example, the 1986 South Saskatchewan MB Ladies Fall Auxiliary Meeting followed a format similar to what one would find within the institutional church--a welcome and was followed by songs, invocation, special music, business, offering, special music, a speaker, and closing.<sup>44</sup> Not only was the format similar to the worship format of the church, but as well, speakers seemed to organize their talks in the same way as preachers did on Sunday morning. This was the case at the spring conference of the 1979 Women's Conference of Manitoba MB Churches where a female speaker presented five portraits of a Christian worker, based on I Timothy 2.<sup>45</sup>

One could ask whether this trend to fashion their worship experiences on the model of the institutional church was an indication of a continued need within Mennonite women's societies for a parallel church organization, one in which they could freely participate in all aspects of the worship. While it is difficult to make a direct correlation, we may get an indication of the extent to which they may have functioned as a parallel church by considering the third area in which Mennonite women's societies remained strong between 1970 and 1987, that of the meaning they held for Mennonite women.

Within their societies, Mennonite women experienced their own sense of community--

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<sup>44</sup> Bulletin from the South Saskatchewan MB Ladies Fall Auxiliary Meeting, Regina, 1 November 1986.

<sup>45</sup> "Spring Conference--April 21, 1979," Report of the Women's Conference of Manitoba MB Churches, 1979.

Who can measure the worth of a circle? We have learned to plan and work together; even to fellowship together when we disagreed, and to share each other's burdens and joys. By the grace and mercy of our Heavenly Father we have grown spiritually by being part of a Missionary Circle.<sup>46</sup>

Within their societies, Mennonite women had the opportunity to fully use their gifts in service to God--

Many of these women in our Mennonite circles God has given all kinds of talents, and besides the homemaking skills they are trained in administrative and organizational skills. But many of these women do not feel comfortable in the world of church and conference boards and committees. . . . Not only has this structure (Women in Mission) given women an opportunity to use their gifts and talents, but I am sure that the results of their work are noticed in the financial reports of the various boards.<sup>47</sup>

It was through their societies that their faith found expression--

It has been a privilege to be part of a Ladies Aid with many opportunities to serve the Lord with gladness. It is our sincere prayer that we continue to serve Him to the best of our abilities and take our place in the ranks of Christian workers.<sup>48</sup>

The women's club has been active in the church, and hopefully has contributed to the church's Christian witness in the community.<sup>49</sup>

Mennonite women's societies provided a context in which each

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<sup>46</sup> Rempel, History of BC Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976), p. 61.

<sup>47</sup> Anita Froese, Canadian Women in Mission President, "Opening Devotional - Council of Boards," Minutes, Council of Boards of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 28 January 1982.

<sup>48</sup> Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977), p. 57.

<sup>49</sup> Neufeld, Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977), p. 119.

member could participate and, indeed, all were encouraged to take their turn; no women needed to sit on the sidelines--"We try to involve as many sisters as possible in our meetings, in choosing hymns, reading Scripture, prayer, and having special numbers in song."<sup>50</sup> Thus, inasmuch as Mennonite women considered women's societies as a context in which they could live out their Christian faith, we could say that their societies functioned, to a degree at least, as a parallel church for them.

Not only did Mennonite women's societies remain committed to support of missions and worshipping together, but during this time the church put forth a greater effort to recognize and affirm the contributions of Mennonite women's societies.

### ***C. Recognition of Mennonite Women's Societies by the Church***

Between 1970 and 1987 the institutional church made a greater effort than they had in the past to acknowledge the work of Mennonite women's societies. This was done both by statements of commendation and by efforts to include them in the official church structure.

Words of commendation came to Mennonite women's societies from the church institution at local, provincial, and national levels. For instance, in 1980, at the local church level, the Bethel Church in Aldergrove, British Columbia, acknowledged the contribution of church's women's groups--

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<sup>50</sup> Albertine Speiser, "Missionary Prayer Band," Minutes, Central MB Church, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1978, p. 10.

From a brief look at the work of our ladies' auxiliaries, we are again made aware that they are more than wives, mothers, homemakers and often wage earners. They love to serve God and seem to possess a special compassion for people and children in need. We can indeed be thankful for the contribution our women make in building God's Kingdom and Bethel church as a whole.<sup>51</sup>

At the provincial level, the 1970 Ontario Conference of MB Churches passed a resolution commending MB women's societies for their "many hours of labour and sacrificial giving in support of our institutions and the missions program."<sup>52</sup> On the national scene, the moderator of the CMC annual conference gave recognition to CWM before the entire delegate body in 1981--

Your service is the glue that puts stability into our church social functions, and your support of Mission and Service activities at home and abroad is the leaven around which so much of congregational mission work is built. I believe, in a very real sense, that you are the deacons of our church and conference.<sup>53</sup>

Not only were words of commendation given to Mennonite women's societies, but the church also attempted in various ways to include them within the official church structure. First, they called upon women's societies to periodically present entire services in the local church, even on Sunday morning.<sup>54</sup> For

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<sup>51</sup> Bethel Mennonite Church (1936-1980); Aldergrove, B.C., pp. 40-41.

<sup>52</sup> Edward Boldt, ed. A History of the Ontario Conference of MB Churches (1957-1982), p. 37.

<sup>53</sup> Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1981), pp. 89.

<sup>54</sup> Rosie Sawatsky, "Ladies Aid Activities," Minutes, Oaklake Mennonite Church, Oaklake, Manitoba, 1971; and Constitution of the Naomi Mission Society, First Mennonite Church, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1975, p. 4.

example, the Laird Fellowship Group presented Mother's Day worship services in the local church in 1975 and 1976 and a New Year's Eve program in 1976.<sup>55</sup> Another way in which the church tried to include women's societies in the church structure was to have them report annually at local church business meetings and provincial conferences.<sup>56</sup> Some Mennonite women's societies were also asked to submit audited reports of their yearly financial income and expenditures.<sup>57</sup> These practices may be viewed as control by the institutional church, and indeed it appears at times to have been just that. For instance, the constitution of the Central MB Church in 1970 held women's groups "responsible to the church for their activities . . . to perform such duties as may be assigned by the church."<sup>58</sup> There is no indication, however, that these initiatives were seen as intrusive.

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<sup>55</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 45.

<sup>56</sup> Ontario CMC women's organizations began to report to the Ontario CMC annual conference delegate body in 1973. See Toews, South Western Ontario Women in Mission (1925-1987), p. 31.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.; Constitution of the Manitou Mennonite Brethren Ladies Fellowship Constitution, Manitou Mennonite Brethren Church, Manitou, Manitoba, 1981; Letter from Pleasant Point Ladies Aid to Gloria Neufeld Redekop; "Ladies Aid Report," Minutes, Main Centre Mennonite Brethren Church, Main Centre, Saskatchewan, 1979.

<sup>58</sup> Article XV, Section 1 of the Constitution of the Central MB Church, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1970. It must be noted, however, that this changed in 1986 when the Central MB Church began to define itself in terms of various "ministries", placing women's societies in the category of "Ministry of Missions." In this way the two women's societies in the church were recognized as a "ministry," on equal footing with the other "ministries" of the church. See the Handbook of the Central MB Church, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1986, p. 8.

That attempts were being made to recognize Mennonite women's societies was also evident in the visibility given to women's societies at the national level and the representation they were given on church boards and committees. In 1981, CWM was included for the first time in the installation service of new officers for the CMC at the annual conference,<sup>59</sup> and in 1982 the CWM president was asked to present the opening devotional to the Council of Boards meeting of the CMC.<sup>60</sup> These initiatives showed that the church recognized the women's society as an important arm of the church. But even more than this form of acknowledgement, Mennonite women's societies began to have representatives on church boards. CWM, at their request, received representation on several General Conference church boards for the first time in 1974: the Mennonite Biblical Seminary Board, the Commission for Home Ministries, the Commission on Education, and the Commission on Overseas Mission.<sup>61</sup> Representation on boards also occurred at the local level. For example, in 1980 the Harmony Hearts of United Mennonite Church in Black Creek, British Columbia, began to be represented on the church council.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1981), pp. 88-89.

<sup>60</sup> Anita Froese, Canadian Women in Mission President, "Opening Devotional-- Council of Boards."

<sup>61</sup> Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1974), p.79.

<sup>62</sup> Gay Wedel, "Harmony Hearts Report - 1980," Minutes, United Mennonite Church, Black Creek, British Columbia, 1980.

With the trend among Mennonite women's societies towards an increased emphasis on fellowship and spiritual growth; continued strength of a biblical orientation, support for missions, and meaningful worship experiences; and various concerted efforts by the church to include Mennonite women's societies in the official church structure, one would think that women's societies would continue to grow and flourish. Yet the 1970s and 1980s was also an era of questioning and decline for Mennonite women's societies, the seeds of which had been sown in the late 1960s.

#### ***D. Decline and Questioning***

After 1970, Mennonite women's societies began to experience a decline in membership and a certain amount of self-questioning. This section will begin by documenting the decline in membership and the efforts made to interest more women in joining Mennonite women's societies. Then we will discuss the self-questioning of women's societies and suggest several factors which may have contributed to this reality.

Whereas 102 Mennonite women's societies were organized between 1953 and 1969, only twenty-six additional societies were formed between 1970 and 1987.<sup>63</sup> Since younger women did not seem as interested in joining women's societies as they once had been, the earlier pattern of the establishment of additional women's groups in local churches as soon as younger women were married

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<sup>63</sup> See Table 5, Chapter III - The Flowering of Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada: 1953-1969.

began to break down in the 1970s, At the same time, existent members were aging and thus societies became smaller in size and some groups even discontinued to function.<sup>64</sup> For instance, in 1972 the Altona Mennonite Ladies Auxiliary reported--"There were only five or six members present at the annual meeting and it seemed rather difficult to get younger women interested in attending."<sup>65</sup> This phenomenon was noted at the General Conference level in 1980 in Gladys Goering's publication of a history of Mennonite women's societies in the United States and Canada--"It is of grave concern that many of its members are older women whose ranks are not being filled by younger ones."<sup>66</sup>

The fact that younger women no longer seemed to be attracted to women's societies was not unique to the Mennonite community. The president of the Montreal and Ottawa Conference of United Church Women indicated that in the 1980s, 90 percent of members were over the age of fifty and only 25 percent of younger women

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<sup>64</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 92; Jennifer Banman, "Osler Mennonite Church," unpublished paper, Religious Studies course at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba, April, 1982; Louise Enns, "Ladies Fellowship Groups, Clearbrook MB Church," in History of the Clearbrook Mennonite Brethren Church (1936-1986), p. 100; Rempel, History of BC Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976), p. 64; Mary Anne Reimer, "Mission Sisters' Report," Minutes, Niverville Mennonite Church, Niverville, Niverville, Manitoba, 1988, p. 15; Grace Loewen, "Ladies Fellowship Report," Minutes, Community Fellowship Mennonite Brethren, Newton, Manitoba, 1988; Katharina Thiessen, "Later Development of the Ladies' Circle," in A History of the First Mennonite Church, Greendale BC, p. 21; and Bethel Mennonite Church (1936-1980), p. 38.

<sup>65</sup> Froese, Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977), p. 19.

<sup>66</sup> Goering, Women in Search of Mission, pp. 117-118.

were involved.<sup>67</sup> The same was true in the Presbyterian Church; the vice-president of the Women's Missionary Society (Western Division) of the Presbyterian Church estimated that only 10 percent of Presbyterian women belonged to WMS groups in the late 1980s and that most members were over the age of fifty.<sup>68</sup>

Because younger women were not as eager to join Mennonite women's societies, attempts were made to integrate them. For instance, this seemed to be one of the factors responsible for the name change in 1975 from Canadian Women's Missionary Conference to Canadian Women in Mission,<sup>69</sup> a name which was meant to be inclusive of all women in the church--

Women were divided in their thinking about the women's missionary associations which were part of every denomination. Some thought the time had come for all separate organizations, both male and female, to be done away with. Others felt that women's organizations ought to be one means of helping all women achieve a greater church involvement, including those who were not members of their group.<sup>70</sup>

Efforts were also made to plan meetings and events which would interest younger women. In 1973 the Canadian Women's Conference of the CMC initiated a consultation on the biblical interpretation of the role of women with the hope that more younger women would become interested in joining Mennonite

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<sup>67</sup> Consultation with Daphne Craig, president of Montreal and Ottawa Conference of United Church Women, Gloucester, Ontario, 1988.

<sup>68</sup> Consultation with Joan Sampson.

<sup>69</sup> Hooge, The History of the Canadian Women in Mission (1952-1977), p. 28.

<sup>70</sup> Goering, Women in Search of Mission, p. 89.

women's societies.<sup>71</sup> The shift in some groups to discussion of social issues such as pornography, abortion, alcoholism, and child abuse,<sup>72</sup> was sometimes perceived as catering to the interests of younger women. This is alluded to in a talk given by the president of CWM in 1986 at the fiftieth anniversary of a local Mennonite women's society--

Once the highlight of the conference was the report of a returning missionary. Now the older members are often bewildered by the emphasis on peace and justice issues - TV advertising, child abuse, war toys, and other social issues.<sup>73</sup>

The fact that older members seemed bewildered indicates that the new emphasis on discussion of issues probably was not on their initiative, but rather at the instigation of younger women.

Along with the decline in membership came a general self-questioning of the usefulness of Mennonite women's societies. In 1976, the Ontario WMS voiced questions about their organizations--

In this day, when the validity and effectiveness of women's organizations are repeatedly questioned, we too are prompted to evaluate our activities of the past year in order to decide whether there is any justification in our monthly meetings in our respective

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<sup>71</sup> "Minutes of the 21st Canadian Women's Conference," Canadian Women in Mission, 7 July 1973.

<sup>72</sup> "Canadian Women in Mission 34th Annual Conference," in Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1986), pp. 98, 107; Anita Froese, Canadian Women in Mission President, Report, "From Anita's Desk (Report--1985)," 1985.

<sup>73</sup> Neufeld and Peters, Fifty Years: Ebenezer Verein, p. 59.

churches or in our joint meeting at the annual rally.<sup>74</sup>  
In Manitoba as well, the MB Women's Conference wondered about the place of women's societies as it pertained to Jesus' command, "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations" (Matt. 28:19)--

Where do we fit into this picture of 'Go ye'? The Lord gives this command to all Christians. You and I must find our place and get involved. Many changes have taken place in the past few years and more may take place in the future. Therefore it is very important that we as women's groups and as individuals find our involvement in today's world.<sup>75</sup>

While they did not specify which changes were taking place, they did hint at the necessity to rethink their activities and their response to Jesus' command. Other Mennonite women's societies were specific about what needed re-evaluation--

As society changes and the role of women evolves, so too will the activities and projects of the women's conference. Twenty-five years ago the work done by the WMA were projects of the hand--quilting, rolling bandages, knitting, etc. As we now have an urban professional group within our organization we have the capacity to be active in many new areas of social welfare, community involvement, speaking to social issues.<sup>76</sup>

While support for missions remained strong during this era, in some Mennonite women's societies, women began to question their traditional mode of service. In 1980, the president of a Mennonite women's society in First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon

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<sup>74</sup> Yearbook of the Forty-First Annual Provincial Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario, (n.p., 1972), p. 25.

<sup>75</sup> Tina Brown, "President's Report 1973," Women's Conference of Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1973.

<sup>76</sup> Hooge, The History of the Canadian Women in Mission (1952-1977), pp. 35-36.

said that she hoped that "as Women in Mission we will not only be busy with fund-raising, serving and sewing, but that there will be time to relate to the hurting and lonely and also to show love and caring for each other."<sup>77</sup> And the report of CWM president at the annual CWM conference in 1978 made reference to the same need to rethink former foci--

In the past few years we have seen needs change--it is no longer practical to send overseas many items such as clothing, layettes, soap, etc., and so it has become necessary to rethink some of our activities. At the same time I think we have also become more aware that sometimes it is more important to share of ourselves than to share our material wealth with people.<sup>78</sup>

Sources indicate that several groups no longer conducted mission sales nor did they cater for church related meals.<sup>79</sup> Responses to my survey, substantiating this trend, indicate that the practice of raising funds by offerings and donations instead of sales and catering, a practice which began in the 1950s and 1960s, continued and increased in popularity into the 1970s and 1980s.

In this era of self-questioning and decreasing interest in joining Mennonite women's societies, we would like to know the reasons for it. While we do not know the causes for decline, we can suggest factors which may have been contributed to this

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<sup>77</sup> Anita Froese, "From Anita's Desk (Report--1985)."

<sup>78</sup> Margaret Ewert, "President's Report to the Canadian Women in Mission 26th Annual Conference," Report, Canadian Women in Mission, 7 July 1978.

<sup>79</sup> Elizabeth Wall, "Missionary Prayer Band," Minutes, Central Mennonite Brethren Church, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1983, p. 3.

trend. In 1985, Lyle Schaller, editor of The Parish Paper, a small American publication of the Yokefellow Institute, briefly mentioned the reality of decline in participation in women's organizations, suggesting four possible reasons for their decline.<sup>80</sup> First, the decline could be due to the fact that more women were employed outside the home. Second, as church leadership positions became increasingly open to women, the women's society no longer needed to serve as women's primary outlet for service. Third, women's discretionary time began to be filled with other social and recreational opportunities. Thus, they no longer had time for women's society meetings. Fourth, the focus on support for missions seemed to attract more women than did an emphasis on fellowship and study.<sup>81</sup> In fact, as we shall discover, Mennonite women have themselves suggested all but Schaller's fourth reason for decline.

Our discussion of causes for decline among Mennonite women's societies is similar to Schaller's in that it will include his first three reasons, but it will differ in that it will suggest that the underlying cause for questioning lay in the issues raised by the women's movement. First, the emphasis on equality of women within society may have influenced the church to include more women in positions of leadership. This in turn, may have meant there was less need for a separate women's organization.

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<sup>80</sup> Lyle Schaller, "What happened to the women's fellowship?" The Parish Paper 14,9 (March 1985):1-2.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

Second, the Mennonite community, both inside and outside of women's societies, were beginning to discuss women's roles. This may have had an influence in the self-questioning within women's societies, societies which tended to perpetuate a support role for women. And third, Mennonite women, along with other women in society, were stepping outside of the home in greater numbers than before, as they entered educational institutions, found employment outside the home, and became involved in many other activities outside the home. All of these factors are related to issues of the women's movement which sought to give women equal opportunity for education, employment, and positions of leadership. Beginning with the first then, we will suggest that these factors may have had an influence on the decline and self-questioning of Mennonite women's societies.

While most CMC and MB Mennonite churches no longer adhered to the practice of Bruderschaft, in which only male members of the church could have a vote, men continued to hold the primary positions of leadership.<sup>82</sup> Women in the MB conference were more restricted than women in the CMC conference. In 1975, a resolution of the Canadian MB conference enabled women to serve as delegates to the Canadian MB conference, permitted women to sit on certain church boards and committees, but prohibited ordination of women to the pastoral ministry--

1. That the Canadian Conference of M.B. churches go on record as not favouring the ordination of women for the

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<sup>82</sup> See Chapter II - Historical Background and Establishment of Mennonite Women's Societies.

preaching and pastoral ministry nor their election to boards and offices whose work is of the nature of eldership, such as the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns and the Board of Reference and Counsel or its equivalent.

2. That the Canadian Conference declare women eligible to be elected as delegates to conferences and to church and conference boards and committees other than those referred to in recommendation 1.<sup>83</sup>

This was followed by another resolution in 1987 which encouraged women to participate in specified areas of ministry--"We encourage our churches to free and affirm women for ministries in the church, at home and abroad, in decision-making, evangelizing, teaching, counselling, encouragement, music, youth, visitation."<sup>84</sup> In the CMC conference, on the other hand, women could be ordained, and as early as 1974 a revised resolution on ordination emphasized that efforts should be made to eliminate barriers of race, class and sex.<sup>85</sup> This was followed in 1987 by a statement of inclusiveness in which the CMC conference committed itself "to a growing recognition of the ministering gifts of women in our congregations, institutions and conference structures," and "a growing sensitivity to our language, referring to our Christian community and our God, so that we do not implicitly exclude

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<sup>83</sup> 1975 Yearbook of the Sixty-Fifth Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America (Winnipeg: The Christian Press, 1975), p. 106.

<sup>84</sup> Don Ratzlaff, "General Conference Reports--Board of Reference and Counsel," Mennonite Brethren Herald 26,16 (28 August 1987):16.

<sup>85</sup> Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1974).

women.<sup>86</sup> In the same year, the position of president of the General Conference Mennonite Church was filled by a woman for the first time.<sup>87</sup>

Women were participating in decision making in the church to a greater extent than before--"We notice an increasing number of women participating actively in all areas of church and conference work."<sup>88</sup> By the mid-70s approximately one-third of delegates to the CMC Canadian conference were women.<sup>89</sup> As more women served as delegates to the CMC annual conference, they were unable to attend both the CMC conference and CWM business sessions, since they were held simultaneously. This realization contributed to the questioning of the usefulness of women's societies, addressed particularly in 1977 by the president of CWM--"Many of our women are delegates to the Conference Sessions. Do we still need to meet as women only? Should we continue to run parallel sessions . . . ? What is the future direction of

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<sup>86</sup> "On inclusiveness in our fellowship," Mennonite Reporter 17 (27 July 1987):18.

<sup>87</sup> Ron Rempel, "Florence Driedger appointed president of General Conference Mennonite Church," Mennonite Reporter 17 (30 March 1987):1-2. It should be noted that Driedger became president when the president died; a vote was taken to determine whether the board would allow a woman to serve as president.

<sup>88</sup> Hooge, The History of the Canadian Women in Mission (1952-1977), pp. 35-36.

<sup>89</sup> Yearbook: Canadian Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Canadian Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1974), p. 58.

Women in Mission?"<sup>90</sup> Here an inference was made that since a greater percentage of women were now delegates to the CMC, thereby participating in the church more fully, women's societies might no longer be necessary.

A second factor which may have contributed to decreasing interest in Mennonite women's societies was the awareness of women's issues, both within women's societies and within the Mennonite community generally. Some women's groups were beginning to discuss women's roles. Two groups in Saskatchewan studied a Christian feminist book, All We're Meant To Be--

We started a monthly morning Bible study in June, 1976. We're studying the book entitled, All We're Meant To Be, a biblical outlook to women's liberation. This has been a great blessing to all of us and we recommend this book to any women interested in a serious study of God's place for women in our world.<sup>91</sup>

We are studying the book All We're Meant To Be - a biblical approach to women's lib. This book is controversial but interesting - makes for good discussion.<sup>92</sup>

There are a few indications that women were also beginning to question traditional interpretations of biblical texts which had been used to support the subordination of women. One example is found in the address of Anna Ens to the Women in Mission Annual Conference in 1982--

We all know that there are texts that suggest subordination of women to men which have held us in

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<sup>90</sup> Hooge, The History of the Canadian Women in Mission (1952-1977), p. 30.

<sup>91</sup> Bartel, Saskatchewan Women in Mission, p. 21.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

bondage and that tend to hinder the implementation of God's purpose for unity and partnership in Christ's body, the church. As we have found clarity about other troublesome texts . . . so we can also find clarity about texts that, taken in isolation, on the surface suggest subjugation and silence on the part of women.<sup>93</sup>

Women were also beginning to realize that the auxiliary nature of women's societies could impede a desired mutuality between women and men--

Is WM recognized as an integral part of the Canadian Conference? Or must WM continue a separate existence, remain an auxiliary? Must WM be dissolved to make room for greater mutuality and partnership in the Conference?<sup>94</sup>

The same question was raised in a 1978 issue of the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society Report, an issue which dealt exclusively with the perceived value of Mennonite women's societies.<sup>95</sup> Mennonite women's groups had been requested to indicate whether there had been a drop in participation and to reflect upon the usefulness of their organization. The following questions were to guide their thinking--

Are they (women's organizations) able to appeal to the majority of church women? Is the zeal to proclaim the Gospel to all the world still present? If not, what has replaced it? Have church women's organizations allowed themselves to become a church within a church, happy with the fellowship and worship taking place there? Should organizations continue to serve as an auxiliary organization or has the time come to think of

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<sup>93</sup> Anna Ens, "Leadership: Christ our Model," Canadian Women in Mission 30th Conference, 3 July 1982.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society Report 18 (February 1978):1-7.

disbanding and working together with the others?<sup>96</sup>

When it was published, the editorial, "Focus on the Auxiliary Syndrome," explored the meaning of "auxiliary," defining it as "a helpful but 'outside' contribution to the central core of the church. 'Help' means giving of oneself to complete or supplement another's work, task or responsibility."<sup>97</sup> The editor noted that Mennonite women, including leaders in Mennonite women's organizations, "have been struggling against this auxiliary image and beginning to claim full membership in the church community, a role which includes shared involvement in setting priorities and in decision-making with regard to the entire church's ministries."<sup>98</sup> Without the "auxiliary" then, women could be full members of the church.

But this was not the stance of all Mennonite women. While some women's groups felt the women's movement should be taken seriously,<sup>99</sup> others reacted against it. In 1978, a female speaker at the South Saskatchewan MB Women's Auxiliary meeting, asserted that "any lady thinking she needs to be liberated needed to hear these ladies share how they are liberated in the Lord."<sup>100</sup> Some

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<sup>96</sup> Letter from Katie Funk Wiebe to the leaders of women's organizations in General Conference churches, 1977.

<sup>97</sup> MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society Report, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Anna Ens, "Leadership: Christ our Model."

<sup>100</sup> South Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren Ladies Auxiliary, Minutes.

women's groups became conscious of using inclusive language, others opposed it. In 1985, the CWM president quoted a familiar hymn of the church, but changed its wording to include women--"I bind my soul this day--to the person far away, And the person near at hand; in this town and in this land."<sup>101</sup> (In the original hymn the word "person" is actually "brother.") A few women's society reports referred to their leader as "chairperson."<sup>102</sup> At the same time, other groups opposed inclusive language.<sup>103</sup> Thus, Mennonite women's societies were mixed in their reaction to feminist issues.

Not only were issues of women's equality raised within Mennonite women's societies, they also were discussed within the broader church context in church periodicals and at conferences. Here as well, the women's movement was referred to in both negative and positive lights. Marie K. Wiens in "Full Church Citizenship for Women?" advocated a more active role for women in the church, but at the same time made it clear that her viewpoint was not due to "any women's lib tendencies, but because of a

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<sup>101</sup> Anita Froese, "From Anita's Desk (Report--1985)."

<sup>102</sup> Donna Smith, "Women Alive Report," Minutes, Central Mennonite Brethren Church, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1979, p. 10 and Elly Redekopp, "Ladies Sewing Circles," in Virgil MB Church (1937-1987), ed. Helen Reimer Bergmann (n.p., 1987), p. 60..

<sup>103</sup> This is evident in the effort made by Mennonite women to reverse the prior CMC conference decision and change the use of "chairperson" back to "chairman." See Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1982).

deepening awareness of the church's meaning in our lives."<sup>104</sup> Luetta Reimer, on the other hand, tried to clarify misunderstandings about the Women's Liberation Movement in "A Christian Response to the Women's Liberation Movement" stating that "the general spirit of equality, justice, and personal dignity promoted by the movement is clearly compatible with Christ's teachings on human relationships."<sup>105</sup> In 1973, the Mennonite Reporter carried a four part series on the role of women.<sup>106</sup> While one article in the series warned the Christian community to "avoid the traps of the radical women's liberation movement," another referred to the "consequence of generations of subtle suppression in the church," and a third discussed the issue of sexist language.<sup>107</sup> In a 1976 article on a male perspective of feminism, a husband of a feminist woman asserted that Christian feminism was liberating for both women and men.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Marie K. Wiens, "Full Church Citizenship for Women?" Mennonite Brethren Herald 12,9 (4 May 1973):18.

<sup>105</sup> Luetta Reimer, "A Christian Response to the Women's Liberation Movement," Direction III,1 (April 1974):172.

<sup>106</sup> Ruth Klaassen, "The role of women (1): Keeping up with our Anabaptist sisters," Mennonite Reporter 3 (5 February 1973):7; Mary Regehr Dueck, "The role of women (2): In church 'people' means 'men'," Mennonite Reporter 3 (19 March 1973):7; Mary Regehr Dueck, "The role of women (3): Young maidens dare not prophesy," Mennonite Reporter 3 (2 April 1973):7; and Patty Shelly, "The role of women (4): The language must be changed," Mennonite Reporter 4 (16 April 1973):7.

<sup>107</sup> Klaassen, "The role of Women (1)," Dueck, "The role of women (3)," and Shelly, "The role of women (4)."

<sup>108</sup> John F. Peters, "Christian feminism: A husband's perspective," Mennonite Reporter 6 (20 September 1976):7.

During this time period, both the CMC and the MB churches raised the issue of inclusive language. Since 1980 the chair of the CMC was referred to as "chairperson."<sup>109</sup> In 1983, one of the workshops held at the annual CMC conference discussed the issues of female church leadership, female images of God, and sexist language.<sup>110</sup> In the MB community, a resolution at the 1981 Canadian conference urged members to "avoid using sexist language that offends."<sup>111</sup> While it recognized "that the language of scripture reflects the patriarchal societies in which the Bible emerged," the resolution also concluded that "brother" included sister and those who use this language should not be accused of being "anti-feminist."<sup>112</sup> Two years later the writer of the regular column, "Personal Opinion," in the Mennonite Brethren Herald, defended the generic use of "man," urging readers to "speak and write correctly" and "above all, let us not misuse words and thus tamper with the Word." He ridiculed "women's liberationists" saying--"let the uninformed faddists do their thing."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1980), p. 88.

<sup>110</sup> Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1983).

<sup>111</sup> Yearbook of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1981), p. 47.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> John H. Redekop, "Sexist Language," Mennonite Brethren Herald 22,22 (2 December 1983):12.

Exegetical papers appeared in church periodicals on interpretation of biblical texts which had been interpreted as restrictive for women. Positions of Mennonite biblical scholars ranged from advocating continued restriction to suggesting freedom for women to use all their gifts in the church.<sup>114</sup> On the one hand, writers stressed "abiding biblical principles" and on the other, "passing cultural elements which may have occasioned the teachings (of the New Testament)."<sup>115</sup> Their revised interpretation of texts which formerly had been read as restrictive, opened up new avenues for women in the church--

women should be encouraged and feel free to use the gifts God has given them to build the church . . . This includes mission work, counselling, teaching Sunday School, preaching, teaching in our denominational schools, participation in Bible studies, voting, being convention representatives and board members.<sup>116</sup>

But the same writers were quick to add that Pauline restrictions,

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<sup>114</sup> John E. Toews, "The Role of Women in the Church: The Pauline Perspective," Direction IX,1 (January 1980):34; Howard Loewen, "The Pauline View of Woman," Direction VI (October 1977):18; Allen R. Guenther and Herbert Swartz, "The Role of Women in the Church," Mennonite Brethren Herald 12,9 (4 May 1973):4-9; and David Ewert, "The Place of the Woman in the Church," General Conference Study Conference Paper, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, May 1980, pp. 88-109.

<sup>115</sup> Guenther and Swartz, "The Role of Women in the Church," pp. 4-9.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9. Both Old and New Testaments are quoted to affirm the equality of men and women. Positive reference is made to Hannah, Rebecca, Anna, Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Mary, Mary Magdalene, Susanna, Joanna, Philip's daughters, Priscilla, and Phoebe. Gal. 3:26-28 is interpreted as a statement of the principle of equality. The so called restrictive texts (I Cor. 11:2-16; 14:33-36; I Tim. 2:8-15) are analyzed at length with the conclusion that these texts related to a particular cultural context.

applied to today's culture, meant women should not accept "any militant espousal of 'women's lib,' any disruption of the marriage relationship in the name of freedom and equality."<sup>117</sup>

In the 1970s MB women began to question existent interpretations of biblical texts. Katie Funk Wiebe emphasized the need "to disentangle biblical teaching from cultural accretions," stating that

(w)omen in Mennonite churches will not always sit outside the inner circle of church life. The gap between what they can do and what they are allowed to do will disappear. The church will not always be afraid to give women the opportunity to develop full use of their talents of love, concern, intellect, spiritual and special skills. They will not always be considered second class citizens in the kingdom of God.<sup>118</sup>

In a five part series entitled "God's Word: To Women as to Men," Hedy L. Martens examined both the original languages and cultural contexts of scriptures which had limited women's role in the church (Eph. 5:22; I Pet. 3:1; I Cor. 11, 14; I Tim. 2; Gen. 2:18), concluding that in the Christian church men and women are called equally to mutual submissiveness.<sup>119</sup> (Martens was later criticized for "twisting scripture" and liberating women beyond what women desire.)<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "Woman's Freedom--The Church's Necessity," Direction 1,3 (July 1972):82.

<sup>119</sup> Hedy L. Martens, "God's Word: To Women as to Men," Direction V,1 (January 1976):11-25.

<sup>120</sup> Shirley Bergen, "Not True to Life," and Dave Loewen, "Freedom through Submission," Mennonite Brethren Herald 15,9 (30 April 1976):8,9; Rudy Bartel, "Somewhat Uneasy," Mennonite

Thus we see that issues arising from the women's movement did make inroads into both the CMC and MB churches. On the one hand, women were encouraged to become more actively involved in the church structure, taking positions for which they were gifted, but on the other hand, they remained restricted because of interpretations of so called restrictive biblical texts.

A third factor which may have contributed to the decline of Mennonite women's societies was the greater tendency in these years for Mennonite women to take initiative in activities outside of the circle of home and church--continuing education, employment outside the home, and volunteer work in other organizations. In 1980, Gladys Goering referred to the effect of employment of women outside the home--"Employment of women outside their homes is a factor affecting mission groups that must be considered, as is the need of workers to keep what few hours that remain a family affair."<sup>121</sup> CMC groups also referred to these factors in their reports--

The fact that many women were in the workforce, had families perhaps taught Sunday School, or served on church committees, made it more of a challenge to interest women in the Wednesday evening fellowship where they would gather to quilt, roll bandages, plan programs, or attend meetings.<sup>122</sup>

Times have changed. The majority of us (approximately two-thirds) are working outside the home. Most are involved in intensive church work in addition to career

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Brethren Herald 15,10 (14 May 1976):9.

<sup>121</sup> Goering, Women in Search of Mission, pp. 117-118.

<sup>122</sup> Toews, South Western Ontario Women in Mission (1925-1987), p. 33.

and home responsibilities. We are constantly having to redefine our goals, priorities, and boundaries of service. We find we want to help in Verein work but energy and time are beginning to be a problem.<sup>123</sup>

In recent years, we have found it more difficult to meet regularly as many ladies have become involved in full-time and part-time occupations outside of the home. However, we feel our commitment to service as women in mission has not diminished if we consider the diverse interests and involvements of our Verein members. Firstly, we are ladies who are busy as Sunday School teachers, Girls' Club workers, pianists, organists, handbell ringers, choir directors, and librarians. We serve on various church committees locally, as well as at the conference level; we assist in the operation of the Cancer Society, Canadian Food Grains Bank, the South Essex Community Council, and the Candy Stripper program at the Home.<sup>124</sup>

Many young women with families work part-time or full time; . . . they have evening activities including study courses, or 'going out' entertainment; . . . It seems the social need the Verein once provided is not there anymore. New groups do not happen spontaneously. . . . Some members express a lack of enthusiasm and motivation in their groups and they are discouraged. The nomination committee has difficulty finding women willing to serve on the executive. The attendance at our Women in Mission conference meetings has decreased.<sup>125</sup>

There have been many changes in the twenty-one years that have passed . . . many of the ladies were farmers' wives at first; since then many husbands have changed their professions and the ladies too have joined the ranks of the various professions, such as nurses, secretaries, teaching, and business ventures, besides all being homemakers.<sup>126</sup>

A representative of the MB Missions and Service Board noted this

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>126</sup> Fiss, The Story of Women in Mission (Southwest Ontario), p. 39.

phenomenon among MB women's organizations as well--

Working women, women going back to school to get more education, more community and church involvement--these are affecting attendance and attitudes toward WMS. Is WMS in trouble? Perhaps. More likely WMS is in the process of changing. How to change, which direction to take, defining the purpose of a WMS today, wondering whether younger women will carry on what has been done so far--these questions are being discussed and must receive attention.<sup>127</sup>

The tendency of Mennonite women to enter the work force, pursue higher education and generally become more involved in activities outside the home may have been a function of both the trend for Mennonites to become more acculturated to society<sup>128</sup> and the influence of the women's movement which freed women to make their own choices for education and career.

The realization of the reality of questioning and decline among Mennonite women's societies raises the question--what kept them alive as viable societies? When we examine the sources, we see that Mennonite women felt their societies were still valuable even though numbers were decreasing and the future of women's societies seemed uncertain--

Today there is an uneasiness and uncertainty among those inside and outside of Women in Mission circles. What lies ahead for Women in Mission? Is WM still essential in church and conference structure? . . . And then when the annual reports come in and I read of all the community and church activities, the interest and support for missions and all the extra dollars that

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<sup>127</sup> Marie K. Wiens, "No national organization," MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society Report 18 (February 1978):6.

<sup>128</sup> See Driedger, Mennonite Identity in Conflict and Hamm, Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren.

flow into church and conference coffers as a result of the work and talents of our 4,000 plus members across Canada, I remain convinced that Women in Mission have a role to fulfil in the future of our Total Kingdom work.<sup>129</sup>

Just because women were encouraged to use their gifts more freely in the church didn't necessarily mean that women felt comfortable doing so--

Until that day comes when everyone feels free to serve on a congregational level, in the capacities of wherever those talents lie, our church structures will continue to suffer from malnutrition because of the rich resources that are being tapped only by our women's organizations.<sup>130</sup>

It is clear that some women in women's societies did not even want to have leadership positions in the church--

For many of our Christian women the lack of female leadership in the church has been no problem. They appeared content to leave the duties and leadership of religious and public life to men and did not give the matter further thought. They would never have seen themselves as deprived, unliberated or in bondage.<sup>131</sup>

In defense of a support role for women, one woman, responding to an article in the Mennonite Reporter which claimed that women's societies were exploited by the church, argued that they were not exploited--Mennonite women willingly served the church by raising money for its projects and by "pouring coffee."<sup>132</sup> The fact that

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<sup>129</sup> Anita Froese, CWM President, "Reflections," Report, Canadian Women in Mission, 1987.

<sup>130</sup> Joan Wiebe, "Forum for leadership development," MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society Report 18 (February 1978):4.

<sup>131</sup> Anna Ens, "Leadership: Christ our Model."

<sup>132</sup> Lydia Kehler, "Troubled about 'Women's lib' discussion," Mennonite Reporter 4,3 (4 February 1974):7.

women remained content in support roles is not surprising, since women did not have role models of female leadership and were cautioned by the church against "taking our models for the husband/wife relationship and for the place of the woman in the church from the current feminist movement."<sup>133</sup> In addition, the church seemed to give women mixed messages about their expected role. As we have noted, on the one hand they were encouraged to use their gifts in the church, but on the other hand, they were restricted from leadership positions. Endorsement was given to the continued relevance of I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2 "which put restrictions on the Christian woman," while at the same time churches were encouraged "to draw upon the spiritual resources found in our sisters for various ministries" including "participation in local church and conference ministries, if the local church so chooses."<sup>134</sup> Thus, although Mennonite women's societies were undergoing a time of questioning and decline, many Mennonite women still considered involvement through women's societies to be the best way to use their gifts in the church.

In this chapter we have identified three dynamics within Mennonite women's societies during this time period--the shift toward fellowship and spiritual growth; a continued emphasis on biblically motivated service and worship experiences; and a decreasing interest in membership. Some women who were

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<sup>133</sup> Yearbook of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1981, p. 46.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

comfortable in their roles within women's societies and felt that through them they had a significant place within the church, resisted fundamental change; other women who found new opportunities for involvement in church and society seemed to vote with their feet, questioning the usefulness of women's societies and becoming disinterested in belonging to them.

In the final chapter, we will identify the characteristics of women's societies which were still thriving in the Mennonite community in Canada in 1988. An analysis of responses to my survey will help to determine which aspects of Mennonite women's societies continued to remain part of their identity, which trends were still evident in 1988, and what participation in women's societies meant for Mennonite women.

## Chapter V - Mennonite Women's Societies in 1988

In the study of Canadian Mennonite women's societies thus far, their development has been traced from the time of their emergence in the late 1800s through to 1987. We saw that right from the beginning of their establishment, Mennonite women's societies, motivated by the biblical text, provided a context within which Mennonite women could serve God. We suggested that these women might have been participating in their own parallel church. We followed their growth during the years when they flourished, both in numbers and in programs, but noting as well the first signs of self-questioning. In the last chapter we discussed significant trends within Mennonite women's societies between 1970 and 1987, including the shift to an emphasis on fellowship, spiritual growth and Bible study. We noted as well those aspects in which Mennonite women's societies remained the same as in previous years--they continued to be biblically motivated, conducted their meetings in the same way, and continued to find significant meaning in membership. We also noted signs of decline. In this chapter we will present a "snapshot" of Mennonite women's societies as they were in 1988.

Until now, we have examined Mennonite women's societies in larger blocks of time. The evidence, both of a general and specific nature, has shown that certain trends could be corroborated by a variety of sources. In this chapter, the data collection survey instrument allows us to hear from women themselves about their experience within Mennonite women's

societies at a set point in time, 1988. An analysis of survey responses will enable us to test whether what we discovered about Mennonite women's societies in previous years remained part of their reality in 1988. First, we will test whether the key dimensions that gave Mennonite women's societies their identity when they were first established still remain part of them. Did they still maintain a biblically based service orientation? Did the worship ritual remain constant? Second, through survey responses, we will be able to ascertain whether in fact the trends which we saw developing between 1953 and 1987 were mentioned by women who completed surveys in 1988. Did they continue to emphasize fellowship? Was decreasing interest still prevalent? Third, we will ask how the meaning of participation in women's societies may have changed for Mennonite women by 1988. Some groups have maintained similar foci as in previous years and others have decidedly changed their focus or have discontinued. In this final chapter we will show how the data from the survey confirms the trends described in the previous chapters and point out those indicators which suggest new realities which might guide the continued evolution of Mennonite women's societies in the future.

### ***A. Continuity of Past Identity***

Based on information gathered from the survey as well as minutes and reports of society meetings, it is clear that in some aspects the identity of Mennonite women's societies in 1988

remained the same as it had been at the time of their emergence in Canada. A strong orientation of service to others, a primary focus of Mennonite women's societies at the time of their establishment in Canada, prevailed. Biblical texts still informed their identity and motivation in 1988, and components of their meetings remained essentially the same as they had always been.

### 1. A Service Orientation

Survey respondents were asked to indicate, from a list of service opportunities, in which areas their groups were involved. These included--raising money for foreign missions, visiting nursing homes, participating in World Day of Prayer, working in MCC self help stores,<sup>1</sup> raising money for MCC, raising money for home missions, supplying furnishings for the local church, and a category for other areas of involvement. Ninety-seven percent of CMC groups and 94 percent of MB groups specified their areas of involvement. A subsequent question asked women to indicate which projects were most important for their group. This was answered by 79 percent of CMC and 72 percent of MB groups. While survey results indicated that women's societies supported all these projects to one degree or another, the following graph indicates

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, stores operated by MCC were set up in numerous cities and towns across Canada in order to sell the handwork of people in developing countries as well as used clothing. These were staffed by volunteers from Mennonite churches, invariably by Mennonite women who were members of Mennonite women's societies.

which projects emerged as most important for women's groups. The percentages given in this and all subsequent graphs are based on the number of women who answered each survey question.

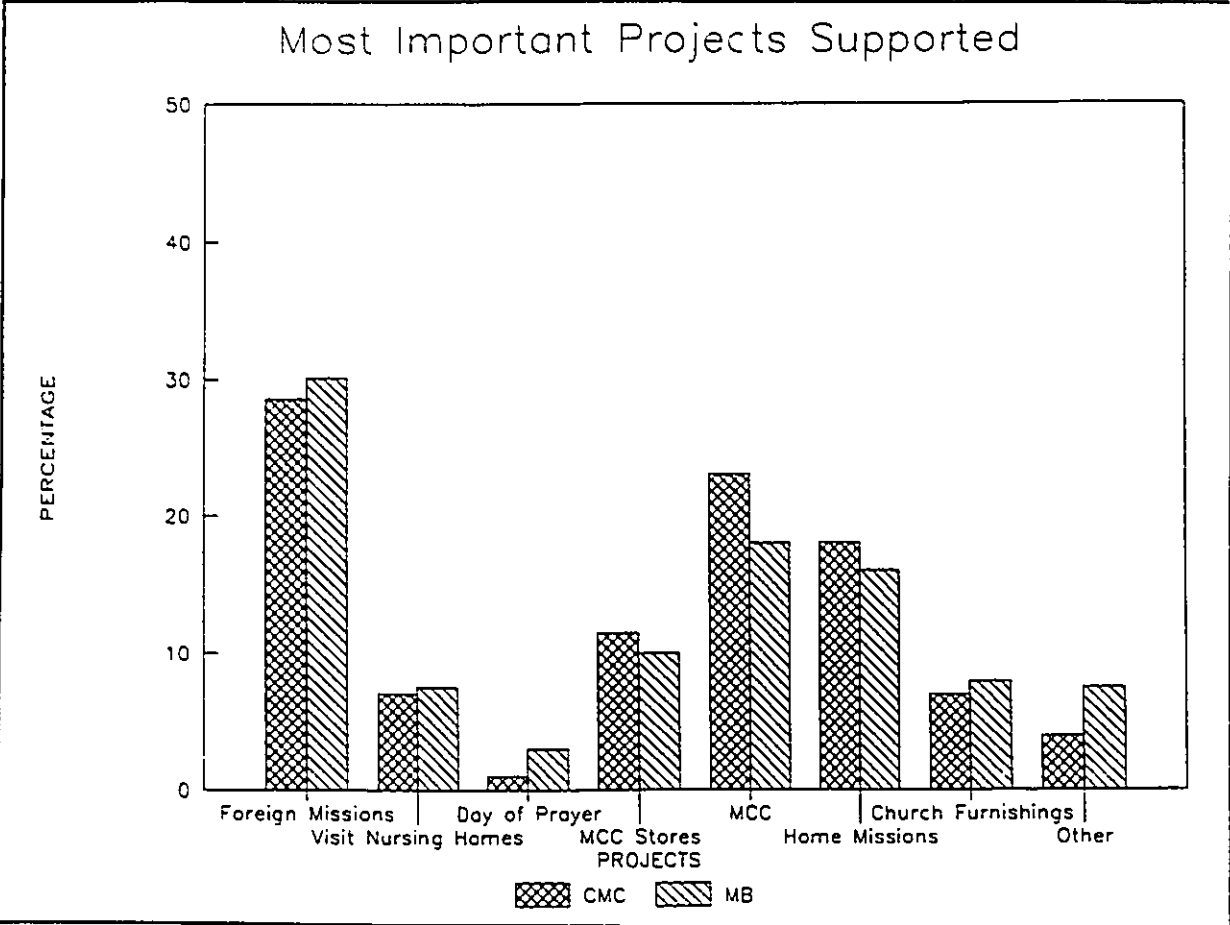


Figure 1

The graph shows that, consistent with priorities of women's groups in the past, support for foreign missions, home missions and MCC remained the most important avenues of service for Mennonite women. These areas were mentioned as priorities by 81 percent of CMC Mennonite women's societies and 74 percent of MB women's groups. Less than 10 percent of societies identified

visiting nursing homes, supporting the World Day of Prayer, or supplying furnishings for the local church as the most important priorities of service. The 10 percent of CMC women's society responses and 7.5 percent of MB responses in the "other" category primarily had to do with ministering to the sick within the local church and participating in community outreach opportunities such as food hampers for the needy. Thus, survey results pointed to a continued service orientation within Mennonite women's societies in 1988. Not only did this remain part of their identity, so did their emphasis on biblical texts as motivation for service, as discussed in the next section.

## 2. Biblical Motivation for Service

Respondents were asked to name biblical texts that served as mottos for the group or informed their group's purpose and choice of projects. Forty MB groups (56 percent) and seventy-nine CMC groups (69 percent) identified Biblical texts. The following table shows the distribution of biblical texts according to denomination.

Table 14  
Biblical Texts Identified by Women's Societies<sup>2</sup>

Texts	Percentage CMC Societies	Percentage MB Societies
Texts with a service orientation	36.5%	32.5%
Texts linking service to working for God	36.5%	42.5%
Texts referring to spiritual growth	23%	20%
Texts on human relationships	4%	5%
TOTAL	100%	100%

That Mennonite women in 1988 still found their impetus for service from the Bible is evident in the number of references to biblical texts about service to others. Seventy-three percent of biblical texts cited by CMC societies and 75 percent of MB texts referred to service (including texts with a service orientation and texts linking service to working for God). The most frequently quoted text, Gal. 6:9,10, was mentioned eighteen

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<sup>2</sup> Biblical texts cited in survey responses were analyzed inductively. Texts which simply referred to service, without making any connections between service and God were included in the designation "Texts with a service orientation." An example is Pro. 31:20--"She extends her hand to the poor; and she stretches out her hands to the needy." The second category in Table 15, "Texts linking service to work for God," includes texts such as Ps. 100:2--"Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful singing." "Texts referring to spiritual growth" included such texts as Phil. 4:4--"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." In the last category, "Texts on human relationships," were those such as Matt. 25:23--"Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the law and the prophets."

times--

And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.<sup>3</sup>

Col. 3:16-17 was quoted six times--

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the father.

I Cor. 3:9 was mentioned five times as a motto--"for we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building". Other texts chosen refer to "supplying the needs of the saints" (II Cor. 9:12); "deeds of kindness and charity" (Acts 9:36); "serving one another" (I Pet. 4:10); and being "generous and ready to share" (I Tim. 6:18). Not only did Mennonite women choose texts which mentioned service, they also chose those which linked service to doing a work of God or for God--"serve the Lord" (Ps. 100:2); "do your work heartily as for the Lord" (Col. 3:23); "serve him (God) in sincerity and truth" (Josh. 24:14); and "always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15:58).

The fact that 27 percent of texts chosen by CMC women's societies and 25 percent by MB societies did not refer to service but rather to the spiritual life and human relationships may be

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<sup>3</sup> Biblical texts are from the Revised Standard Version which does not use inclusive language. Even in 1988, the majority of Mennonite women will have felt included in male exclusive language.

an indication of the trend in Mennonite women's societies to emphasize spiritual growth and fellowship, which we noted in the previous chapter. However, biblical texts referring to service still predominated in 1988. Thus, we can conclude that the biblical text still informed their commitment to service. Texts chosen show that they continued to believe that their work was done as service for God. And now we turn to the third and last aspect of Mennonite women's societies that seemed to remain constant through the years--the components of society meetings.

### 3. Components of Mennonite Women's Society Meetings

The survey listed ten possible components of society meetings--Scripture reading,<sup>4</sup> prayer, singing, Bible studies,<sup>5</sup> devotionals,<sup>6</sup> study of religious books, offering,<sup>7</sup> eating, crafts, discussion of issues, and a category for other elements. Respondents were asked to indicate which of these formed part of their gatherings. They could check as many items as pertained to their group. All women's societies answered this question. Table 15 shows the percentage of CMC and MB groups that indicated their meetings contained the components listed in the survey.

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<sup>4</sup> Scripture reading is reading texts from the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> These are systematic studies of biblical texts.

<sup>6</sup> Devotionals are talks with religious content and for Mennonites are usually based on biblical texts.

<sup>7</sup> This is the opportunity during the meeting to contribute of one's financial resources.

Table 15

Components of Meetings of Mennonite Women's Societies

Components of Meetings	Percentage CMC Societies	Percentage MB Societies
Scripture Reading	92%	86%
Prayer	96%	99%
Singing	88%	77%
Devotional	83%	81%
Offering	88%	90%
Eating	91%	80%
Discussion of Issues	74%	50%
Bible Studies	30%	57%
Crafts	41%	26%
Study Religious Books	15%	19%
Other <sup>a</sup>	54%	47%

From Table 15 we can see that scripture reading, prayer, singing, a devotional, offering and eating were mentioned by more than 75

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<sup>a</sup> Only 22 percent of responses in the "other" category qualified for components of meetings. These included quilting, sharing concerns, and hearing guest speakers. The remaining responses fell into the area of projects supported and included support for MCC and catering for church meals.

percent of both CMC and MB women's groups.<sup>9</sup> When we examine the format of worship services of the Mennonite church, we discover that most of these elements are also important components of the Mennonite Sunday worship service, which usually includes prayers, scripture reading, singing, a sermon and an offering. (Eating together as a community is also important to the larger church, periodically occurring in the form of potlucks or church suppers.) Therefore, meetings of Mennonite women's societies still seemed to be similar to local church services.

So far in our "snapshot" of Mennonite women's societies in 1988, we have noted the ways in which they remained consistent with their initial identity. They have kept a service orientation based on the biblical text and their worship meetings have continued to contain the same primary components they always had. We now turn to discuss those aspects of Mennonite women's societies which we noted as trends in Chapters III and IV, in order to see how these have played themselves out within Mennonite women's societies in 1988.

## ***B. Continuing Trends***

We noted in Chapter III that in the 1960s women's groups began to change their names to names denoting fellowship, with MB women's societies doing so to a somewhat greater extent than CMC

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<sup>9</sup> Discussion of issues, Bible studies, crafts, studying of religious books, and other elements noted in the "other" category were mentioned by less than 75 percent of women's groups.

women's societies. We wondered, then, whether this indicated a trend to an emphasis on fellowship and whether this would continue in the future. In the previous chapter an examination of statements of purpose and naming showed that indeed this was the case. In this section we will discuss the evidence of a fellowship emphasis in women's groups in 1988. Besides this we will examine the trends to raise money through donations and the decline of Mennonite women's societies, both of which we have already mentioned in chapters III and IV. First then, the shift to a fellowship emphasis, evident both in naming and statements of purpose will be discussed.

### 1. The Trend to Emphasize Fellowship

An examination of the names of Mennonite women's societies can give us an indication of the extent to which fellowship was emphasized. All survey respondents identified the name of their group. For the purpose of analysis, names were divided into eight categories, denoting either mission, aid, fellowship, biblical names, a combination of fellowship and biblical names, a combination of fellowship and mission, a combination of biblical names and mission, or a designation other than those listed on the survey. As the following graph indicates, the trend to name themselves as fellowship groups was more evident in MB groups than in CMC groups, with 50 percent of MB names denoting fellowship, compared to 20 percent of CMC names.

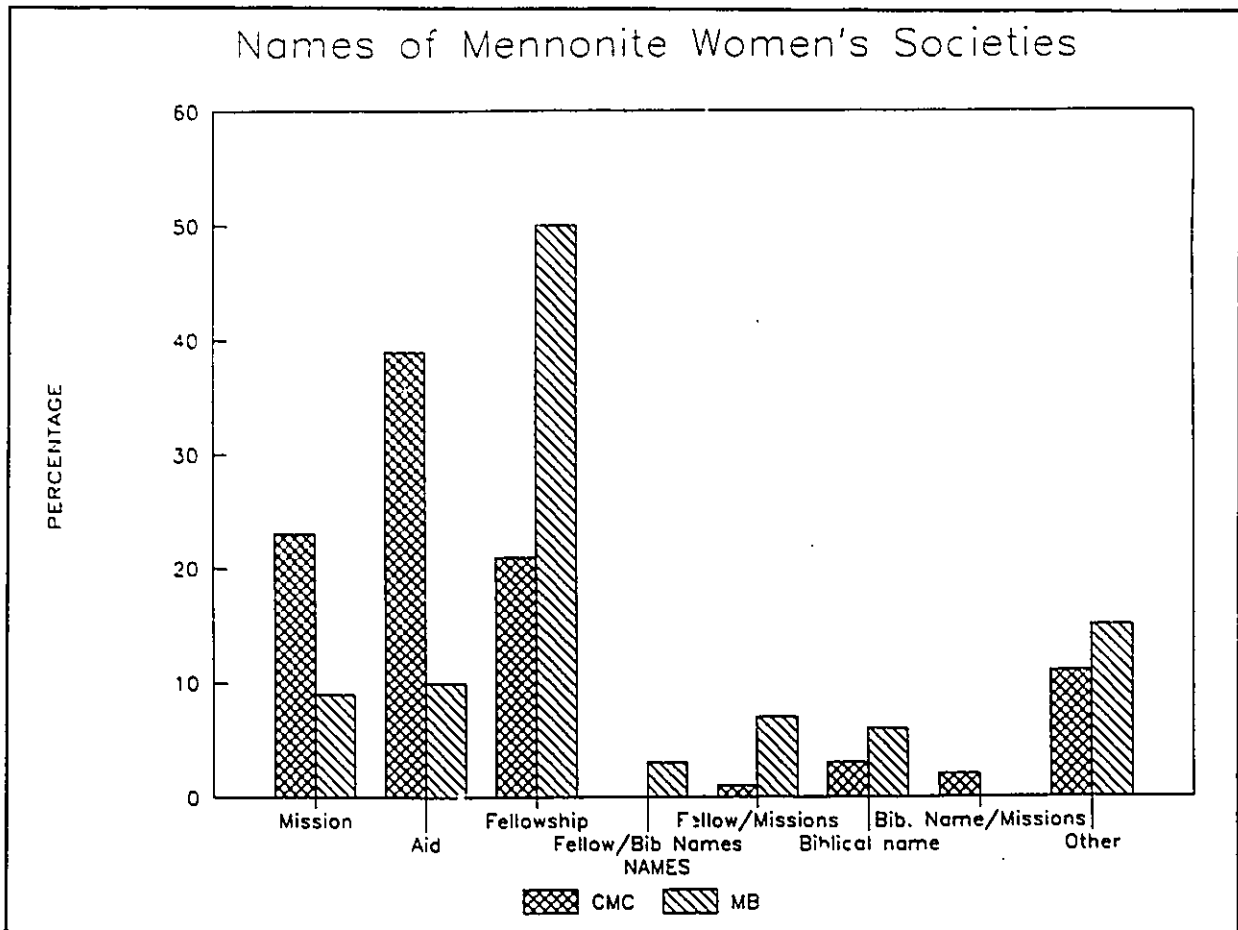


Figure 2

On the other hand 62 percent of CMC groups compared to only 19 percent of MB groups identified themselves as mission or aid societies. Thus, naming in 1988 indicates a greater incidence among MB women's societies of names denoting fellowship and among CMC women's societies of names exemplifying service.<sup>10</sup> An examination of stated purposes of Mennonite women's societies will help to determine whether in fact MB women's groups

<sup>10</sup> As the graph indicates, a small percentage of names were combinations of fellowship, Biblical names, missions, or aid. Names in the "other" category included names such as Homemakers, Study Group, Feminine Focus, Church Women, Harmony Hearts, Love and Light Ladies, and Evergreen Circle.

emphasized fellowship more than CMC groups.

The survey requested Mennonite women's societies to indicate the purposes of their groups. Five were suggested--fellowship, friendship and support; service to the local church; discussion of contemporary issues of particular interest to women; evangelism; and missions. The survey asked societies to rank their group's purposes according to order of importance. If groups had purposes other than those listed, they could specify it in a sixth category, "other." All groups responded to this question. The following graph shows all the purposes with which women's groups identified.

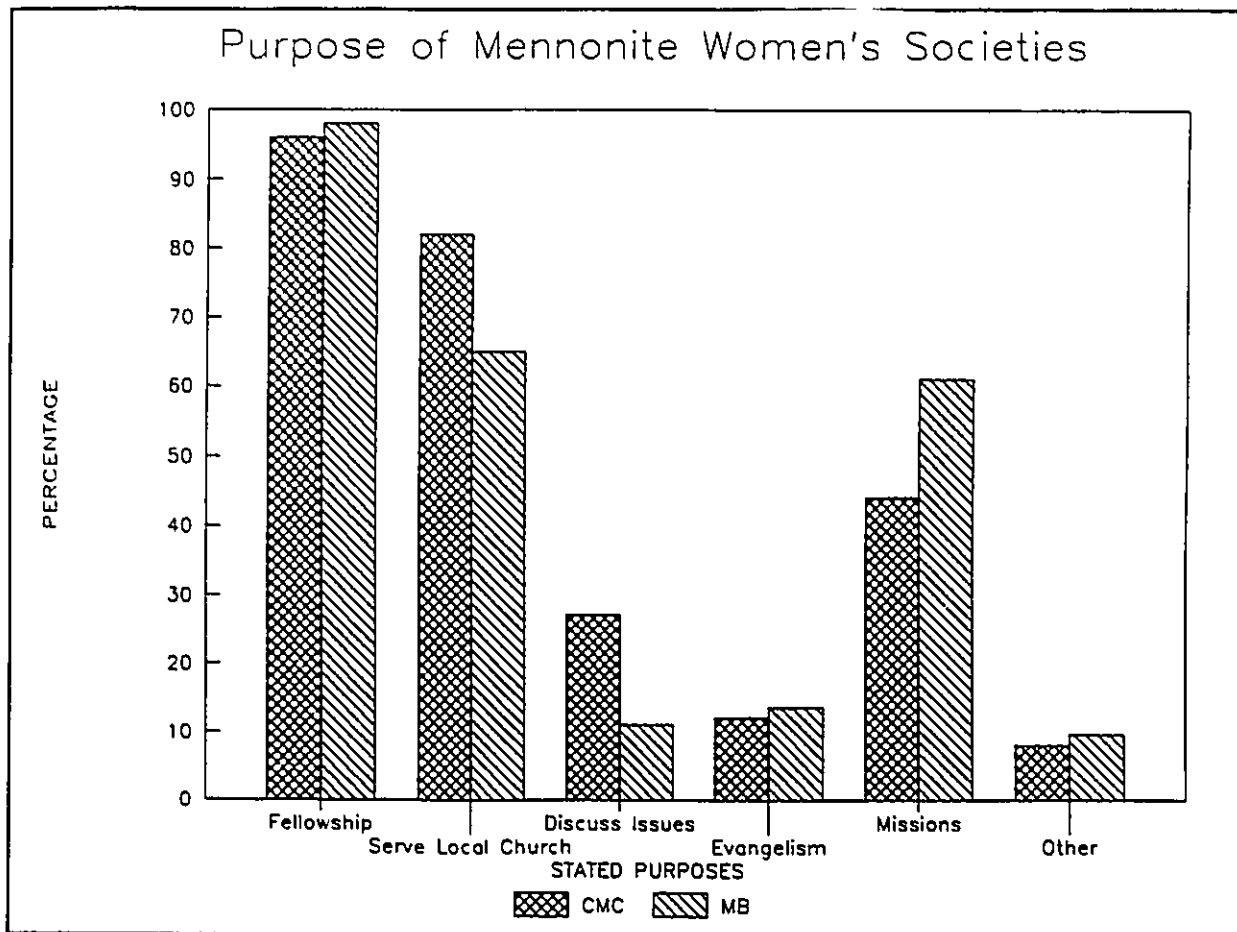


Figure 3

Fellowship emerged as the most frequently mentioned group purpose with 96 percent of CMC and 98 percent of MB women's societies stating it as a purpose of their society. Eighty-two percent of CMC and 65 percent MB groups saw service to the local church as important functions of their group; 41 percent of CMC and 61 percent of MB groups said that missions was an important group focus. Thus, even though in naming, MB women's societies more frequently called their groups fellowship groups, when asked to state their groups' purposes, CMC women's societies mentioned fellowship almost as frequently as did MB societies. Where a

difference emerged however, was in the prioritization of purposes. Figures 4 and 5 indicate first, second, and third priorities of purpose for CMC and MB women's societies.

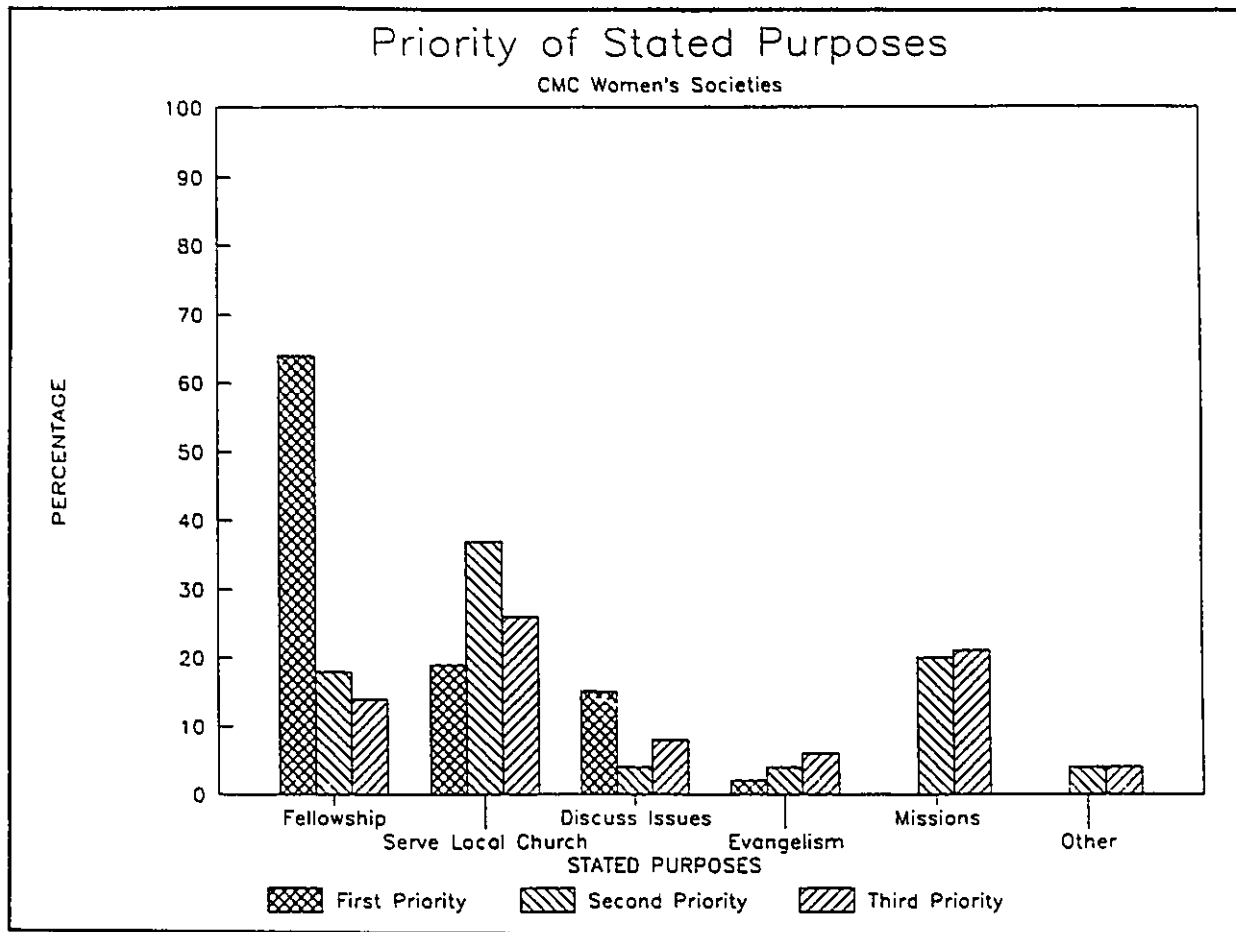


Figure 4

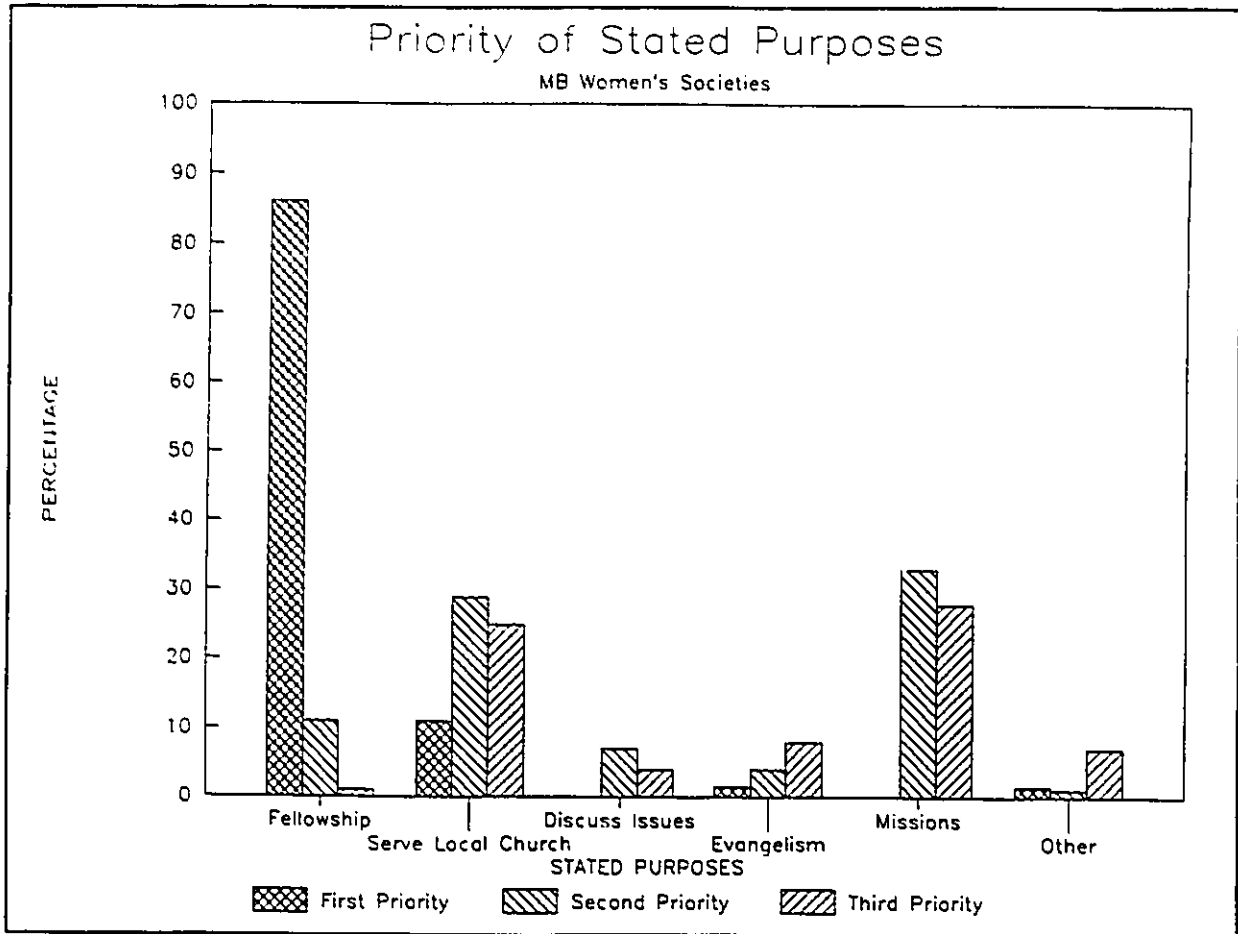


Figure 5

The graphs indicate that fellowship emerged as the most important priority of purpose for both CMC and MB societies. The tendency for MB women's societies to stress fellowship more than CMC societies, illustrated by the fact that 86 percent of MB groups said that fellowship was their most important purpose compared to 64 percent of CMC groups, is consistent with our earlier discovery in naming--more MB women's societies than CMC women's societies called themselves fellowship groups. Reports of women's societies, submitted along with completed surveys, corroborate the importance given to fellowship, since in stated

goals fellowship aims are mentioned first. For example, the 1988 report of the Ladies Fellowship of the Parliament MB Church in Regina, Saskatchewan stated its goals as follows--

1. To encourage friendship and fellowship between ladies.
2. To provide a prayer chain that will encourage women to pray for one another.
3. To provide an avenue of service for the ladies within our church.
4. To provide outreach to our friends and neighbours.
5. To promote an awareness of missions and to encourage our missionaries through cards, letters, gifts and prayers.<sup>11</sup>

The goal of fellowship is mentioned before service. Constitutions of MB groups also reflect this emphasis--

The purpose of the Southern MB Ladies Fellowship shall be to provide an opportunity for spiritual fellowship and receive financial contributions from participating groups and individuals which shall be used in the support of MB missions projects.<sup>12</sup>

In light of the fact that support for missions was so prominent a purpose in the early years,<sup>13</sup> it is noteworthy that neither denomination placed missions as their first priority. However, as indicated in figures 4 and 5, service to the local

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<sup>11</sup> Betty Russell, "Ladies Fellowship," Report, Ladies Fellowship, Parliament MB Church, Regina, Saskatchewan, 1988.

<sup>12</sup> "Constitution of the Southern Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren Ladies Fellowship," Southern Saskatchewan Mennonite Brethren, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> A decrease in missions emphasis as primary was also noted in the survey question which asked groups to specify changes in group purpose. The decrease was mentioned by Ladies Fellowship in Newton, Manitoba; Ladies Mission Circle in Woodrow, Saskatchewan; Ladies Fellowship in Main Centre, Saskatchewan; Freundinnenverein (Friendship Society) in Winnipeg, Manitoba; Women's Fellowship in Eignenheim, Saskatchewan; and Mary Martha Group in Greendale, British Columbia.

church and missions emerged as significant second and third priorities among both CMC and MB women's societies. Other purposes--discussion of issues, evangelism, and those in the "other" category<sup>14</sup> were not mentioned as often as fellowship, service to the local church, and missions. Clearly, goals of fellowship, service to the local church, and missions emerged as most important for Mennonite women's societies in 1988.

Besides the trend to emphasize fellowship, another continuing trend, a trend which began in the 1960s, occurred in the area of fundraising.

## 2. Fundraising Methods in Mennonite Women's Societies

In Chapter III we noted that methods of raising money for projects was beginning to shift from auctions, bake sales, bazaars, and catering to asking for cash donations (see Table 9). While the greatest percentage of change took place between 1953 and 1969, the trend to emphasize fundraising through donations continued through to 1988.

Respondents were asked to indicate which methods of the seven enumerated (church dinners,<sup>15</sup> auctions, bazaars,

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<sup>14</sup> Purposes in the "other" category included prayer, community service, and support for MCC.

<sup>15</sup> The category of "church dinners" included all the money collected through serving food to larger groups, such as at weddings, graduations, congregational meals, anniversaries, and funerals.

donations,<sup>16</sup> bake sales, fashion shows, and garage sales) had been used in their group in 1988 and which of these were most important to them. An "other" category was provided for listing other methods of fundraising not included in the survey.<sup>17</sup>

Ninety-five percent of CMC groups and 96 percent of MB groups identified specific methods of fundraising. Respondents were also requested to indicate their most important methods of fundraising. Seventy-four percent of CMC groups and 64 percent of MB groups did so.

The following graph indicates all the methods of fundraising used by Mennonite women's societies in 1988.

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<sup>16</sup> This category included offerings taken at various events.

<sup>17</sup> Of the seven methods, no one identified fashion shows and only four stated that funds were raised through garage sales.

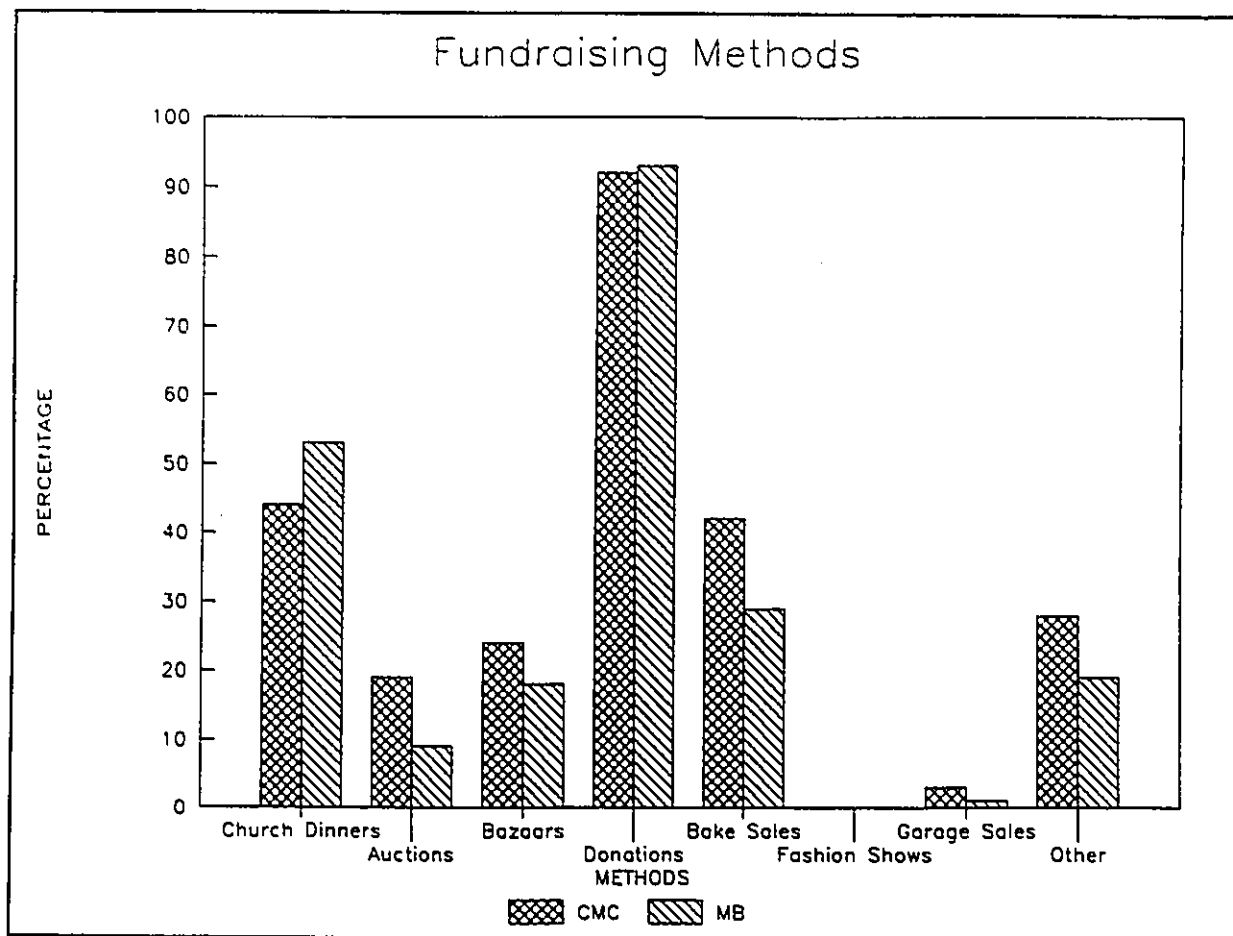


Figure 6

The most frequently mentioned method of fundraising for both denominations was that of cash donations, with 92 percent of CMC and 93 percent of MB women's societies identifying it as one of their methods. Although now the trend was to raise money through donations instead of serving food and sewing, fundraising through serving meals was still mentioned by 44 percent of CMC and 53 percent of MB groups. When respondents were requested to identify their most important methods of fundraising, over half of women's societies indicated that their most important method of fundraising was through donations. Figure 7 shows the

distribution of most important fundraising methods identified by CMC and MB societies.

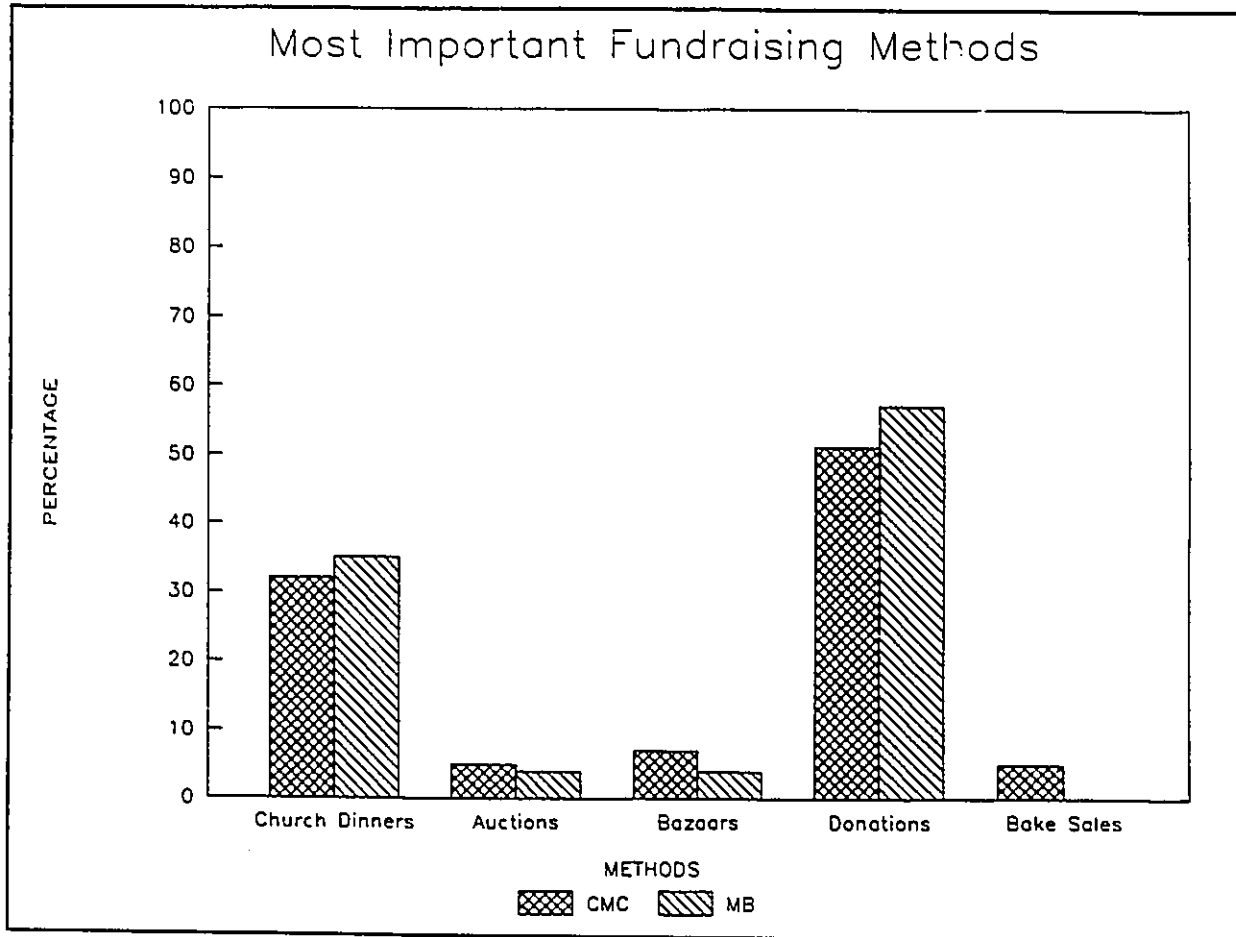


Figure 7

Fifty-one percent of CMC and 57 percent of MB groups indicated that raising money through donations was their most important method of fundraising. The method of second highest importance was preparing and serving church dinners, identified by 32 percent of CMC and 35 percent of MB groups. That women's groups used both methods of fundraising is illustrated in the 1988 financial report of the Mennonite Senior Ladies Aid in Carrot

River, Saskatchewan--

<u>Credits</u>	
Offerings	1169.28
Donations	100.00
Memberships	59.16
Christmas Supper	<u>112.00</u>
	1440.44 <sup>18</sup>

In this case, money collected by donations far exceeded income from serving a meal. Money received by serving a Christmas supper represented 7 percent of total income while money raised by donations and offerings was 88 percent of all monies received.

Besides the trends to emphasize fellowship and to raise money through donations, another trend, consistent over time, was the fact of decreasing interest in women's societies.

### 3. Decreasing Interest and Decline

In Chapter IV we noted the decreasing interest of younger women in Mennonite women's societies and the fact that fewer new societies were being organized. Survey responses and letters indicate continued decline in 1988. First, society meetings were held less frequently. Ninety-nine percent of CMC societies and 96 percent of MB societies answered the survey question which asked how often their group met. Whereas in early years women's societies would often gather weekly, the survey revealed that in 1988, only seven groups still met weekly in 1988. Sixty-nine percent of CMC and 46 percent of MB women's groups met only once

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<sup>18</sup> "Financial Report," Mennonite Senior Ladies Aid, Carrot River, Saskatchewan, 1988.

a month. The rest said they met every two or three weeks. The fact that MB women's societies tended to meet more frequently may be partially due to the fact that they were not as integrated into the larger church as CMC women. As we shall see later, CMC women had more freedom to accept positions of church leadership than MB women.

A second indication of decreasing interest in Mennonite women's societies is seen in the continued difficulty of interesting younger women to become involved in Mennonite women's societies. One woman wrote, "We find that younger women do not attend because they do not feel the same need for fellowship."<sup>19</sup> One survey question asked respondents to indicate the age of members within Mennonite women's societies in 1988. This was answered by 90 percent of CMC groups and 92 percent of MB groups. Survey responses indicated that over half of members in Mennonite women's societies were over the age of fifty in 1988--67 percent of women in CMC societies and 57 percent in MB societies. However, MB women's societies had a higher percentage of members in the twenty to forty age group than did CMC women's societies (27 percent of MB members as compared to 17 percent of CMC members). We might ask a similar question as we did in the discussion on frequency of meeting. Could the fact that more younger MB women seemed to be joining societies than CMC women be related to greater opportunities for CMC women in the church?

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<sup>19</sup> Letter from Verna Heinrichs, Ladies Fellowship of the Manitou MB Church, to Gloria Neufeld Redekop, 1988.

Young CMC women might have been attracted to areas of church participation that were open to them, other areas than women's societies. Young MB women, because they did not have the same opportunities as CMC women to participate within the institutional church, may have been more interested in joining women's societies, since in that context they could be full participants.

A third evidence of decline is seen in the numbers of groups which had discontinued, as reported by the societies. Eighteen CMC women's societies and thirteen MB women's societies listed groups which no longer existed; of these, six groups had discontinued in 1988.

With the continuation of these trends, we could expect significant changes in the meaning for Mennonite women of involvement in women's societies. The following section will seek to interpret these changes.

### ***C. The Changing Meaning of Mennonite Women's Societies for Members***

What did it mean for Mennonite women to participate in Mennonite women's societies in 1988? By this time, the significance of membership was not as straight forward as it had been in the years of establishment when it was clear that Mennonite women formed societies in order to support missions and fellowship with one another. At that time, membership meant an opportunity to serve God and to meet with other women for

friendship and support. As Mennonite women became more involved both within the Mennonite church and in society, membership in women's societies was not weighted as it had once been.

Mennonite women had more opportunities for involvement both within and outside of the church. No longer was the Mennonite women's society the only outlet for service and means of support for Mennonite women. While for some in 1988, women's societies continued to hold the same meaning as in earlier years, for others the societies took on an added dimension, namely, as forums for discussion of contemporary issues, as will be discussed in this section. In the following discussion we will seek to interpret these various aspects of the changing meaning of Mennonite women's societies for Mennonite women.

#### 1. Increased Involvement of Mennonite Women in Other Religious Activities

The survey requested women's societies to indicate which involvements outside of Mennonite women's society involvements from the enumerated list (church sponsored Bible studies, neighbourhood Bible studies, church sponsored mother's clubs, church fellowship groups and activities related to personal development such as swimming, aerobics, and night school classes) had affected participation in these societies. An "other" category was provided for listing involvements not included in the survey question. Forty-seven percent of CMC women's societies and 39 percent of MB societies reported that other involvements had lowered their attendance. Percentage

distribution was as follows--

Table 16  
Activities Responsible for Lowered Attendance

ACTIVITY	PERCENT CMC WOMEN'S SOCIETIES	PERCENT MB WOMEN'S SOCIETIES
Church sponsored Bible studies	8%	20%
Neighbourhood Bible studies	10%	15%
Church sponsored mother's clubs	2%	9%
Church fellowship groups	12%	9%
Personal development activities	31%	22%
Other activities	37%	25%

Thirty-two percent of CMC women's societies and 53 percent of MB societies that answered the question, said that other religious involvements (church sponsored Bible studies,<sup>20</sup> neighborhood Bible studies,<sup>21</sup> church sponsored mother's clubs,<sup>22</sup> and church fellowship groups<sup>23</sup>) were responsible for lowered attendance in women's societies. The "other" category included primarily

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<sup>20</sup> These are Bible studies held in the local church, usually open to both women and men.

<sup>21</sup> These are Bible studies held in a home in one's neighborhood, usually attended by women only. They are not sponsored by the local Mennonite church, but rather by an outside religious organization. Nonetheless, they served a spiritual function for Mennonite women who participated.

<sup>22</sup> These are meetings for women with young children, sponsored by the local Mennonite church.

<sup>23</sup> Sometimes the church membership is divided into small groups of members and these groups meet periodically for discussions, studies, and fellowship. They are open to both women and men.

religiously related involvements such as singing in church choirs and accepting local church positions of leadership. One group mentioned that involvement in church fellowship groups was now giving women the social interaction they needed.<sup>24</sup> The same group indicated that because women now were members of church committees and were deacons in the church, this provided the necessary outlet for women's participation, thus making participation in women's groups less necessary.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, if we examine the extent to which women were active in church leadership in 1988, we see that women were indeed more involved than in earlier years. Eighteen percent of positions on national CMC boards and committees were filled by women in 1988; 31 percent of positions on provincial CMC boards and committees were occupied by women.<sup>26</sup> In the Canadian MB Church, percentages were much lower; only 7 percent of board members were women.<sup>27</sup> In the area of pastoral leadership, 6 percent of pastors in CMC churches were women, over half of which were either co-pastors or assistant pastors.<sup>28</sup> Among the MB the percentages are again

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<sup>24</sup> As stated by the Servettes, Mennonite women's society in the Waterloo/Kitchener Mennonite Church, Ontario.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Yearbook: Conference of Mennonites in Canada (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1988), pp. 7-10; and Janice Hershberger, ed., Handbook of Information (Newton: General Conference Mennonite Church, 1988), pp. 100-110.

<sup>27</sup> Yearbook of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (Winnipeg: Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1988). pp. 160-165.

<sup>28</sup> Hershberger, ed., Handbook of Information, pp. 14-24.

considerably lower, with only 3 percent of pastors being women.<sup>29</sup> While fewer women in the MB church were pastors, nonetheless women were encouraged to use their gifts in the church<sup>30</sup> and a 1988 article in the Canadian MB periodical supported the idea of husband and wife pastoral teams--

In the secular world, on TV talk shows, news broadcasts, etc., we invariably see a man and a lady host together. In Christian telecasting it may not be a husband and wife team, but the stage is shared by both sexes. Women expect this in an age when they have equal education. It is certainly not uncommon in several other denominations in our land. . . . I believe most women in our churches would cheer their pastors if they shared more of their public ministry with their wives!<sup>31</sup>

The fact that fewer MB women than CMC women were in church leadership positions in 1988 may be related to the trend both of more involvement of younger women in MB societies and for young employed women in the MB church to join women's societies. The survey asked respondents to indicate the ages of members employed outside the home. Sixty-four percent of CMC societies and 58 percent of MB societies indicated that women were employed outside home in 1988. Survey responses show that in 1988, 26 percent of CMC and 21 percent of MB members of

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<sup>29</sup> Herb Kopp, ed., "The Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada: A Century of Grace," Mennonite Brethren Herald 27,11 (27 May 1988):2-72.

<sup>30</sup> Don Ratzlaff, "General Conference Reports--Board of Reference and Counsel," p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Fehr, "Husband and wife ministry," Mennonite Brethren Herald 27,3 (5 February 1988):2.

Mennonite women's societies were employed outside the home. Of these, 62 percent of women in CMC societies who were employed outside the home were between ages forty and sixty; 63.5 percent of women in MB societies who were employed outside the home were between ages thirty and forty. This is explained in part by the higher percentage of younger women generally in MB societies. And as we noted earlier, MB women's societies tended to meet more frequently in 1988 than CMC societies. If the relative decline of societies is due in part to greater opportunities to participate in church life generally, the fact of less decline in recruitment of young employed MB women and more frequent society meetings would be consistent with the relatively slower pace among MBs to incorporate women in church leadership positions and therefore the need for their own organization.

In both the CMC and the Canadian MB churches, although to a lesser degree in MB churches, women were becoming more visible in leadership roles and had more opportunity than before to sit on church boards and committees. In the survey, Mennonite women, themselves, identified increased involvement in the church as one of the reasons for a decrease in interest in women's societies. No longer were Mennonite women's societies the only forum for women's service to God. Not only were Mennonite women beginning to participate to a greater extent in the church, but according to survey results, they were also becoming more involved in activities outside of the church.

## 2. Increased Involvement of Mennonite Women in Society

Mennonite women were becoming more integrated into Canadian society. One factor which contributed to this trend was the fact that Mennonites had been gradually changing their primary language from German to English. In Mennonite churches, the transition from German to English began in the 1940s, but the greatest number made the shift in the 1960s.<sup>32</sup> Not surprisingly, the same phenomenon occurred in Mennonite women's societies. The survey asked respondents to indicate whether their meetings were conducted in English or German in 1988. Ninety-eight percent of CMC societies and 97 percent of MB societies answered the question. Eighty-two percent said they used either English or a combination of English and German at their meetings. A subsequent question asked which year a change in language took place. Of the 26 percent of CMC and MB groups which indicated the year in which the language of meeting changed to English, almost half of the changes occurred in the 1960s, but 33 percent of those who identified the year of change said it occurred between 1970 and 1987. The change to the English language also found expression in society name changes from German to English. Whereas until 1952, 43 percent of names of CMC women's societies and 53 percent of MB societies were German names (see tables 2 and 3 in Chapter II), by 1988 only 11 percent of CMC and 12 percent of MB

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<sup>32</sup> Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 329 and Pannabecker, Open Doors: The History of the General Conference Mennonite Church, pp. 173-174.

societies had German names. The language change meant that increasingly women could be involved in activities outside the home and church to a greater extent than before, since language was no longer a barrier.

As Mennonite women became more integrated into Canadian society, they were more likely to participate in other activities and initiatives other than only religious ones. In the survey question which requested women's groups to identify involvements which had affected attendance at society meetings, 31 percent of CMC and 22 percent of MB societies indicated that activities geared to one's own personal development were responsible for decreased attendance (see Table 16). In addition, these types of involvement were also identified in the "other" category including--women working outside the home, volunteering for children's school activities, participating in community organizations.

Employment of women outside the home was already noted in the previous chapter as one of the reasons for decline of participation in Mennonite women's societies. As indicated earlier, 26 percent of CMC and 21 percent of MB members of women's societies were employed outside the home in 1988. This percentage is much lower than the percentage of all Mennonite women employed. In a 1989 church member profile, it was found that 56 percent of Mennonite women in Canada and the United

States were employed.<sup>33</sup> The fact that a lower percentage of Mennonite women who were members of women's societies were employed than the percentage of all Mennonite women employed adds to the evidence that employment may be a factor in the decline of Mennonite women's societies, as indeed Mennonite women themselves have acknowledged.

Because of increased involvements of Mennonite women both within the church and in the broader society, it is not surprising that the identity of Mennonite women's societies was changing. It is to this area of discussion we now turn.

### 3. The Changing Face of Mennonite Women's Societies

With the greater integration of Mennonite women both into the larger church and society generally, the fulfilment of the religious and social needs of Mennonite women was no longer limited to participation in women's societies. Thus, the primary focus of Mennonite women's societies no longer needed to be limited to the mission projects and fellowship among sisters. We see in 1988, the small beginnings of what could evolve into a

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<sup>33</sup> J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1991), p. 115. Two member profiles were conducted by these authors--one in 1972 and another in 1989. Since the latter is the closest to the year of our survey, figures from this profile were used in determining the number of all Mennonite women employed. A cautionary note regarding the representativeness of the profile with respect to CMC and Canadian MB women is that the survey sample included five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ denominations in Canada and the United States. However, General Conference Mennonites and the MB comprised half of the participating congregations.

refocusing of Mennonite women's societies in the future This has to do with the growing importance of discussion of contemporary issues within societies.

Although discussion of issues did not emerge as one of the three most important stated purposes of Mennonite women's societies (see figures 3, 4, and 5), 74 percent of CMC societies and 50 percent of MB societies indicated that this was a component of their meetings (see Table 15). In a subsequent survey question which asked respondents to indicate the three most important elements of their meetings, 97 percent of CMC societies and 64 percent of MB societies did so. These responses give us an indication that discussion of issues in Mennonite women's societies was beginning to emerge as an important component of meetings for a small percentage of groups. Figure 8 shows which elements emerged as primary aspects of Mennonite women's society meetings.

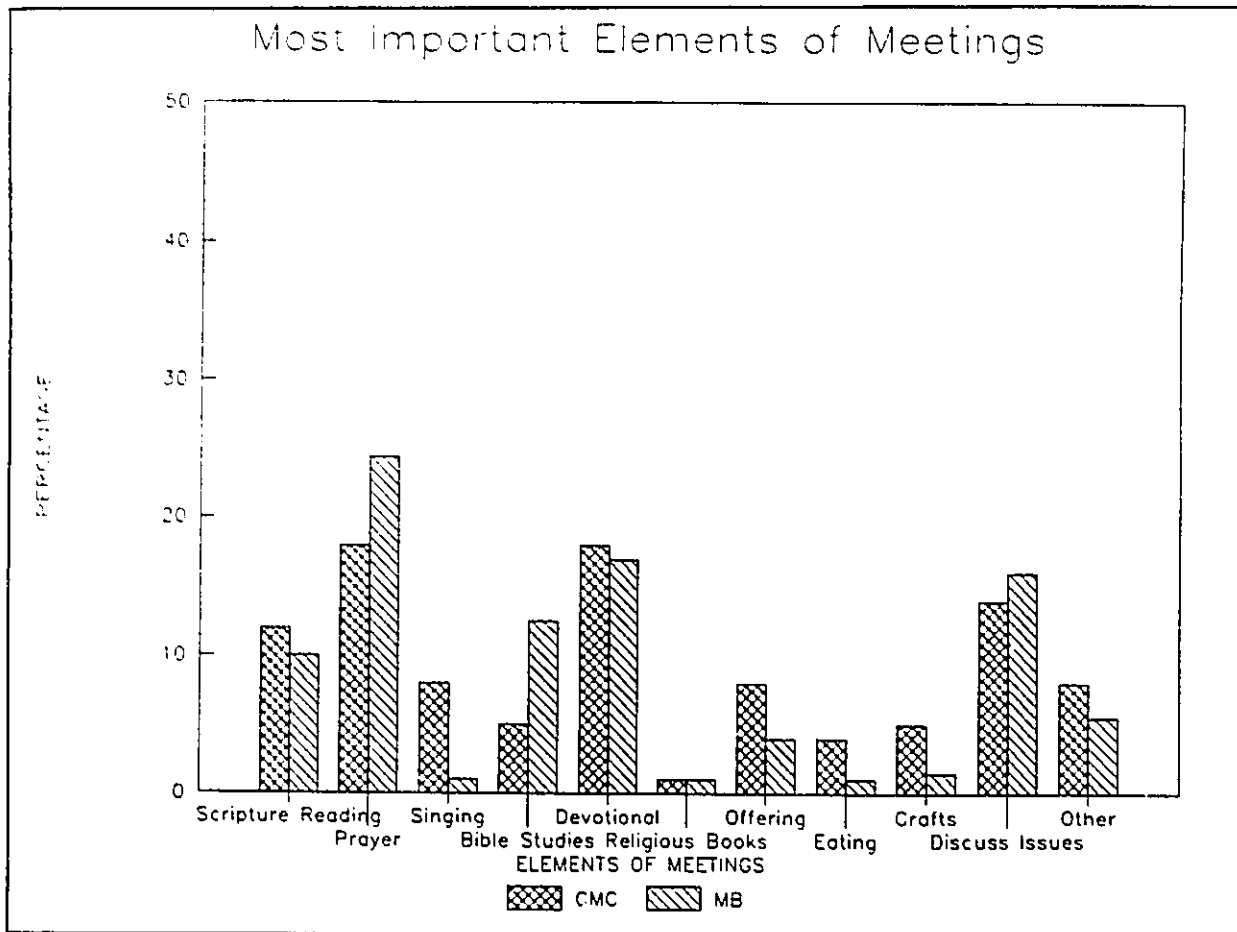


Figure 8

From the graph we can see that prayer, devotionals, and discussion of issues were the most frequently mentioned elements of meetings. It does not surprise us that prayer and devotionals were aspects of meetings, since these had always been a part of meetings, but the fact that discussion of issues ranked higher than scripture reading is perhaps an indication of a shift in focus within a few Mennonite women's societies. Respondents listed topics of discussion that were common in their groups, topics which included women's issues. Among the topics of discussion mentioned by survey respondents in CMC groups were the

abortion issue, abuse, pornography, nutrition, raising children, mental and physical health, women in other countries, women in the church, old age and death. In MB women's societies, child abuse, pregnancy distress, day care, mothering, depression, stress, and Christian qualities of women in the Bible emerged as discussion topics.

Thus, with the use of the survey instrument and other primary sources, we have a picture of Mennonite women's societies in 1988. There remained a certain continuity of their past identity. Eighteen percent of women's societies were still using the German language at their meetings. Survey responses indicate that the support of missions, the primary focus of Mennonite women's societies when they were first established, remained an important focus for women's societies in 1988. This is corroborated by the CWM report at the 1988 annual CMC conference, which affirmed the women's society as a forum for serving God by raising money for mission projects--"Fundraising is an important aspect of WM work. . . . We are the Women in Mission. Like our counterparts in scripture we serve with vigour and enthusiasm, with courtesy and kindness, with love and compassion, making Christ known throughout the world."<sup>34</sup> As in the past, their service orientation continued to be based upon the biblical text and components of meeting remained primarily the same. The emphasis on fellowship, the tendency to raise money primarily

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<sup>34</sup> Yearbook: Canadian Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1988, p. 107.

through cash donations, and the signs of decrease and decline continued into 1988.

While elements of their identity remained the same, survey responses indicate that Mennonite women's societies were no longer the only context in which Mennonite women could be of service to others and have their needs of fellowship met. Mennonite women were gradually becoming more involved in the church on church boards and committees; as deacons and church leaders; and in church sponsored small groups. With the expansion of the role of women within Mennonite churches and the decreased interest on the part of younger women in joining the societies, the question is--will Mennonite women's societies, in future years, discontinue entirely if Mennonite women experience even more integration into the larger church institution? On the other hand, if Mennonite churches continue to be male dominated, will some women always feel the need for their own parallel organization where they can make their own decisions about how to serve God and be full participants in the church through the context of Mennonite women's societies?

## Conclusion

When Russian Mennonites began to immigrate to Canada in the late 1800s, Mennonite women were quick to establish their own societies in response to their sense of God's call to service. These had a precedent in their communities in Russia, where women's societies had been formed in order to support missions. In Canada, Mennonite women's societies played a vital role in the church, but their history has been only scantily recorded in Mennonite historiography.

As a social history, this study conforms to the Annales school of thought in that it is a history of those previously left out, that of ordinary Mennonite women. The social historical method has allowed the use of primary source material which has been generated by Mennonite women's societies. Mennonite women took minutes of society meetings; submitted reports at local church business meetings; wrote reports for church yearbooks; contributed stories of their groups to local church histories; wrote constitutions for their groups; kept account of financial records; and wrote letters and poems. In addition to these primary sources, the responses to the author's survey has provided a picture of Mennonite women's societies in 1988.

As women's history, the history of Mennonite women's societies is first of all, of necessity, descriptive, since the story of Mennonite women's societies in Canada has never been

told as a corporate story. Second, it is history "from the bottom up" in that the thesis gives a voice to Mennonite women, examining Mennonite women's societies from their point of view. Third, it is analytical in that it examines the dynamics of Vereine within ecclesiastical and social contexts, highlighting the interplay of factors which helped to shape women's societies.

In the 1500s, when Anabaptists were persecuted in the Netherlands, Anabaptist women seemed to have considerable freedom to participate in the church community. Along with men, they read the Bible and defended their faith before the authorities; some women even were church leaders. The norm, however, was that men were the elders in the church; they had ultimate authority in religious matters. What freedom Mennonite women might have had in early Dutch Anabaptism was soon lost as the church became institutionalized. When Mennonites immigrated to Prussia and later to Russia, male authority in the church and female subordination became entrenched. Women could not vote at church business meetings; they had no official voice in the church.

Russian Mennonites came to Canada during three major periods of immigration--eight thousand between 1874 and 1880, twenty thousand between 1923 and 1930, and seven thousand between 1947 and 1952. During the immigration years these Mennonites were concentrated in five provinces--Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia. This thesis has examined Mennonite women's societies formed within churches of the immigration period (1874-1952), following their development until

1988 (the year of my survey of CMC and MB women's societies that were formed in churches established during the immigration years).

The immigration years (1874-1952) constituted the period of the establishment of CMC and MB women's societies in Canada. It was during this time that they established the various elements of their organizations which were to be normative in the ensuing years. This period was foundational in that it established a sense of purpose and direction. The primary focus, motivated by the biblical text, was the support of missions. Restricted in their role in the church, this was one way they could serve God. It was customary for Mennonite women to knit, sew, or crochet articles of clothing or other handiwork during the year which would then be sold at annual auction sales, the proceeds of which would be given to church mission projects. This strong emphasis on service was exemplified in the names women chose to designate their societies. In these early years 70.5 percent of CMC names and 65 percent of MB names denoted mission, sewing, aid, help, or service.

Besides their work of service, Mennonite women's societies became a context for fellowship and spiritual nourishment. Loneliness was common in those early pioneer years and thus the gathering as sisters was a great encouragement to Mennonite women. There also developed very early on in the formation years of establishment, a particular worship ritual that provided spiritual nourishment for Mennonite women. The pattern of

worship was very similar to the worship format of the institutional church, which included Bible reading, prayer, singing, offering and sermon(s). While Mennonite women's societies did not have a sermon as such, there was always something of a devotional nature, either a talk, a Bible study, or the reading of a religious book. While they had subordinate roles in the church, in the context of Vereine they took leadership in every aspect of their worship.

As the years progressed, Mennonite women's societies flourished, with the greatest numerical increase taking place between 1953 and 1969. It was a time of living out to the full the paradigm that had been established in earlier years as they strengthened group identity through the formation of their own provincial and national organizations and linkages with the church institution, linkages which gave official recognition of their work by the church, both through statements of commendation and requests for them to report on their involvements. During this time, societies remained strongly committed to goals of a biblically based support for missions and fellowship with each other, goals which were expressed in their choice of biblical texts for mottos, themes of conferences, naming of groups, and their own statements of purpose. While their focus was still service oriented, their method of raising funds was beginning to change; there was a growing trend to raise money through cash donations instead of auction sales. Mennonite women's societies continued to be the primary context in which Mennonite

women could serve God. Vereine seemed to continue to function as a parallel church for Mennonite women.

Although we must exercise caution about proposing reasons for the remarkable growth of Mennonite women's societies between 1953 and 1969, a few suggestions can be made. These concern the possible link between the growth of Mennonite women's societies and the church's understanding of women's role at that time. Since the church was beginning to give affirmation to women's society work and at the same time defending, on the basis of biblical texts, both a subordinate role for women in the church and the importance of their role as mothers and homemakers, it is understandable that Mennonite women's societies became a primary vehicle for Mennonite women to serve God and to participate fully in a worship ritual. Here they could worship as they pleased and decide for themselves how to serve God.

While 1953 to 1969 was a period of growth for Mennonite women's societies, there were, in the 1960s, a few Mennonite women who began to question the usefulness of separate societies for women. As more Mennonite women became fluent in the English language, they were understandably more likely to be influenced by society. In any case, in the 1960s Mennonite women increasingly became interested in higher education and employment outside the home. This may have contributed to the self-questioning of Mennonite women's societies. Despite this, during this era, the majority of Mennonite women still felt women's societies were the best way for them to use their gifts in the

church.

The seeds of questioning, sewn in the 1960s, developed into a period of decline--1970 to 1987. During this time, fewer groups were formed; it became increasingly difficult to interest younger women in Mennonite women's societies. While linkages are difficult to establish, we note that in the period of decline, not only were women pursuing higher education and careers to a greater extent, but also that the church was beginning to open more positions to women. These included more opportunity for women to serve as delegates to annual church conferences and a higher representation of women on church boards and committees. Besides this, both the institutional church and Mennonite women's societies were beginning to discuss women's issues and some were questioning previously held interpretations of biblical texts which had been used to defend the subordination of women. At the same time as the role of Mennonite women in the church was expanding, Mennonite women's societies were declining. However, while more doors seemed open to Mennonite women now, women were mixed in their reaction to these new possibilities. Mennonite women did not necessarily feel comfortable accepting leadership positions within the church structure. Many preferred to continue to use their gifts within the context of Mennonite women's societies, and thus these societies continued to play a meaningful role in the lives of a considerable number of Mennonite women.

While many Mennonite women's societies continued to function

much as they had before, some changes in emphasis were emerging. Societies continued with a strong biblically motivated support of missions, contributing large sums of money to the mission program of the church. Their worship format remained much the same as it had been in previous years. However, a notable change occurred in the greater emphasis given to fellowship, spiritual growth and Bible study. This is illustrated in the change in naming practices. Whereas until 1952, names of Mennonite women's societies were primarily service oriented, now names of newly organized societies were fellowship oriented. Not only was this increased emphasis on fellowship expressed in naming, but also in stated group purpose, society constitutions, reports, themes for meetings and biblical texts chosen for mottos.

In order to determine the result of significant trends and the current state of Mennonite women's societies, the survey of Mennonite women's societies in 1988 allowed us to take a "snapshot" in time. We found continuity in both the identity of Mennonite women's societies and previously noted trends. A biblically motivated service orientation and worship format had remained the same. Mennonite women were still considering their societies as contexts for service to God. Survey responses indicated that over 80 percent of CMC and MB women's societies still had scripture reading, prayer, devotionals and offering as worship components. This suggests that Mennonite women's societies may still have been functioning as a parallel church for Mennonite women in 1988. Besides these constants, trends

which began in previous years also continued. The trend to emphasize fellowship was expressed in naming and priorities of purpose. The trend to raise money through cash donations continued, with over 90 percent of Mennonite women's societies using this as one of their fundraising methods. The difficulties women's societies experienced in the past in interesting younger women in membership was also evident in 1988--over half of members were over the age of fifty.

While survey responses reflected the continuation of previous identity and trends, they did point to a new evolving area of emphasis, not seen to a great extent in former years. This was the inclusion in their gatherings of discussion of issues. At times these were simply topics of interest to women but they also included discussions of women's roles and issues of social justice.

Not only did survey results provide evidence of continued identity and trends, they also suggested reasons for lowered attendance in Mennonite women's societies. Respondents identified church involvements, employment outside the home, activities for personal development, and commitments in the wider community as reasons for decreased interest in Mennonite women's societies. Several women suggested that since Mennonite women were now more visible in the church, it was not as necessary to participate in societies specifically for women. Just as the restriction of women's role in the church between 1953 and 1969 coincided with increased interest in participation in Mennonite

women's societies, the gradual opening of leadership positions for women in the church between 1970 and 1988 coincided with the gradual decrease of women's involvement in Mennonite women's societies. While acculturation to Canadian society has certainly been one factor in the decline of Mennonite women's societies, we might also suggest that another factor has to do with the degree to which the church opened positions of leadership to women. As women felt they had a greater role in the institutional church, they may have felt less need for gendered societies in which to worship and serve God. Yet, in spite of the relative decrease in attendance in women's societies, there remained, in 1988, a substantial number of CMC and MB women who still found considerable meaning through their involvement in viable Mennonite women's societies in Canada.

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## Appendix A

### SURVEY ON WOMEN'S FELLOWSHIP GROUPS OF THE CONFERENCE OF MENNONITES IN CANADA AND THE CANADIAN MENNONITE BRETHREN

Name and address of person(e) \_\_\_\_\_  
who filled out the survey \_\_\_\_\_

1. Give the name of your church \_\_\_\_\_

2. PRESENT: Give the full name of your women's association  
\_\_\_\_\_

PAST: If there have been changes in the name of your group, list the various changes and the years the changes were made.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. What year did your group begin? \_\_\_\_\_

4. PRESENT: How often do you meet? \_\_\_\_\_ weekly \_\_\_\_\_ every second week  
\_\_\_\_\_ monthly \_\_\_\_\_ other

Does your group meet in the summer? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

PAST: If the frequency of meeting has changed from past years, state the changes in frequency of meeting and the years the changes were made.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. PRESENT: In which languages(s) do you conduct your meetings?

\_\_\_\_\_ English \_\_\_\_\_ German \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

PAST: If your group used to use the German language and now has changed to English, when was that change made? \_\_\_\_\_

6. PRESENT: What is the purpose of your group? Mark them in order of importance: 1, 2, 3, etc.

\_\_\_\_\_ fellowship, friendship and support \_\_\_\_\_ evangelize

\_\_\_\_\_ to be of service to the local church \_\_\_\_\_ missions

\_\_\_\_\_ discuss contemporary issues of particular interest to women (name them)  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ other (name them) \_\_\_\_\_

PAST: If the purpose of your group has changed from past years, list the changes in purpose and years in which they occurred.

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7. PRESENT: Check off what you are doing at your meetings this year.

- |                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| a. ___ Scripture reading    | f. ___ study of other religious books            |
| b. ___ prayer               | g. ___ have an offering                          |
| c. ___ singing              | h. ___ eat                                       |
| d. ___ Bible studies        | i. ___ crafts                                    |
| e. ___ devotional           | j. ___ discuss issues of importance to the group |
| ___ other (name them) _____ |  |

Which 3 of the above are most important in your group? (a,b,c, etc.)

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PAST: If there have been changes in what you do at your meetings, state the changes and the years in which they occurred.

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8. PRESENT: What projects is your group supporting this year?

- a. \_\_\_ raise money for foreign missions projects
- b. \_\_\_ visit nursing homes in the community
- c. \_\_\_ participate in World Day of Prayer
- d. \_\_\_ work in MCC Self Help Stores
- e. \_\_\_ raise money for MCC
- f. \_\_\_ raise money for home missions projects
- g. \_\_\_ supply furnishings for the local church like curtains, piano, dishes, floral arrangements, cribs
- \_\_\_ other (name them) \_\_\_\_\_

Which 3 of the above projects are most important to your group? (a,b,c, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_

PAST: If there have been changes in the kind of projects your group supports, list the changes and the years in which they occurred.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

9. PRESENT: If your group raises money for various projects, what methods are being used this year?

- a. \_\_\_ church dinners
- b. \_\_\_ auctions
- c. \_\_\_ bazaars (crafts sales)
- d. \_\_\_ donations
- e. \_\_\_ bake sales
- f. \_\_\_ fashion shows
- g. \_\_\_ garage sales
- \_\_\_\_\_ other (name them)

Which of the above methods are most important in raising money? (a,b,c, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_

PAST: If this is a change from how money used to be raised, state former methods and the years in which they were practised.

\_\_\_\_\_

10. If your group has a Biblical motto, what is it?

\_\_\_\_\_

11. Which Biblical texts have had an important impact on the development of your group's

- a. purpose \_\_\_\_\_
- b. projects \_\_\_\_\_

12. Approximately what percentage of women in your congregation belong to your group? \_\_\_ 75%-100% \_\_\_ 50%-75% \_\_\_ 25%-50% \_\_\_ less than 25%

13. How many women between the following ages are:

Ages	part of your women's group	in your group and working outside the home
20-30	_____	_____
30-40	_____	_____
40-50	_____	_____
50-60	_____	_____
60-70	_____	_____
70 +	_____	_____

14. If possible, consult your records and give the average attendance for the following particular years:

1920 _____	1960 _____
1930 _____	1970 _____
1940 _____	1980 _____
1950 _____	1988 _____

15. Has participation in any of the following activities by women in your church affected attendance in your women's group? If so, which ones and how?

- Church sponsored Bible studies \_\_\_\_\_
- Neighborhood Bible studies \_\_\_\_\_
- Church sponsored mother's clubs \_\_\_\_\_
- Church fellowship groups \_\_\_\_\_
- Activities for personal development  
such as swimming, aerobics, night  
school classes \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

16. If you are aware of any women's group in your church that has discontinued meeting, when did this occur and why?

17. If you wish to receive a summary of the results of this survey check here

PLEASE REPLY BY DECEMBER 15, 1988.

## Appendix B

5 Beddoe Lane  
Gloucester, Ont.  
K1B 3X9  
Nov. 4, 1988

Please give this letter to the president of one of the women's fellowship groups in your church. If your church does not have a women's group, I would very much appreciate your assistance by answering only questions 1 and 16 of the survey form and sending it back to me in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope.

I am presently working on a doctoral thesis on "An Examination of the Women's Fellowship Groups (auxiliaries, societies, Verein) of the General Conference and Mennonite Brethren Churches in Canada." I am limiting the study to those churches which were formed between 1895 and 1950. To my knowledge, the only research done in this area was by the provincial and national Women in Mission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in 1977. Therefore, in order to tell the story of Mennonite women's associations your participation is crucial. My hope is that my research can become the basis for a book on the history of Mennonite women's fellowship groups.

My interest in writing the history of the women's groups began last year when, for one of my classes at the University of Ottawa, I studied women's groups in 2 General Conference and 2 Mennonite Brethren churches in each of 5 provinces, examining minutes, reports, church histories and constitutions.

The story of the work of Canadian Mennonite women's groups is an important one. Women have been active in these groups since Mennonites first immigrated to Canada. They have found these groups to be a tremendous support to them personally, and as well, have raised substantial amounts of money in support of a variety of worthwhile projects.

To tell you a little bit about myself--I was raised in the Mennonite Brethren Church in Saskatoon, Sask. My husband, Vern, and I attended the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California and co-pastored the Mennonite Church in Thompson, Manitoba for three years. We have lived in Ottawa with our 3 children since 1985 and are presently members of the Ottawa Mennonite Church.

I am aware that in some churches there are more than one women's fellowship group. I would like one person from each group to fill out a survey. Please share this letter and give survey forms to the president (or other knowledgeable member) of each women's group in your church. You may photocopy the survey form if I have not sent enough of them.

I am aware that many women's groups report to the church at the church's annual business meeting. I would very much appreciate a copy of these annual reports from each women's group in your church, plus the financial statement of each group for the following years: 1920, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 88. As well, if the group has a constitution, or if there is additional information, documents or anecdotes which you think could be helpful I would appreciate receiving them. Send completed surveys and any other documents using the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope to: (additional postage is needed if more than 6 pages are enclosed)

Gloria Redekop  
5 Beddoe Lane  
Gloucester, Ontario  
K1B 3X9

If you have any questions feel free to write or call me at 613-837-4218.

Thank you for your interest and cooperation in the writing of this important history of the women's fellowship groups of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and the Canadian Mennonite Brethren.

Sincerely yours in Christian love,

## Appendix C

5 Beddoe Lane  
Gloucester, Ont.  
K1B 3X9  
Jan. 3, 1989

Re: Mennonite Women's Fellowship Groups Survey  
(sent out Nov. 4, 1988)

Dear

So far the response to my survey has been most encouraging. Of the 309 I mailed out, I have received 103 completed surveys from both Conference of Mennonites in Canada churches and Canadian Mennonite Brethren churches. In addition, many have written letters of support and affirmation of my research and have sent extra material such as histories, financial reports, and annual reports.

To this date I have not received any surveys from your church, but I recognize that it has been a busy time of year for everyone. My concern now is to be as thorough as possible. Therefore, I would still be grateful for a response from each of the women's groups in your church. I have enclosed an extra survey form in case your other one has been misplaced.

I realize some of the questions may take a certain amount of digging. Even if it is not possible to answer all the questions, I would still very much appreciate a partially completed questionnaire.

Thank you for your efforts.

Sincerely yours,