

MENNONITES OF NIAGARA: CHURCH HISTORIES

TAPE 10 SIDES 1 AND 2
TAPE 11 SIDE 1

Interviewee: Mr. Fransen, Vineland United Mennonite Church

Interviewer: Trudy Funk

Date: January 1, 1977

Language:

TOPICS COVERED: Background: Mr. Fransen was born in Mariawohl, Molotschna in 1908. Migrated to Kitchener in 1926 and shortly later came with his family to the Niagara peninsula. Married and moved back to Kitchener in 1928 but returned a year later when he lost his job due to the depression. Farmed at Jordan Harbour from 1934 until 1957 when he moved to a farm in West St. Catharines.

Vineland Church: People in Vineland belonged to the Kitchener-Waterloo Church. During the winter they met in homes. Together with the MBs they rented an old sawmill on Victoria Street in Vineland where services were held. In 1935 the UMs built their own church on Victoria Street for \$3,000. The present church was built in 1957.

First UM Congregation to pay their minister. Minister paid from the beginning. During the depression received \$200 per year.

Discusses changes in communion service, role of women, and rate of intermarriage. Considers changes in the wedding ceremony, increasing acceptance of divorce and changes in the order of service as a result of language change. Prosperity is viewed as making Mennonites too independent and as fostering a growth in the church's outreach activities.

Importance of the Coffman family at the time of the earliest settlement of Russian Mennonites. Importance of the language barrier between Swiss and Russian Mennonites - led to the formation of a separate church and a separate conference.

Service among Mennonites who had left Canada for Mexico. Mr. Fransen served in Mexico during 1973.

The Vineland Burial Society: its origins, fees and benefits.

Interview with Nick Fransen, United Mennonite Church of Vineland, Jan. 1, 1977.

BACKGROUND

I was born in South Russia, near the Black Sea, in the town of Mariawohl, Molotschna. I came to Canada in 1926 landing in Quebec and then proceeding to Kitchener where some of my family were living. At the time, I was single and 18 years of age. I remained in Kitchener for a couple of months and then followed my family to Vineland where we worked as farm labour.

In those days the government would send people out west to help with the harvest. I went by train. It cost \$15. to get to Winnipeg and a half cent per mile beyond Winnipeg. I stayed in Winnipeg for 6 weeks. When it started to rain we moved on to Saskatchewan until mid-October and then returned. This gave us the opportunity to see Canada. My family preferred to stay in the Vineland area since the climate was milder. I worked in the Vineland area until 1928 when I married and moved to Kitchener looking for greener fields. In the Fall of 1929 the depression started and we lost our jobs so we moved back to Vineland. For the next 5 years I worked for a farmer in Vineland and then purchased land at Jordan Harbour where the Beacon Motel is now located. Three partners purchased twenty acres and we divided it among ourselves. In 1957 I moved from that land to my present location outside St. Catharines. The other partners were Mr. Epp and Mr. Janzen, a Deacon in my church. I purchased my present location in 1947 and worked both farms. In 1949 our house on the Jordan Harbour property burned down. In 1941 the QEW was built through our property at Jordan and cut my six acres in two. It was inconvenient like that. So the partners traded off - one took the south side the other the north. Mr. Janzen took the Beacon property and in 1946 he sold it to the Beacon owner.

VINELAND UNITED MENNONITE CHURCH: THE EARLY YEARS

In the early years there was a group in Vineland that got together to have services but we were members of the Kitchener U.M. Church. In 1936, the number of people in the Vineland area had become quite large and so we founded our own church. I have been a minister of that church since 1929. Occassionally I would go to Waterloo and preach there. I married all my children and a couple of grandchildren. I served in Mexico for two years under the auspices of the General Conference.

When the Vineland U.M. Church was first organized we rented an old saw mill on Victoria Avenue. We moved the old machinery to one end and sometimes when it rained we had to move the pulpit. At that time, the pulpit was only a table. People had to move around as well.

In the wintertime people moved away from here, there were no jobs or income, and went to Kitchener, Waterloo or New Hamburg. We gathered in homes, particularly the home of Mrs. Klassen who later became my mother-in-law.

The original group in 1936 consisted of between 150 and 200 people.

We had started constructing our first building in 1935. It was located on Victoria Avenue. Before that we used a shed in summer and private homes in winter for services. The church was built for \$3,000. We only purchased the materials. The foundation was made of stones we collected in Twenty Mile Creek. Mr. Boese supplied trucks to carry the stones. Farmers came with their tractors and dug the basement. Only one man was hired; he supervised the whole thing.

In 1957 we built the present church on 2nd Avenue. The other one was sold to the Dutch people.

The Vineland UM Church was founded because we were sufficient in number to go our own way. As well, we had purchased the piece of land and it had to be registered. So we got our own name. The church was all in German in the beginning. We had about 130 founding members. We differed from the MBs in the form of baptism. We discouraged smoking but didn't put people out of the church for smoking. Same thing with drinking - we discouraged it and tried to work with the person. Form of communion was also a little different.

The founding members were mostly farmers. Just a few had other occupations in St. Catharines i.e. schoolteacher. But 90% were farmers. We were Russian Mennonites but there were a few converts. The church has always wanted to be a more evangelical church. We have always wanted to have a more active outreach program. From time to time, we had evangelists call, people from the outside. On a smaller scale than Billy Graham, the General Conference has always had its own evangelists. Rev. Fransen has conducted evangelical services in low German in Leamington. In Leamington they only speak low German and call themselves Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference. Their parent group is in Manitoba and there is a larger group in Aylmer, Ontario. They do not know much High German. I read the scriptures in High German and preached in Low German. If I were to preach in Low German in my Church, they would laugh. My children do not permit me to preach in English because they say I cannot speak that well. But I have spoken in English far away from here. At one time, I was the Field Secretary of the Canadian Mennonite Bible College - a sideline in the wintertime. I informed churches throughout Canada of the College and solicited funds. When I came to churches which were all in English I had to speak in English. That was between 1955-1958.

I'm not so much a supporter of Eden Christian College, that's not our Conference. They are M.B.s. But two of my children attended Eden because we considered it a good school. Financially we have never supported them. We merely paid when we sent our children there.

LANGUAGE IN THE CHURCH

In 1957 some of the younger people asked our church if we could have some part of the service in English. We realized that some families had only spoken English to their children so we decided that from time to time we would have some English. Perhaps an introduction once a month. Then a member spoke up and said once a month is not enough, so around 1958 we decided to have a short introduction in English every Sunday. This increased gradually until by 1973 it was 50/50, one sermon German and one in English.

In 1973 while I worked in Mexico as a volunteer, the church decided to separate the meetings. The Adult Sunday School is all in German, the rest in English. From 10:30 until 11 we hold German Sunday School for adults. At 11 all Sunday Schools cease and a complete English sermon begins. Occasionally there is a German song. Now about 75% is in English. There are very few people who do not understand English, people like my second wife who has not been in the country for long. She came ten years ago from Russia and we only speak German in our home.

Our church did not really have a group which broke away to form a new church all in English. But with the St. Catharines and Niagara U.M. churches, when English speaking members pushed for the language during the war years, Grace Mennonite was built and so some members of Vineland U.M., just like from other churches, went to Grace [1955]. Grace was built in the early 50s [1958] and from the beginning it was completely in English. That was the reason it was built.

CHANGE OVER THE YEARS

Our church like the others has changed from a plural ministry to a single ministry. We still have several ministers in every church, but now we have a salaried minister. The Vineland Church had a paid Minister from the beginning, but he was not full-time. When we first formed our own church we paid the Minister \$200 per year. Of course this was during the depression. A number of ministers helped him because they also had farms. The leading minister of Kitchener U.M. lived in Vineland and had a predicament. He joined the small group in Vineland. At the time the people in Vineland as well as groups in New Hamburg and Dunnville belonged to the Kitchener church. At that time the Kitchener church had 600-700 members. Dunnville and Port Rowan stayed on for a number of years but the others gradually formed individual congregations. Rev. John Wichert was the first paid minister in Vineland. From 1944-1965 he was the Minister of the Church while there were 3 or 4 Assistant Ministers who were not paid. Vineland had the first full-time paid Minister. Later on, all the other churches did the same. The mother church always had a paid minister but he was paid by the Conference. Vineland paid for our own.

Over the years there have been small changes in ritual. For example in communion. We Mennonites are separatists, we like our own things. Some congregations have a pitcher and pour; some have a bowl and sprinkle. The wine used to be passed in one cup. Now everybody gets an individual little glass, same with the bread. There were two groups in the old country, the Flemish and the Frissions. One used the pitcher the other the bowl. Our church had to accommodate the different people in the beginning. Before individual little bread pieces were baked slightly joining, the Minister broke a piece off and gave it to each member. Now it is passed around and members take a piece. Way back we had foot washings but we have never practiced that here.

There haven't really been doctrinal changes. There have been more formal changes. For example insisting that people live what they preach. Always stressed the word "Nachfolge," which means to follow after the right way. "Nachfolge" means you must prove what you confess on Sunday during the week as well.

Teaching of children has changed from the old country because we did not have Sunday Schools. We had our own private Christian schools and there all the education was done except when the communists made us drop teaching religion in schools, between 1918 and 1920. Then we started Sunday Schools. This congregation has always had a Sunday School.

The membership has changed. It increased gradually. There are presently about 450 members. Many have moved away due to jobs or marriage. We are strict when it comes to marriage. Stress that people must have a home church, one church to which you belong. It has to do with the Minister. Now we will marry if one party is a member and the other not in the hope that the non-member will become a member. Rev. Wichert would not marry them because according to his understanding they should belong to one Church. The other Ministers did marry them because they did not want them to live common-law or be married by some outsider. Why shouldn't we give our blessing? Rev. Wichert would not stop this being done in their church. He would rather not have it, but did not stop it. At first the congregation was asked for their approval on that marriage, now the ministers decide on our own at the congregation's request.

The occupations of the members have definitely changed. Now less than 3% farmers. All kinds of occupations. Two of my sons are doctors in the U.S. One is a General Surgeon in Newton, Kansas, the other a urologist in Bloomington, Illinois. Both were educated at Bethel College in Newton, Kansas, a General Conference College and fields were greener there. Both married Mennonites. There has been little change in the ethnic composition of the church membership. Over half the marriages are intermarriages.

When some of us die, the question will come up: Is there any need to have German? But this depends on whether there are any newcomers from Germany and Russia. For our sake they will probably keep up the German. Otherwise in 10 or 12 years, God knows, it will be gone. That is the course it has taken but we should take it as painlessly as possible.

The pastor is now hired for 3 years and then the congregation votes on him again. The Minister himself can decline the position.

There have been changes in the number and variety of church activities. A boys league has been added and pioneer girls. We always had Sunday Schools and a women's auxiliary divided according to age.

There are some changes in the sense of community within the church. Boys and girls now have their own opinions. Women's lib has changed things; it's good it came up but they overdid things a little. My daughter is mentioned in Women in Action. She has her own opinions. For a while she belonged to the Church Council. That has changed because before Mennonites believed women belonged in the kitchen. Also we have a number of ladies as delegates to the Conference. We stress having more younger delegates to shoulder the responsibilities.

Have the Mennonite churches become more similar over the years? M.B. same ethnic group. I have sisters and brothers and in-laws who are MB. At first we were quite far apart. We should work together. For years the MB church was across the road and I never heard outsiders say we want people from the right side only. Just because you have a different constitution

doesn't make you any better. What you are through 6 days, you are on Sundays. For older people it is hard to admit but both conferences announced publicly that our forefathers made a mistake back in 1860 and we want to bridge that. Mr. Fransen thought that through schools we would be more successful than we have been in bridging the gap. In Winnipeg they have two Bible colleges one UM and one MB but at least they have one bookstore now. They could have one college rather than having 2 with 150 students each and 2 buildings. Maybe the next generation will grow closer together. MB Mission outreach is stronger than UM's perhaps because it is stressed more. Their people are more emotional while we are more non-emotional. We stress our everyday life while MB stress confession, public preaching and praying. We have a number of people who will never pray in public. In the MB Church this is almost a must.

RELATIONS WITH FIRST MENNONITE

Relations between Swiss and Russian Mennonites have changed. First Mennonite is smaller than we are. I have good friends in that congregation and some day we will invite them to join us, instead of heating two furnaces we will heat one. Of course it might take another generation or so. Those are the people who called us out and brought us here. They helped us and came to meet us in Quebec and employed us. The Coffmans especially. They were like grandparents to us. In fact Bishop Coffman married me the first time. Twenty-five years later for our Silver Anniversary we invited Bishop Coffman to speak. Whenever someone got hurt, they went to the Coffman's for help. We had a very good relationship except the language. They had everything in English. Otherwise we probably would have joined them at that time. When we formed our own Churches we did not even join their Conference, which in a way insulted them. They call their Conference the Mennonite Conference, ours is the General Conference. General Conference people came from Russia, their background was the same, that is why we joined them. Gradually we have become closer to First Mennonite particularly because of the language change.

I do not foresee the possibility but believe great changes are necessary in our churches. Prosperity does not do us any good. Instead of trusting in God we are depending on the dollar. If we do not have any money well Trudeau will send us some. A number of our people have become rich fast. Mr. Braun for example. Rev. Coffman said when we came that among the Mennonites there are no millionaires. Once you are one, you are no longer a Mennonite. You must do something about it before you become one. There are a lot of poor people in the world so you could never become that rich. There is an old saying: when the cups turn into silver cups then the Ministers become wooden. Same now, we have built five rich churches and this wealth does us no good. Our churches are losing their value as I see it. I hope there will be a change, a revolution to come back to where our fathers were many years ago. As long as prosperity exists, people are too independent. When we first came here if someone was not in church you would inquire as to whether he was sick and go to assist him. Now if you ask, the answer is: Is it your business? Can't I stay home? We are getting so independent when going to the same Bible study class everyone drives along even though we live around the corner. You don't call anyone, just start your car. Prosperity weakens our religious beliefs. It weakens the sense of community within the church. People don't have to go to church. Although we are gathering more money every year for MCC,

even over-subscribing our budget, it doesn't mean very much.

Weddings have changed a lot from when I was young. The dress is completely different, the whole procession is different. There is so much stress on outward things. Old ministers believed that the marriage sermon was to bring marriage event to a climax and then you ask couple if they still want to join their hands in marriage. Now it is taken for granted that you marry them first and then have the sermon. The vows too have changed. Couples write their vows themselves. I married my grandson and they wrote the vows so that I could use them. They differ from the ones I used to use. The trend is for couples to speak to one another "I". The church views the joining as for life and parting is against the Bible. Although we have a number of couples that do not live together and are not divorced. Still belong to one marriage. Church is becoming more lenient. At first these people would be locked out. We would consult with them and give them ample time and if they would not come to an agreement they would be put out of the church. Now we have 6 cases.

The church as a whole is against marrying divorced people, but there are cases. We look at individual cases. The last war brought on a lot of things too because one partner disappeared for many many years and after years they would remarry and later the other partner would show up. Very hard question to deal with. Church does not want to be too hard on this because it happened to so many of their people. Although now it is different again, people have a choice.

The order of service has changed gradually because of the language. It is good that it has because there is always room for improvement. The role of outreach has changed considerably. With prosperity outreach is a lot greater than it was through Conferences and opportunities.

VOLUNTARY SERVICE IN MEXICO

We went as volunteers to Mexico. Voluntary service is a good thing to do when you retire. In 1973, the General Conference asked for volunteers to go to Mexico where they have a church of approximately 200 members. One school is out in the country with a dormitory and we served as houseparents for two years. I also helped out as Minister and gave communion. My first wife died in 1970 and I remarried in November 1971. Most of the teachers in Mexico were from Canada. Mennonites moved to Mexico in 1922 from Manitoba and Saskatchewan. At that time, the Canadian government wanted them to study English. Up until then they knew hardly any English only German. The government insisted that some of their education had to be in English. These Mennonites thought that this would cause them to lose their identity and sold their farms and moved away. Up to 10,000 moved. They purchased big areas of land and settled in villages, but kept by themselves. They were not to accept anything worldly, not supposed to ride tractors with rubber tires, no cars. Some farmers because of the rough land bought rubber tires and were ex-communicated from the church. This was very hard for them because no one would speak to them. If a son was excommunicated he was not allowed to sit at the table and eat, he had to wait outside until prayers were done and then he could come to eat but had to eat alone. This group of Mennonites called themselves "Rheinlander" in Manitoba. They came from Russia in 1874. They even kept to themselves in Russia. Some

members did not go along with all this and bought tractors with rubber tires and bought cars which they hid in a garage. But when this was noticed they were thrown out of the church. So the General Conference sent people to form a church for these outcasts. Some are even moving back to Canada since fields are greener here. The Old Church has no mission, no outreach, no MCC offerings, nor do they do anything for their neighbours the Mexicans regardless of how poor they are. They chose Mexico because they could buy land and keep to themselves. They had also sent a delegation to Paraguay.

We enjoyed our years in Mexico very much. A year ago we went back to visit.

BURIAL SOCIETY

The burial society is another change. The idea originated in Manitoba late in the 1920s. Since funerals were expensive in this country, we decided to chip in and help people. In Vineland we didn't do anything about it until Cornelius Enns died. We decided to make a start and paid either one or two dollars a piece. Then we had an organizational meeting and elected a Chairman, Treasurer but no one is on salary or getting paid for the job. Now we have a large organization in Vineland and another one in Virgil. Approximately 80 or 90% of the Mennonites that are here joined the society. Since we all have to die, this expense will come sooner or later and people join and they don't have much trouble collecting the annual fees. It costs \$5. per adult and \$2.50 per child. All of my children even those in the U.S. belong to it. I pay for it and they reimburse me. Today organizers do not work on it full-time but they get paid approximately \$250-\$300 per year for expenses. Money is on deposit at the credit union, we have around \$25,000 annually but it takes almost that much and sometimes a little bit more. If it takes more they raise the dues. In Virgil the dues were increased to \$6. Its a non-profit organization. Only Mennonites can be members. If you marry a Mennonite you can join. The reason it is not open to others is because it would grow too large. That's why the Virgil one was formed. Vineland became so big they were going to have to engage someone full-time. The two were split so that would not be necessary.