



MAKING A HOME IN THE CITY:
MENNONITE BRETHREN URBANIZATION IN CALIFORNIA
1895-1960

The Mennonites who migrated from Russia to North America beginning in the 1870s were a decidedly rural people. Most had lived for decades in agricultural colonies in South Russia, where they had little contact with major cities. Even before coming to Russia, these Mennonites had a long tradition of rural existence in Prussia or the Netherlands. Some of them--or at least their ancestors--had lived in major European cities such as Danzig or Amsterdam, but by the 1870s such past urban experiences had little relevance for most Russian Mennonites on their way to America.

Their choices of destinations in North America confirmed the rural preferences of these Mennonites. Like most German-speaking immigrants, Mennonites from Russia moved to rural farming communities in the Midwest. The Mennonite migration of the 1870s and 1880s resulted in no urban settlements whatsoever.

For Mennonite Brethren, the inclination toward rural settlement also reflected conference policy. At the 1883 MB General Conference in Henderson, Nebraska, delegates passed a resolution on living in cities. They agreed that while members could not be forbidden to move to the city, they should be warned of the dangers accompanying such a decision. Evidently the secretary assumed that everyone knew what those dangers were, since he chose not to enumerate them in the conference minutes.¹

Over the following half century most Mennonite Brethren adhered to the guidelines of 1883. Those warnings notwithstanding, however, increasing numbers of Mennonite Brethren did move to the city in the next several decades.

¹*Bericht über unsere Konferenz, abgehalten in Nebraska, Hamilton Co., am 12. November 1883, 15.*

While the first period of large scale Mennonite Brethren urbanization in North America took place during the period from 1940 to 1960, the origins of this phenomenon can be traced back to the turn of the century. During this period a small number of Mennonite Brethren relocated from the Midwest to southern California, where they established the first MB community in that state. California represents the location of the earliest recognizable urbanization among North American Mennonite Brethren. Today it remains the most heavily urbanized MB center in the United States, and, together with Vancouver, Winnipeg and southern Ontario, is one of the four major urban MB centers in North America. This study will examine MB urbanization only in California. The process of comparing and contrasting this story with other urban areas in the MB Church remains for some future setting.

The first Mennonite Brethren known to have settled in the Los Angeles Basin were Johann and Justina Ratzlaff, who moved from Henderson, Nebraska to Glendora in the spring of 1895. While Glendora was a small town in the 1890s, it was located only about twenty miles east of Los Angeles, one of the fastest growing cities in the country. With a population of eleven thousand in 1880, Los Angeles had grown to fifty thousand by 1889 and over 170,000 by 1900. Nearby Glendora could not have helped but been affected by such growth.

It seems that loneliness would have been the least of the Ratzlaffs worries in such a place. Yet their earliest letters from there printed in the *Zionsbote* indicate that they were indeed lonely. In June of 1895 Johann Ratzlaff noted that he and his wife were "physically well but spiritually lacking. We miss our fellow believers here. We must pray and believe that

some will come here."² The Ratzlaffs would pray and hope for several years before other church members joined them. By 1902 Peter and Maria Wall had moved to nearby Azusa. Shortly after their arrival, the Walls reported meeting with other Mennonite Brethren there, suggesting that they and the Ratzlaffs were not the only ones in the area.³ A funeral for the Ratzlaff's two-year old son in Azusa during the summer of 1903 drew forty of "unserer Deutschen" ("our Germans"), a common term then used by Mennonite Brethren to describe fellow church members in non-German contexts such as this.⁴

Rather than settling in a compact area, Mennonite Brethren migrants to southern California scattered across the region. The Walls reported visiting their children in Los Angeles in the spring of 1903, with whom they travelled twenty-five miles southeast to Anaheim to attend the dedication of a German Baptist Church led by Johann Berg, a former Mennonite Brethren from Marion County, Kansas. While in Anaheim the Walls also visited with a Mr. Huebert, who had come to visit his children, and the Peter Bergs, who lived there as well.⁵ They reported in September of that year that Mennonite Brethren were scattered over a forty mile area, and that they were trying to visit as many of them as possible.⁶ In April of 1904 the Walls traveled to Long Beach,

²Johann Ratzlaff, correspondence from Glendora, 23 June 1895, *Zionsbote* 3 July 1895, 4. See also Justina Ratzlaff, correspondence from Glendora, *Zionsbote* 26 August 1896, 3.

³Peter and Maria Wall, "Aus California," *Zionsbote* 26 November 1902, 2-3.

⁴Maria Wall, correspondence from Los Angeles, 1 July 1903, *Zionsbote*, 15 July 1903, 4.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Peter and Maria Wall, correspondence from Los Angeles, 14 September 1903, *Zionsbote*, 23 September 1903, 3-4.

about fifteen miles south of Los Angeles, where Peter conducted evangelistic meetings.⁷

On August 14, 1904 Mennonite Brethren in the Los Angeles area gathered for a business meeting at the home of Peter and Maria Wall. At this meeting they agreed to conduct quarterly meetings beginning the first Sunday of September.⁸ One can argue that this decision represents the first organized Mennonite Brethren congregation in California, ten months before the group at Reedley formally organized itself. The quarterly meetings were thrown temporarily off track when Peter Wall, who seems to have been the leader of the group, died on September 3. After a brief delay, the group gathered in a Long Beach school house for its first meeting on October 9, 1904.⁹ Six months later itinerant evangelist Johann Harms travelled from Kansas to conduct meetings at Long Beach and baptized ten persons there into the Mennonite Brethren Church. The candidates for baptism came from various towns, including Pasadena, Los Angeles and Anaheim. Thirty-four members attended the baptismal service.¹⁰

Mennonite Brethren in the Los Angeles area continued to meet on a more or less quarterly basis for the next few years. The congregation suffered a serious blow in 1907, when several families moved to Escondido, a small town

⁷Peter Wall, correspondence from Los Angeles, 12 April 1904, *Zionsbote*, 20 April 1904, 8; Peter and Maria Wall, correspondence from Los Angeles, 9 May 1904, *Zionsbote*, 25 May 1904, 7.

⁸Peter and Maria Wall, correspondence from Los Angeles, 15 August 1904, *Zionsbote*, 24 August 1904, 3.

⁹Cornelius and Katharina Nickel, correspondence from Long Beach, *Zionsbote*, 7 September 1904, 7.

¹⁰Johann Harms, "Ein Tauffest in Long Beach, Californien," *Zionsbote*, 26 April 1905, 3.

north of San Diego. Franz C. Penner of Long Beach, one of the first to move, noted that because the Mennonite Brethren were so scattered throughout the Los Angeles area, some preferred to move to a more compact settlement.¹¹ While Los Angeles Mennonite Brethren continued to meet together in the following years, the group seems to have lacked the same level of energy and organization that existed during the years 1904-1906. The Los Angeles congregation, which appeared in the General Conference Yearbook lists of MB churches in 1905 and 1906, vanished from those lists beginning in 1907.¹²

Prospects for a Mennonite Brethren church in Los Angeles brightened again in the 1920s, particularly with the arrival of young adults coming to study at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (Biola). The Los Angeles Mennonite Brethren Church organized itself with forty-two charter members on June 22, 1924, almost twenty years after the first quarterly meeting of Mennonite Brethren in Los Angeles.¹³

For a few Mennonite Brethren the city was a place to settle; for others it was a place in which to evangelize. Rather than meeting the needs of MB members living in the city, these city mission programs reached out primarily to people of lower socio-economic backgrounds with no church affiliation.¹⁴

¹¹Franz C. Penner, correspondence from Escondido, 19 February 1907, *Zionsbote*, 27 February 1907, 3; "Thrifty People Here," *Escondido Times*, 15 February 1907, 3.

¹²The 1906 list describes the congregation as "Anaheim" rather than "Los Angeles"; both designations refer to the same group.

¹³J.F. Harms, *Geschichte der Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde* (Hillsboro, Kans.: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, [1924]), 168-170; PDC Yearbook 1924, 12-13.

¹⁴John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), 199.

The programs often directed their efforts at children, who generally were more receptive to the message and who the missionaries hoped would influence their parents for the Gospel.

The Mennonite Brethren Church adopted its first city mission program in 1909 in Minneapolis; another mission was established in Winnipeg in 1913. Discussions regarding such a project in California first took place at the 1913 Pacific District Conference. There Bernhard J. Friesen, pastor of the Bakersfield Mennonite Brethren Church, expressed the opinion that the time had come for Mennonite Brethren on the West Coast to make a start in this area. Friesen cited the need for such a program in Bakersfield, a city of fifteen thousand with a church population of only 1500. In Bakersfield, said Friesen, "Suffering, godlessness and sin may be found on every street."¹⁵ The Conference discussed Friesen's comments at length, but decided that it was too small in number and weak in finances to begin such a project. It did, however, appoint a committee to examine the issue further.¹⁶

Unwilling to wait for the conference, Friesen undertook the work as a local project of the Bakersfield Mennonite Brethren Church. At the 1914 sessions of the Pacific District Conference in November, Friesen reported that they had acquired a house in which to conduct a Sunday school program. The members of the Bakersfield Mennonite Brethren Church provided the mission

¹⁵"Bericht vom Felde," *Verhandlungen der dritten Pacific Distrikt Konferenz der M.B. Gemeinde von Nord Amerika*, 15-18 November 1913, 29. All PDC annual reports hereafter cited as "PDC minutes."

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 34.

staff. Evidently impressed with the Bakersfield congregation's initiative, the conference agreed to contribute \$300 to the project.¹⁷

The Bakersfield city mission drew considerable support from the Mennonite Brethren Church established there in the spring of 1910. While Bakersfield hardly represented urbanization on the same scale as Los Angeles, it was a sizable city by the standards of the time. Several members of the Bakersfield church worked in the city, including its first paid minister, B.J. Friesen, who held a second job in the office of a local utility company.¹⁸ The decision of the Bakersfield church to establish a city mission there clearly indicates that they perceived themselves to be living in an urban area.

Reports from the Bakersfield city mission appear in the minutes of the Pacific District Conference for the next few years, but by 1920 had for the most part disappeared. The eventual fate of the city mission program is unclear, since no formal announcement of its closure seems to have appeared in print. For whatever reasons, it was unable to sustain its initial momentum.

Within a few years the Los Angeles congregation had also began city mission projects. Only a few months after the organization of that congregation, it established a Sunday school program in nearby Lynwood under the direction of Jacob D. Hofer. After only about one year, however, the Los Angeles church turned the Lynwood project over to a Baptist congregation.¹⁹

¹⁷B. H. Nikkel, correspondence from Bakersfield, *Zionsbote*, 11 March 1914, 2; 1914 PDC minutes, 51-52.

¹⁸H. and L. Kohfeld, correspondence from Bakersfield, 7 August 1913, *Zionsbote* 13 August 1913, 2.

¹⁹1924 PDC minutes, 12-13; J.D. Hofer, correspondence from Los Angeles, 17 November 1925, *Zionsbote*, 25 November 1925, 7.

Considerably more successful was the city mission project that came to be known as the City Terrace Mennonite Brethren Church. Organized in the fall of 1926 by A.W. and Margaret Friesen, the mission originally targeted the Jewish and Catholic population of east Los Angeles, focusing particularly on Sunday schools and after school clubs for the children of the neighborhood. By 1929 the Friesens reported a Sunday school enrollment of 110 and a staff of twelve to fifteen workers.²⁰

Throughout the 1930s the Pacific District repeatedly discussed whether it should accept greater financial responsibility for the City Terrace mission. In 1940 the district took a major step in that direction by agreeing to purchase property and fund the construction of a building at Whiteside and Herbert street, which was completed in 1942.

Early reports from City Terrace emphasize the work there among Jewish people. By the mid 1940s, however, this section of Los Angeles had undergone significant demographic shifts. An increasingly diverse ethnic population complicated the mission's program. In his 1945 report to the Pacific District Conference, A.W. Friesen noted that "it is difficult to harmonize the many nationalities that attend."²¹ The following year he reported that "more and more colored people are moving into the district," and that "this has caused quite a problem--many of the white people object and keep their children at home."²² In 1947 the mission found a temporary solution by conducting separate Sunday school and vacation Bible schools for the white and "colored"

²⁰A.W. and Margaret Friesen, correspondence from Los Angeles, 24 June 1927, *Zionsbote*, 6 July 1927, 7-8; 1929 PDC minutes, 41.

²¹1945 PDC minutes, 22.

²²1946 PDC minutes, 16-17.

children.²³ In 1954 pastor Wesley Gunther noted that the City Terrace community consisted of three distinct ethnic groups: a Jewish neighborhood, in which the church had worked with little success; a variety of working-class white ethnic groups, with whom the mission had its greatest success in the past; and a dominant Hispanic population, with whom Gunther suggested "our greatest opportunities lie in the future."²⁴ His assessment of the future was largely correct, since in subsequent years the City Terrace church's work became increasingly Hispanic.

Despite these efforts at settlement and mission work in Los Angeles and Bakersfield, the Mennonite Brethren Church in California was still overwhelmingly rural by 1940. However, the creation of MB congregations in San Jose (1940) and Fresno (1942) marked the beginning of more rapid and systematic urbanization among California Mennonite Brethren.

The origins of the San Jose congregation actually date back to the 1920s, shortly after the creation of the Los Angeles Mennonite Brethren Church. In 1925 B.D. Schultz reported in the *Zionsbote* that twenty Mennonite Brethren were living in the San Jose area. Since they had no minister, they attended other churches in the area. Schultz expressed hope, however, that a Mennonite Brethren congregation could soon be established.²⁵ A little over one year later Jacob J. Unruh reported that he and his wife met on Sunday afternoons with three other MB families, and that they had discussed the possibility of

²³1947 PDC minutes, 25.

²⁴1954 PDC minutes, 19.

²⁵B. D. Schultz, correspondence from San Jose, 24 November 1925, *Zionsbote* 9 December 1925, 4.

regular Sunday evening worship services.²⁶

Many of the Mennonite Brethren who moved to San Jose during the 1920s and 1930s took employment at local fruit canneries. Jacob J. Unruh indicated that he had done so in 1927, and there had "experienced a taste of slavery." In addition to the difficult and unpleasant work, Unruh complained of "all the godless people who work there." He noted that "it requires much grace not to be dragged along by them. . . . It has been a great struggle for me, but the Lord has given me the victory."²⁷

Job opportunities in the canneries during the depression-ridden 1930s brought increasing numbers of Mennonite Brethren to San Jose. Many stayed only for the summer, but by the late 1930s more decided to make their homes in San Jose. This growing permanent MB population led to renewed interest in starting a congregation there. In March 1940 a group met with C.N. Hiebert from Hillsboro, Kansas in the home of Abe and Anna Gerbrandt. Hiebert led the service in German, reportedly a source of great encouragement for a group that out of necessity had been attending various English speaking churches in San Jose. Bolstered by Hiebert's visit, the group began meeting every other Sunday afternoon, and after about two months began weekly Sunday morning services. In September Dick Gerbrandt accepted the call to be their first mini-

²⁶J. J. Unruh, correspondence from San Jose, 26 January 1927, *Zionsbote*, 2 February 1927, 10-11.

²⁷J. J. Unruh, correspondence from San Jose, 7 October 1927, *Zionsbote*, 19 October 1927, 8.

ster. The congregation held an organizational service on October 13, 1940 with twenty charter members.²⁸

A similar, though accelerated, process took place in Fresno. Hope for employment during the depression brought several rural MB individuals and families there beginning in the late 1930s. Most seem to have taken jobs in sales, construction or machine work. The group met socially for the first time in 1938, and within several months began meeting for mid-week worship services in a series of rented facilities. By 1941 the group had started a Sunday school program and rented a building on a long-term basis. The little group suffered a setback that year when their lay leader, John F. Krause, was transferred out of Fresno by his employer, the Standard Oil Company. Situations of involuntary relocation like this were seldom encountered in rural Mennonite Brethren churches. In January of 1942 the Fresno Mennonite Brethren Church organized with forty-seven charter members.

The time between the first identifiable MB settlement in San Jose and the organization of a congregation there was fifteen years. In Fresno the process took only a little more than five years. The close proximity of Fresno to the large MB congregation in Reedley undoubtedly was a factor in this difference. Mennonite Brethren coming from other areas could live and work in the city of Fresno yet still attend an established MB congregation in Reedley. Most Mennonite Brethren in Fresno drove each Sunday to Reedley during the first few years. Furthermore, Reedley served as a "feeder" for the growing MB community in Fresno. Persons in Reedley seeking work outside a small town environment

²⁸P.F. Wiebe, correspondence from Sunnyvale, 11 March 1940, *Zionsbote* 20 March 1940, 7; Richard Gerbrandt, "A History of Lincoln Glen Church, San Jose, California," photocopy [available in Center for MB Studies, Fresno], 1988; 1940 PDC minutes, 10.

would have tended to seek such opportunities first in nearby Fresno before looking further afield. Of the original forty-seven charter members, more transferred their memberships from Reedley than any other location.²⁹

The congregations in San Jose and Fresno grew rapidly in the ensuing years. San Jose surpassed one hundred members by 1943, exceeded two hundred by 1948 and reached three hundred in 1956. Fresno's growth was even more rapid. In less than two years it had one hundred members. By 1949 it had two hundred, had grown to three hundred by 1952 and surpassed four hundred in 1955. The creation in Fresno of Pacific Bible Institute (1944) and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (1955) undoubtedly drew even larger numbers of Mennonite Brethren to that city than would otherwise have been the case.

The accelerated pace of urbanization of California Mennonite Brethren beginning in the 1940s occurred in part because of larger economic trends. Production demands accompanying the Second World War caused a major transformation of California's economy. Orders for all manner of products soared in the early 1940s, bringing the depression to a dramatic close. Thousands of new residents moved to California cities, or relocated from rural to urban California, many seeking employment in defense-related industries.³⁰ The Mennonite Brethren who came in increasing numbers to California's cities in the 1940s were part of this larger phenomenon. While no statistics are available indicating how many Mennonite Brethren entered jobs directly related to defense production during the 1940s, it seems more than coincidental that MB

²⁹Bethany Mennonite Brethren Church Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, Cal.

³⁰Richard B. Rice, William A. Burrough and Richard J. Orsi, *The Elusive Eden: a New History of California* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 443-446.

membership in urban areas would shoot up simultaneously with the demands of the defense economy. Even those Mennonite Brethren who chose not to enter defense industry-related jobs would have found improved job opportunities in urban areas due to the general economic stimulation of the wartime economy.

San Jose and Fresno were not the only two urban centers to draw new Mennonite Brethren migration; the Los Angeles congregation did so as well. Organized in 1924 with about fifty members, it doubled its membership by the end of that decade but then dropped to about seventy-five members during the depression. The onset of the Second World War, however, coincided with an increase in the congregation's membership: from seventy-three members in 1941 to 119 in 1942, eventually climbing to 137 members by the end of the war. While these are not large numbers, the increase is dramatic when compared to the stagnant and even declining growth rate of the previous decade.

Through the 1940s the Pacific District Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches took a largely passive role in the urbanization process. The conference was content for the most part to let its city members fend for themselves. Individual MB families sought one another out, began meeting on an informal basis, and eventually reached a point at which they wished to organize a regular congregation. Not until that point did the Conference, through the Board of Home Missions, generally become involved with the new group. Nor did the conference take much initiative in establishing city mission programs. The missions in Bakersfield, Lynwood and East Los Angeles all arose from local initiative; only after several years did the Conference provide major support for Bakersfield and City Terrace.

Beginning in the 1950s, as the pace of urbanization quickened, the Pacific District Conference became a more active participant in developing

urban congregations and mission projects. When its churches were still overwhelmingly rural, the conference could afford to take a casual attitude toward the few members who ventured to the cities; as that number increased the conference was forced to take them more seriously or risk losing a significant portion of its membership. Rather than waiting for almost fully organized congregations to approach it for assistance, the Board of Home Missions began to enter the process at a much earlier stage, offering help and encouragement almost from the outset.

The earliest example of this changing attitude is evident in Board of Home Missions discussions regarding the establishment of new congregations in Sacramento and Santa Cruz during 1951 and 1952. In the spring of 1951 Board members met with four MB families in Sacramento about becoming the nucleus of a new congregation, and the following year agreed to "accept the challenge of the Sacramento field with definite plans to establish a church there."³¹ However, not until 1964 was a Mennonite Brethren congregation organized in Sacramento. That the Board would become involved with such a small core group so early in the process marks a radical departure from its earlier policies toward developing urban congregations.

The same holds true for Santa Cruz. Aware that a small group of MB families were living in that city, the Board sent Allen Fast to hold four weeks of meetings in Santa Cruz. By the time of the Pacific District Conference in November, Fast could report a core group of seven families and

³¹Board of Home Missions meetings, 2 July 1951 and 21 May 1952, PDC Home Missions Records, Center for MB Studies.

optimistically announced that a new Mennonite Brethren Church had been born.³² Within a few months, however, dissension arose within the group, some of them preferring to establish an independent congregation rather than one in the MB conference. By May of 1953 the Board of Home Missions had abandoned the Santa Cruz project.³³

As is evident in the examples of Sacramento and Santa Cruz, this new Home Missions approach carried with it the potential for failure, or at least delayed success. Under the old methodology, the Board waited until an urban congregation had proven itself ready for membership in the conference, and therefore was reasonably assured of surviving for the foreseeable future. Now that the Board had begun entering the process earlier, no such assurances existed.

Early difficulties notwithstanding, the Board of Home Missions had committed itself to a program of urban church planting. This new commitment can be seen in Board Secretary Dan Goertzen's report to the 1953 Pacific District Conference, in which he stated,

as to the future the hope of Home Mission lies in the establishing of new indigenous churches in our rapidly expanding suburban areas. The natural barriers of language and culture have to a large extent disappeared for this generation. . . . New neighborhoods are being built up and established in nearly every large city, and in these districts many of our own Mennonite Brethren young couples find themselves. These areas offer the greatest opportunity for Home Mission to this generation.³⁴

³²Board of Home Missions Executive Committee meeting, 15 September 1952, PDC Home Missions Records, CMBS; 1952 PDC minutes, 30.

³³Board of Home Missions meetings, 14 February 1953, 10 March 1953, 9 April 1953, 25 May 1953, PDC Home Missions Records, CMBS.

³⁴1953 PDC minutes, 14.

The Board of Home Missions implemented this vision by establishing three urban congregations during the 1950s: in Fresno, Pacoima (later Arleta) and Santa Clara. Two of these congregations resulted from outreach and growth within existing urban congregations; the third represented MB urbanization in a new area.

By the early 1950s MB population in Fresno had grown to such a point that discussions took place regarding a second congregation there. A formal request to that effect was made to the Fresno Mennonite Brethren Church in fall of 1953, and by the spring of 1954 the Board of Home Missions took initiative for this project. Large numbers of MB families had moved to the southeast part of the city, resulting in the decision to locate the new congregation in the area.³⁵ In 1955 land was set aside adjacent to the proposed campus of Pacific Bible Institute and Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and in 1957 the Butler Avenue Mennonite Brethren Church was organized there.

A similar process took place in Santa Clara. The San Jose Mennonite Brethren Church organized a Sunday school project in the El Camino district of that city, which by 1956 had an enrollment of one hundred. A large upper middle class population with no church in the area convinced Board of Home Mission members that El Camino was a prime location for a new congregation.³⁶ The Board offered to pay for the lot and one-quarter of the initial building

³⁵Board of Home Missions meetings, 30 March 1954 and 29 June 1954, PDC Home Missions Records, CMBS.

³⁶"San Jose trip of some of the members of the Board for Home Missions and one member of the Board of Trustees of the M.B. Pacific District Conference," 3 May 1956, PDC Home Missions Records, CMBS.

costs for a new church in Santa Clara.³⁷ This 25/75 percent split became the regular practice for subsequent Home Missions funding projects. The Pacific District Conference accepted the El Camino church at its 1956 sessions.

Butler Avenue and El Camino represented outreach by local urban congregations; the Board of Home Missions carried primary responsibility for beginning a work in the San Fernando Valley north of Los Angeles. In November of 1955 Dan Goertzen reported to the Pacific District Conference on an appeal from four or five young couples living in the Burbank area, and noted that more MB families were likely to move to the area in the coming years. Goertzen encouraged the conference to consider their request, stating that "we cannot disappoint them. . . . A work is needed to conserve those who will go there in the years to come."³⁸

The San Fernando group met for the first time in December of 1955, with an attendance of about twenty. In June of 1956 the group began meeting for regular worship in the town of Pacoima and at that time adopted the name Valley Mennonite Brethren Church. All of the original participants were young Mennonite Brethren families, most of whom had come to the area for education or work. Also included were several young Mennonite Brethren men fulfilling government alternative service assignments. In June 1956 Arthur Wiebe visited the fledgling congregation and submitted a report to the Board of Home Missions. He noted that the "youth and enthusiasm of the group . . . argues well for the future of this work." However, such a group also lacked long term

³⁷Board of Home Missions and Board of Trustees meeting, 7 May 1956, PDC Home Missions Records, CMBS.

³⁸1955 PDC minutes, p. 18.

stability, since those in the area for school or government service would likely not remain beyond that time.³⁹

Accepted by the Pacific District Conference in 1956, the Valley Mennonite Brethren Church moved to nearby Arleta in the early 1960s and adopted the name Community Bible Church. It never achieved a high level of numerical strength and stability, and at its peak in the early 1980s, had fewer than sixty members. The congregation closed in 1987 and the Board of Home Missions appropriated the facility for a new Hispanic congregation.

The concern for conserving existing church members dominated most discussions of urban church planting projects through the 1950s. This can be seen in the concern for MB young people living in the San Fernando Valley, but also in the origins of the Butler Avenue and El Camino congregations. Both of the latter were established in part to meet the needs of MB families living some distance from the existing congregation in their city. While mission projects such as West Park and Sunset Gardens near Fresno in the early 1950s reached out mainly to non-Mennonite Brethren persons, the Board did not use that approach when establishing other congregations. It perceived urban church planting primarily as a conservative action to keep existing members in the conference and only secondarily as a means of bringing in new members.

Shifting demographics brought about the birth of some urban MB congregations; it caused the demise of others. In 1957 the Los Angeles Mennonite Brethren Church closed after twenty-three years. The church was located in south central Los Angeles, an area that underwent significant population

³⁹"Report from Arthur Wiebe on the visit to the Valley Mennonite Brethren Church, Pacoima, California, on June 17, 1956," PDC Home Missions Records, CMBS.

changes during the 1950s. As increasing numbers of minority groups came into the area, most middle-class whites retreated to outlying suburban areas. Included in this "white flight" were many members of the Los Angeles Mennonite Brethren Church. Without a local membership base, the congregation found it increasingly difficult to continue in its existing location. Rather than move, however, the congregation voted to disband and requested that the Board of Home Missions explore establishing a new church in the Downey/Lakewood area southeast of Los Angeles. The Board made numerous investigations into such a project, but no congregation was ever established in that area.⁴⁰

Despite its aggressive efforts to start urban churches in the 1950s, it does not appear that the Board of Home Missions had a significant impact on the urbanization of California Mennonite Brethren. In areas such as Fresno, San Jose/Santa Clara and Bakersfield, where large numbers of MB families settled, stable congregations developed by 1960. In areas such as Santa Cruz, Arleta or Los Angeles, no amount of Home Mission support could create or sustain a congregation in which a strong MB core group did not exist.

In 1883 the Mennonite Brethren Church actively discouraged its members from moving to the city; less than seventy-five years later the city had become very much a part of the church's life. The years from 1940 to 1960 witnessed a remarkable transformation in MB Church demographics. By 1960 approximately 1900 members, or thirty-seven percent of all MB members in California attended church in cities larger than fifty thousand residents.

⁴⁰Board of Home Missions minutes, 24 October 1957; "Report of a trip to the Los Angeles area by some of the members of the Executive Committee and the Executive Secretary of the Board for Home Missions of the M.B. Pacific Conference," 3-4 March 1958; Board of Home Missions Executive Committee minutes, 18 March 1958, PDC Home Missions Records, CMBS.

This figure far exceeded the North American MB average, which stood at about twenty-five percent. Though the urbanization of California's Mennonite Brethren began several decades before 1940, the two decades following that year mark the real beginning of the church's urban transformation. No longer an exclusively rural people, Mennonite Brethren in California were making a home in the city.

Kevin Enns-Rempel
January 5, 1993