

# Canadian Mennonite Women's Societies from 1940 to 1960: More Than Meets the Eye

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## Introduction

When Mennonites immigrated to Canada, Mennonite women's societies, or *Vereine*,<sup>1</sup> were organized in Canada alongside the establishment of churches. A precedent had been set in Gnadenfeld, Russia, the place of a renewal movement in the mid 1840s, a movement which contributed to the formation of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church in 1860. It was within this context, under the preaching of Lutheran evangelist Eduard Wuest, a frequent speaker at Mennonite mission festivals, that women's societies first seemed to emerge--"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."<sup>2</sup> How the church often viewed these societies is evident as early as 1895 in a story told of a Mennonite leader's daughter, who, as secretary to her father, inquired whether the words *Frauen Missions Verein*<sup>3</sup> should be capitalized.<sup>4</sup> The answer was, "No, such a society is only ordinary," to which the daughter

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<sup>1</sup> *Vereine* is the German word for "societies". The singular form, used elsewhere in this paper is *Verein*.

<sup>2</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>3</sup> *Frauen Missions Verein* means "Womens' Mission Society."

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Floyd Pannabecker, *Open Doors: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Church* (Newton: General Conference Mennonite Church, 1975), p. 288. *Frauen* means "women."

replied, "Not right, father, if the words were *Maenner Missions Verein*,<sup>5</sup> then I would have to write in large letters."<sup>6</sup> Known by some as "coffee klatsches," a common perception was that women's *Vereine* were primarily gossip centres. But women, such as Maria Derksen, president of the Ebenezer *Verein* in Steinbach, Manitoba from 1936-1948, defended the women's society against accusations such as these. In her 1944 report she writes:

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.<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1940s, a poem telling the story of how the women's society of the George Street Mennonite church in Kitchener raised the funds to replace the church roof, also illustrates this common perception of Mennonite women's groups--

Once a few men were standing outside the church door  
As if they knew everything, and were thankful for it too.  
They talked about this and that, about women's societies  
It's not all good that they said, "Yes", one interrupted,  
"Why do they sew so much; it's just to pass the time  
They only gossip and turn their heads from their bodies."  
"Yes," said a second man, "They let everything else go;  
They neglect household duties."  
The third one said quietly, "We need money badly.  
Where in all the world will we get it?  
We need this and that in our church.  
We're sitting deep in debt, what can we do?"  
Then they all agreed to approach the *Verein*.  
It wasn't the first time they had done this.

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<sup>5</sup> *Maenner Missions Verein* means "Mens' Mission Society."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Derksen, "Report - 1944," in *Fifty Years: Ebenezer Verein (1936-1986)*, eds. Nettie Neufeld and Jessie Peters (Steinbach: Ebenezer Verein, 1987), p. 14.

And when they asked the women's society if they would help  
An auction was held and see how the money rolled in.<sup>8</sup>

When women in Mennonite women's societies found out I planned to document their contribution within the Mennonite church, several expressed the need for such a history. For instance, a member of the Arelee MB Women's Missionary Fellowship in Saskatchewan wrote, "recognition of women's contributions to church and community is long overdue."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, an examination of historical studies in the field of Mennonites in Canada shows that only a few references have been made to Mennonite women's societies.<sup>10</sup> This lack is not unique to the Mennonite community. For instance, Pauline Bradbrook, who wrote an account of Anglican women's societies in Newfoundland, refers to the same phenomenon--

It is commonly said that the church would not have survived over the years without the support of women. While most people would agree with this observation, there has been little documentation of precisely what their contribution has been or what it has meant to the church.<sup>11</sup>

That Mennonite women have been left out of history is due to a number of factors. Two are mentioned here. First, until recently, women's history has been missing from traditional historical studies which focussed on aspects of historical events and institutions in which women were not involved. Second, even when the field of women's history began to

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<sup>8</sup> A translation from the German poem by Heinz Janzen, composed in the late 1940s, George Street Mennonite Church in Kitchener, before the church roof was replaced.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from the Arelee MB Women's Missionary Fellowship, Arelee, Saskatchewan, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Gloria Neufeld Redekop, "Mennonite Women in Canada: State of the Research," a partial requirement for a PhD program in Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Pauline Bradbrook, "A Brief Account of The Church of England Women's Association in Newfoundland," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 28,2 (October 1986):93.

develop in the 1970s, the emphasis was on the history of feminist thought and feminist organizations. Especially lacking in this new history was the history of non-feminist religious women's organizations. But now, Canadian historians such as Ruth Compton Brouwer maintain there is a growing realization that this story needs to be told as well--

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 fruit in a larger sphere for women.<sup>12</sup>

It is exactly this aspect of "personal spirituality and transcendent concerns"<sup>13</sup> that has characterized Mennonite women's societies, and the 1950s was a period of time when Mennonite women, within the context of their societies, lived out to the full the paradigm that had been established in the first half of the twentieth century.

This paper will discuss Mennonite women's societies in both the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) and the Canadian MB, focussing on their growth during this period, their emphasis on service, their motivation, and the meaning participation in *Vereine* held for Mennonite women.

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth Compton Brouwer, "Transcending the 'Unacknowledged Quarantine': Putting Religion into English-Canadian Women's History," A paper presented to the joint session of the Canadian Society of Church History and Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting, Queen's University, Kingston, June 5, 1991, pp. 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

In Canada, the 1950s was a time of tremendous growth for women's organizations. In the United Church, for example, the attendance in women's societies almost doubled between 1942 and 1955.<sup>14</sup> A similar phenomenon occurred among Mennonite women's societies. In CMC and MB churches established between 1874 and 1952, available sources indicate that there were four times as many new groups organized during the twelve year period of 1947 to 1959 as were formed during the next twenty-seven years, 1960 to 1987.<sup>15</sup>

While we need to be cautious in suggesting a direct correlation, it may be significant that the flowering of Mennonite women's societies occurred concurrently with both the emphasis on women's role as homemaker and the reinforcement of women's subordinate role within the church. In the 1950s both society and church promoted the "happy homemaker" image for women.<sup>16</sup> Besides this emphasis on the role of Mennonite women as homemakers and mothers, there seemed to be increased restriction for Mennonite women within the

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<sup>14</sup> Alison Prentice, et al. *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich, 1988), p. 334.

<sup>15</sup> Between 1947 and 1959, 112 new Mennonite women's societies were organized, whereas between 1960 and 1987, only sixty-six additional societies were formed. Sources were Margaret Gossen Toews, *South Western Ontario Women in Mission (1925-1987)* (n.p., 1987); 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); histories of CMC and MB local congregations; and my 1988 survey of CMC and MB women's societies.

<sup>16</sup> Prentice, et al. *Canadian Women: A History*, p. 311; Anne Bargen, "Too gifted to become a mere housewife?" *The Canadian Mennonite* 4 (September 7, 1956):2; B. Charles Hostetter, "The husband's part in happy home building," *The Canadian Mennonite* 2 (August 27, 1954):6 and "The wife's part in happy home building," *The Canadian Mennonite* 2 (September 3, 1954):6.

church, one indication being the rescindment of ordination. Prior to 1957, both married and single MB female missionaries had been ordained for mission work; the ordination procedure was the same for both men and women. But in 1957, after three years of study by the General Conference of the MB Church, a resolution was accepted, changing the former method of ordination of women to commissioning--

In view of the fact that we as an MB Church, on the basis of clearly conceived scriptural convictions, do 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>17</sup>

It is difficult to determine exactly what the change from ordination to commissioning meant to Mennonite women, but it might be significant that it was during this time that Mennonite women's societies flourished. If the movement was in the direction of further restrictions for women within the church, they certainly could serve God within the context of their societies, thus considering them as their primary outlet for service.

## ***B. The Service Orientation of Mennonite Women's Societies***

Service remained the primary reason for establishment of Mennonite women's societies right through the 1940s and 1950s. Canadian church historian John Webster Grant notes that "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

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<sup>17</sup> *Yearbook of the Forty-Seventh General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1957), p., 106.

missions."<sup>18</sup> Churchwomen's societies were known to respond quickly to expressed needs. Earl Merrick in his book, *These Impossible Women: 100 Years, The Story of the United Baptist Woman's Missionary Union of the Maritime Provinces*, admits that "men have never given women credit for the speed at which they can move when something captures their enthusiasm."<sup>19</sup> MB women's societies were no exception. I recall a particular MB church history class taught at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary by J.B. Toews in which he said that if the Board of Foreign Missions had an urgent financial need, he, as General Secretary, found it to be more effective to contact leaders of MB women's societies than church pastors because then he knew the request would get immediate action.<sup>20</sup>

Mennonite women's societies contributed large sums of money in the support for foreign missions, home missions, and the local church. Mennonite Brethren women's societies generally became aware of potential mission projects through the Board of Foreign Missions of North America.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the societies were considered "a channel through which the Board of Foreign Missions and missionaries could make their needs known."<sup>22</sup> Besides this, there were times when women's societies contributed remarkable amounts of money to

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<sup>18</sup> John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company Inc., 1988), p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Earl Merrick. *These Impossible Women: 100 Years, The Story of the United Baptist Woman's Missionary Union of the Maritime Provinces* (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1970), p. 33.

<sup>20</sup> Class lecture for the course, "The Mennonite Brethren Church," Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California, 1982.

<sup>21</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "Women and the Church," in *A Century of Grace and Witness: 1860-1960*, ed. Walter Wiebe (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1960), p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

the local church, as exemplified in the report of MB women's groups of Clearbrook, British Columbia--

It began as a tiny grain in 1934 or 35, with twelve sisters in the home of one of the pioneers. They gathered for fellowship and prayer and were busy with their hands. It is said that money for the material for the first sanctuary built in 1940, which amounted to \$700.00 was raised by the Ladies Fellowship. This was done through a Mission Sale in the Poplar Hall.<sup>23</sup>

As in other Protestant traditions, the annual mission sale became a common way for

Mennonite women across Canada to sell articles they had sewn and knit during the year.<sup>24</sup>

Mennonite women were known to use other creative methods as well to raise money for projects. A group in Saskatchewan writes--

. . . when money was needed for a certain project, an apron was passed around to each member. Then each one would sew a patch onto the apron with a donation underneath it. When it had made its round, the apron was relieved of its patches and the money was sent away.<sup>25</sup>

That this focus on service was central for Mennonite women's societies is illustrated by the names they chose for their groups. The following tables indicate the distribution of names of Mennonite Women's Societies organized in immigrant churches (those established between 1874 and 1952) between 1940 and 1960.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Louise Enns, "Ladies Fellowship Groups, Clearbrook MB Church," in *History of the Clearbrook MB Church: 1936-1986* (n.p., 1986), p. 97.

<sup>24</sup> National Council of Women of Canada, *Women of Canada, Their Life and Work* (National Council of Women of Canada, 1900; reprint ed., 1956), p. 298.

<sup>25</sup> Bartel, *Saskatchewan Women in Mission*, p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> My research of CMC and Canadian MB women's societies covers only societies organized within churches which were established between the first year of Russian Mennonite immigration to Canada (1874) and the last year of immigration (1952). I have traced the growth and development of these societies from their years of establishment until 1988.



**Table 1 - Percentage Distribution of Names of CMC Women's Societies  
1940-1960<sup>27</sup>**

CATEGORY	NAMES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Missions	Sunshine Mission Circle, Loving Deeds Mission Circle, Women's Missionary Society (4x), Mission Helpers (2x), Goodwill Mission Circle, Women in Mission, Mission Circle (4x), Mission Workers, Marissa Mission Group, Mission Helpers, <i>Missionsverein</i>	18	18.6%
Sewing	Sunbeam Sewing Circle, Junior Sewing Circle, Busy Fingers Sewing Circle, <i>Nähverein</i> (2x), Girl's Sewing Club, Sewing Circle (2x)	8	8.3%
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 (2x), Willing Helpers (3x), <i>Wohltätigkeitsverein</i> , Women's Auxiliary, Ladies Aid (13x), Home and Abroad Ladies Aid, <i>Verein Helfende Hände</i> , Ladies Auxiliary, Busy Bees Circle, Merry Co-Workers Club	35	36.1%
Biblical Woman's Name & Aid	Magdalene Ladies Aid	1	1.0%
Biblical Woman's Name	Dorcas Circle, Tabitha Circle, Maria Martha Women's Society, <i>Tabea Verein</i> , (3x), <i>Maria Martha Verein</i>	7	7.2%
Fellowship	Harmony Hearts, Homemakers Fellowship, Fellowship Group, Friendship Circle, Ladies Fellowship (2x), Women's Christian Fellowship	7	7.2%
Other	Young Women's, Guiding Mothers, Morija Circle, <i>Verein</i> (13x), <i>Frauenverein</i> (2x), <i>Abendglocken Verein</i> , <i>Schnetke Conference</i> , <i>Sonnenstrahl Verein</i> <sup>28</sup>	21	21.6% <sup>29</sup>
TOTAL		97	100%

<sup>27</sup> Information on naming was obtained from Toews, *South Western Ontario Women in Mission (1925-1987)*; Froese, *Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission (1942-1977)*; Bartel, *Saskatchewan Women in Mission*; Neufeld, ed., *History of Alberta Mennonite Women in Mission (1947-1977)*; Rempel, *History of B.C. Mennonite Women in Mission (1939-1976)*; and histories of CMC and MB local congregations;

<sup>28</sup> Translation of German names are as follows: *Nähverein*--"Sewing Circle," *Wohltätigkeitsverein*--"Charity Society," *Verein Helfende Hände*--"Helping Hands Society," *Tabea Verein*--"Tabea Society," *Maria Martha Verein*--"Mary Martha Society," *Abendglocken Verein*--"Evening Bells Society," *Schnetke Conference*--"a meeting with a variety of components," and *Sonnenstrahl Verein*--"Sunbeam Society."

<sup>29</sup> The percentage of the "Other" category is high because eleven women's societies called their groups simply, *Verein*.

**Table 2 - Percentage Distribution of Names of MB Women's Societies  
1940-1960<sup>30</sup>**

CATEGORY	NAMES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Missions	Junior Ladies Missionary Prayer Group, Ladies Missionary Prayer Group, Missionary Prayer Group, Sunbeam Mission Band, The Mission Group (2x), Ladies Mission Circle, <i>Missionverein</i> (3x), Women's Missionary Service, Young Ladies Mission Group, <i>Missionskränzchen</i>	13	38.2%
Sewing	Ladies Sewing Circle, Sunshine Sewing Circle	2	5.9%
Aid/Help/Service	Women's Ministries, Willing Helpers (2x), Work and Prayer Group, Ladies Aid, (3x), Christian Service Club	8	23.5%
Biblical Woman's Name	Dorcas Ladies Group, Mary Martha Group, Mary Martha <i>Verein</i> , <i>Tabea Verein</i>	4	11.8%
Biblical Name and Fellowship	Mary Martha Fellowship	1	3.0%
Fellowship	Ladies Fellowship, Ladies Christian Fellowship, <i>Schwesternbund</i>	3	8.8%
Other	Pleasant Hour, Sunshine Club, <i>Frauenverein</i> <sup>31</sup>	3	8.8%
TOTAL		34	100%

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, names denoting missions, sewing, aid, help, and service (including names of biblical women who served) comprised 71.2 percent of CMC women's society names and 82.4 percent of MB women's society names. During this era, only 7.2 percent of CMC societies and 11.8 percent of MB societies identified themselves as fellowship groups. Parenthetically, this number was to increase substantially after 1970.

Clearly, Mennonite women's societies' primary focus was to serve, especially in the support of missions. But what motivated them? Why were they so eager to serve the church

<sup>30</sup> Information was obtained from reports of MB women's societies within local congregation histories. Since we do not have access to as much source material about MB women's societies, the number of names of societies is fewer than in CMC women's societies.

<sup>31</sup> Translation of names not mentioned previously are: *Missionskränzchen*--"Mission Sewing Group" and *Schwesternbund*--"Sisters' Union."

in this way?

### **C. The Biblical Motivation of Mennonite Women's Societies**

Mennonite women received their motivation for society work from their faith experience; their involvement was religiously motivated. 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. . . . We adopted as our motto: "Serve him with a perfect heart and willing mind." I Chr. 28:9"<sup>32</sup> It was customary for Mennonite women's societies to choose biblical texts as mottos at the point of the groups' establishment, and in the choice of these mottos we can see their biblical motivation for service.

Mottos chosen between 1940 and 1960 were predominantly service oriented. The most common was Gal. 6:9,10--"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."<sup>33</sup> Examples of other mottos chosen during this time include--

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

She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy (Pro. 31:20).

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<sup>32</sup> Bartel, *Saskatchewan Women in Mission*, p. 68.

<sup>33</sup> Biblical references are from the King James Version, since that version was most commonly used in Mennonite churches in this time period. This particular translation of the Bible did not use inclusive language. Thus, the words "men" and "brethren" appear in biblical references cited in this paper.

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

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

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).

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).

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).

Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me (Matt. 25:40b).

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only (James 1:22a).

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. 5:20).

The frequent reference in their mottos to service--"serve," "do," "deed," "well-doing," and "good works," indicates women's identification of their work with obedience to the biblical text. From it they took their mandate for service. In fact, some of these verses are in the form of a command--"serve one another," "serve the Lord," and "be ye doers." Mennonite women seemed to consider that through their society work they were "labourers together with God" (I Cor. 3:9), and "ambassadors for Christ" (II Cor. 5:20). The opportunity they had to be obedient to their perception of the Christian calling was one factor that made their involvement within societies meaningful. We will now turn our attention to this and other aspects of the meaning societies held for Mennonite women.

#### **D. The Meaning of Women's Societies for Mennonite Women**

Excluded from many of the workings of the institutional church, Mennonite women, within the context of their own societies, were able to contribute to the mission of the church. Their desire to do so is illustrated in this 1944 *Verein* report--

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>34</sup>

Besides offering them the opportunity to serve God, Mennonite women's societies provided a context within which they could receive friendship and personal support. In fact this was considered part of the definition of 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>35</sup>

Writes one president of a Mennonite women's society in the early 1940s--

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>36</sup>

However, the opportunity to serve God and fellowship with each other were not the only benefits of Mennonite women's societies to Mennonite women. Just as significant was the

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<sup>34</sup> Maria Derksen, "Report - 1944," p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Toews, ed. *South Western Ontario Women in Mission: 1925-1987*, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Neufeld and Peters, *Fifty Years: Ebenezer Verein*, p. 13.

spiritual nourishment they received through worship rituals.

The spiritual component of *Verein* meetings was an important aspect for Mennonite women. This was sometimes mentioned as one of their groups' purposes, as was the case in 1959 in the Altona Homemakers Fellowship—"The objective of the group was to promote the spiritual enrichment of the women and to assist in the work of the church."<sup>37</sup> Women's groups of the Leamington MB Church reported that "meetings always had a strong spiritual emphasis with different sisters taking part in scripture reading, devotionals and prayers and singing our favorite hymns."<sup>38</sup> *Verein* worship commonly began with Bible reading, prayer, and singing. Sometimes there was a Bible study or devotional. Business matters were discussed and an offering was taken. For a portion of the meeting, women would often work on their handwork while one member read from a devotional book or the Bible. Meetings generally closed with prayer and eating together.<sup>39</sup>

It is understandable that the components of their worship bore a striking resemblance to the weekly Sunday worship in Mennonite churches. What Mennonite women knew about worship they had learned from the church, where services included prayer, scripture reading, singing, an offering, and sermon(s). But while the services on Sunday morning were commonly male led, Mennonite women, within the context of their societies, could participate in every aspect of their *Verein* worship. Although records indicate that in the early years men often were responsible for the opening and closing of women's meetings with Bible reading

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<sup>37</sup> Froese, *History of Manitoba Mennonite Women in Mission: 1942-1977*, p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> *Leamington Mennonite Brethren Church* (n.p.: n.d.), p. 38.

<sup>39</sup> Katherine Harder, ed. *The Greendale Mennonite Brethren Church (1931-1981)* (Cloverdale: Greendale Mennonite Brethren Church, 1981), pp. 166-67.

and prayer, the women's society became a context in which, for the most part, women could determine how their own 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 1986, Canadian Mennonite historians Frank Epp and Marlene Epp argued that "the women's organization traditionally was, and in some ways still is, the primary vehicle for channelling women's creativity and leadership skills."<sup>40</sup> As such, we could ask whether Mennonite women, perhaps inadvertently, were participating in a parallel church, so to speak. In fact, this possibility is suggested in a recent publication on the ministry of MB women in the church, in which Katie Funk Wiebe writes--

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>41</sup>

In any case, Mennonite women's societies became a context where Mennonite women, motivated by the biblical text, could serve God through the support of missions, fellowship with the sisterhood, receive spiritual nourishment, and fully participate in every aspect of their worship ritual. While restricted in their roles in the larger church institution, they made up for it in their own *Verein* meetings, in which, *de facto*, they formed their own *ekklesia*, in many ways parallel to the local Mennonite church. Truly in the story of Mennonite women's societies from 1940 to 1960, there is more than meets the eye.

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<sup>40</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), p. 233.

<sup>41</sup> John E. Toews, et al., *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1992), p. 183.