

SOME SOUTH CENTRAL CONFERENCE HISTORICAL SKETCHES

By Marion Bontrager

Early settlements: Eastern Mennonites moved to the plains in search of cheaper land. They came in small groups of families. Some settlements failed and became extinct. Leadership was always crucial. The Anabaptist passion of John F. Funk and Preacher Daniel Brundage helped form Mennonite churches in Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska. Funk published the "Herald of Truth" where scattered Mennonites could write for help in forming a church. Brundage traveled in the three states helping form churches and later conferences. Evangelistic meetings were new in the church and contributed to the outreach and growth in communities where there were few if any churches. Many youth in the church accepted Christ which stopped the loss of youth to other denominations.

Beginning Conferences: The Kansas-Nebraska Conference formed in 1879. When the Nebraska-Iowa Conference ended, Kansas joined with the Missouri Conference to form the Kansas-Missouri Conference in 1921. With church plants and settlements in Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Mississippi and Louisiana the name was changed to South Central Mennonite Conference in 1946. Conference had 42 congregations with over 3000 members. (The Mississippi and Louisiana churches later joined the Gulf States Conference) In 1972 there were 44 congregations with over 3500 members. Over half had fewer than 75 members. One fifth of the conference membership was in the Hesston, Kansas, area.

Organization/polity: In 1954 the conference was the first to replace bishops with Regional Overseers appointed by the Executive Committee. In 1971 the conference was divided into 6 districts which would choose a representative to the Coordinating Council and Executive Committee. The Hesston College presidents served ex-officio. But finding enough overseers became a problem. For a few years the conference had an Executive Secretary which gave way to a Conference Minister. Millard Osborne became the first followed by Dick Headings who was a pilot and could fly to distant churches. He was a gifted, relational, positive leader who brought positive feelings toward the conference. The issue with the Rainbow Boulevard Church's position on homosexual relations brought conflict and a focus away from missions leading to his resignation. Howard Keim led the Executive through the process steps created by the Mennonite Church in dealing with churches at variance which was usually about "Welcoming Churches." The pastor of the Harrisonville Mennonite Church (not from Mennonite background) felt the process was too slow and that the church should be ex-communicated immediately. Consequently, nearly all the Missouri churches and two churches in eastern Oklahoma left the conference creating a crisis including financial stress.

Already in Conference Minister Dick Heading's latter years, Howard Hershberger worked to raise resources from individuals and churches. So much finance was used for conference offices that little was left for anything else. Robert Nolt succeeded Headings. After a leave of absence his contract was terminated. John Kauffman of the Mt. Pisgah church in MO became Conference Moderator. He visited churches and sought to maintain conference loyalty. The offices were moved from North Newton to Whitestone Mennonite Church that was graciously free.

Mergers Cooperation that Succeeded and Mergers that Failed

Historical Note: Between 1860 and 1880 in the Midwestern states the Amish Churches divided over acculturation issues resulting in Old Order Amish and Amish Mennonites. The Amish Mennonites then merged with the Old Mennonites during 1915-20. The Amish Mennonites had a congregational polity and the Old Mennonites had conference authority. These two groups merged in the forming of conferences from Ohio west in the U.S. The Pennsylvania (Whitestone) Church was formed by two groups; Amish Mennonites and Old Mennonites. (However, later the groups contributed to a division.) When the Mennonite Church USA was created it was assumed that the different area conferences would also merge. That did not happen in most conferences. From 1972 on there was a growing number of dual conference churches including a

number in South Central and Western District. Mennonite Disaster Service which began at Hesston soon became dual. Hesston College had minister's week for Mennonite Brethren, Western District and South Central conferences. C.P.S. camps during WWII brought various Mennonites together. Some South Central pastors, moderators and a conference minister pushed for merger. Others were hesitant. Beginning in 1972 the two conferences met together for worship and speakers and met separately for business meetings. Joint meetings were held at Bethel College, in Oklahoma, at Lawrence, KS., Hesston, and Texas. When the merger vote failed, relations were strained in South Central Conference. All the dual conference churches in Texas went with Western District. An underlying issue included polity; congregational in Western District and conference polity in South Central. Today the issue of same sex relationships and inclusion of gay and lesbians in membership continues. Some churches are divided about the issue. What is the way forward for the conference?

Previous Challenges Faced: One challenge at the turn of the 20th century was the Holiness movement with its emphasis on needing a second work of grace. The first Kansas-Nebraska conference had a statement affirming the holiness experiences. The second conference meeting reversed the statement!

The First World War challenged, not only the men in the army camps, but faithfulness relative to buying war bonds. The Spring Valley pastor was tarred and feathered and fences painted yellow. At Protection, Kansas, during an evening service, some community men entered the service and nailed a U.S. flag on the front of the church. The town barber shop posted a sign "No Dogs or COs allowed." Several community men took some of a church member's cattle to the sale barn and sold them to buy war bonds in his name. The Western District church at Inola, OK, was burned down.

Hesston Mennonite had the first pipe organ in the Mennonite Church, The women's head veiling was dropped. The divorce issue did not divide the conference. The Mennonite Church at large with evangelistic emphasis and revival meetings did not succumb to the Fundamentalist challenge of putting beliefs above discipleship. The charismatic movement did not divide conference churches.

South Central Conference lost all the dual conference churches in Texas but not many members. The next moderators sought to build a positive spirit and self-image among the churches. "Size is not everything. Let's think of conference in terms of relationships. Conference is led by the Spirit not by organization. Think relationships and organism, not organization... Emphasize evangelism, outreach and church growth." Regional Conference Ministers were appointed with the vision that they would be more coaches than traditional views of conference ministers. Churches could decide whether to affirm the match. With a lower budget, money was being accumulated for church planting. For example, when the McPherson Journey Church plant came up, the conference could help with start-up funds. Moderators and Regional Conference Ministers have devoted much free time in the last decade.

Amzie Yoder, a lifelong successful missionary in Central America was appointed Regional Conference Minister for South Texas Churches (UCIM). He understood persons and cultures and worked with an indigenous approach. Mennonite Mission activity had begun in South Texas after WWII. Two larger churches developed among others at Mathis and Cordero in Brownsville. Some mission workers were paternalistic and stayed too long. The South Texas churches have produced church wide leaders: Ted Chapa, the De León family, Conrado and Felipe Hinojosa among others.

Maintaining relationships and a sense of belonging with the South Texas churches was and is a major challenge. When conference sessions were longer weekends starting Thursday. South Texas persons brought families and stayed in homes. Often lasting relationships were established.

June 11, 2020