2024

Religious Upheaval in a South Dakota Mennonite Community, 1874-1940

Ryan Mews

RELIGIOUS UPHEAVAL IN A SOUTH DAKOTA MENNONITE COMMUNITY, 1874-1940

By

Ryan Mews

B.S, University of South Dakota, 2019

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History

History Program
In the Graduate School
The University of South Dakota
May 2024

The members of the Committee appointed to examine
the Thesis of Ryan Mews
find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

DocuSigned by:
Molly Rozum
0408347B2EA144F...
Chairperson

DocuSigned by:
Sara E. Lampert
BB30A2541D5849E...

DocuSigned by:
98257F9DDC0345D...

ABSTRACT

In 1874, multiple colonies of German-Russian Mennonites and Hutterites entered the Dakota Territory to settle into tightknit religious communities. These Anabaptists sought to escape religious persecution and assimilation in Russia but found themselves influenced by American religious groups. Their history of isolationism caused these groups to draw lines between their congregations that kept them small but allowed them to interact with new ideas in different ways, but caused them to redefine their German Mennonite identity. One such influence, called fundamentalism, erupted from the Presbyterian Church, encouraged evangelical works in America, and sought to combat modernism in religious institutions.

In this thesis, I argue that four South Dakota Mennonite congregations: Salem-Zion, Salem, Bethesda, and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Churches interacted with fundamentalism and evangelicals in different ways during a religious upheaval from 1920 to 1940. Fundamentalism influenced these congregations through outside ministers and through the local Freeman Junior College, which embraced fundamentalism due to financial and local pressures. Because of these different approaches, some congregations succeeded in enlarging their congregations and others suffered from membership losses. I argue that adaptability and geography played a role in how much fundamentalist evangelicals influenced these congregations as they slowly accepted American culture.

By 1940, this religious upheaval cooled due to religious divides, a string of bad evangelicals, and acceptance of a conservative fundamentalism that eschewed militancy and convinced the Mennonite population of Freeman-Marion to step away from evangelicals. This shift differed from other Mennonite congregations in America, who interacted with evangelicals until 1960 and continued to debate their usage. However, Freeman-Marion Mennonites in southeastern South Dakota did accept new religious ideas that filtered into their congregations as they interacted with American Protestants.

Thesis Advisor DocuSigned by: Dr. Molly P Rozum 0408347B2EA144F...

Dr. Molly Rozum

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not be possible without the help and patience of those who worked with me during this process. I would like to thank my outstanding professors: Molly Rozum, Sara Lampert, and Nathan Bates. Their guidance has allowed me to deepen my understanding of the area and residents. I would also like to thank Samuel Herley for allowing me to help transcribe the Mennonite interviews at the USD Oral History Center, which allowed me to learn more about Mennonite evangelicals and troubles that they faced in the early 20th century.

I would like to thank the staff at Bethel College and Augustana University, who helped me access their collection and deepen my understanding of their relationship with the Freeman-Marion Anabaptists. In particular, it was a joy to chat with Director Cisar over the Goertz Collection. Furthermore, I'd like to the staff at the Heritage Hall Museum and Archives in Freeman, SD for their assistance in drawing my interest to the region and help in finding material. Our conversations on the region and it's residents have been incredibly fascinating.

I am grateful to my former classmates: Ryan Moore, Katherine Kemp, Feith Murerwa, Kaia Brose, and Sabrina Escalante for their feedback in the initial phases of my thesis and words of encouragement.

Finally, I am incredibly thankful to the residents of the Freeman-Marion area as my discussions with them have been insightful and gave me a look into their history and troubles as their ancestors navigated the post-WWI environment and religious difficulties. I find myself learning new facts with every conversation.

Danke!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Introduction: Mennonite Identity and Anabaptist Faith

Mennonite identity is a question that has haunted the Anabaptist faith since its emergence in 16th century Switzerland. Individual independent congregations have continually reexamined their religious and cultural ties to the Mennonite faith as pressures from their surroundings and their own members forced them to redefine what it means to be a Mennonite. Outside factors, like secular governments and non-Anabaptist religious leaders forced Anabaptists to either change their religious beliefs or leave European domains. These banishments caused them to embrace isolationism, which led to congregations following different leaders and adopting different ideas as they moved throughout Europe. The Anabaptists went through a cycle of migration and religious splits since their creation due to the interactions between their beliefs and practices with the outside world. One of these splits centered around the question of evangelism and, later, evangelicalism. Evangelism is the practice of proclaiming the Gospel to gain converts to a Christian religion while evangelicalism refers to a movement started in the 18th century that put an emphasis on conversions, personal piety, and a change of lifestyle centered on being religiously reborn. These two ideas, evangelism and evangelicalism, played a role in shaping Mennonite experiences and identity in America and will be discussed throughout this analysis.

This thesis is focused on the early twentieth century religious challenges to Anabaptist Mennonites as they played out in four main churches in modern day southeastern South Dakota that continue to exist today: the Salem-Zion and Salem Mennonite churches of the Swiss Mennonites, and the Bethesda Mennonite and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren churches of the Low Germans. The Freeman-Marion area contains the largest and most diverse Mennonite colonies in South Dakota. This Anabaptist identity is enhanced by the presence of Hutterite

colonies that settled along Wolf Creek west of Freeman. The Hutterites also faced challenges during their settlement in America and influenced the Mennonite churches and Freeman Junior College, like with the Krimmer Brethren Church, discussed in this thesis, but would require a larger scope to discuss their transformation in the pre-World War Two environment. Chapter one follows the history of Mennonite immigration to the United States and their settlement in the Dakota Territory; chapter two centers on defining fundamentalism and its influence on Freeman Junior College; and chapter three concentrates on how the Freeman-Marion Mennonite community interacted with fundamentalists in the early twentieth century, shifting their German, traditionalist identity into a more American identity that borrowed practices from other denominations. Historians such as Paul Toews, Calvin Redekop, Royden Loewen, and Beulah Hostetler have examined the German-Russian migration to and experiences in the United States and historians like George Marsden and Hostetler have studied the history of evangelicalism, the rise of fundamentalism, and their influences on foreign immigrants in the Great Plains, especially regarding extremely conservative Mennonites. However, I will focus on a culturally and religiously diverse group of Mennonites who interacted with both the outside world and their neighboring Mennonites in South Dakota.

Historians Calvin Redekop, Paul Toews, Beulah Hostetler, and George Marsden have examined the changes to Mennonite identity in the United States as modern American religious ideas influenced traditional German Anabaptist ideas on religion and religious practices. Paul Toews, a Mennonite Brethren historian, argued in his *Mennonite Quarterly Review* article "Fundamentalist Conflict in Mennonite Colleges: a Response to Cultural Transitions?" that fundamentalism affected different Mennonite groups at different times, as he believed that General Conference Mennonites experienced a modernist scare during the 1920s and 1930s

while the Mennonite Brethren did not experience their scare until the 1930s and 1940s.[1] Historian Calvin Redekop, a former Mennonite Brethren, argued in *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (1988) that the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church sought to redefine its identity through the fundamentalist-evangelical movement in the 1930s. This shift by the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church led them to align with American culture and militarism while associating with non-denominational or fundamentalist denominations.[2] I believe that the Mennonite Brethren Churches, especially in South Dakota, felt fundamentalism intensely in the 1920s as will be discussed in chapter three regarding religious challenges to their doctrine.

Religious historian George Marsden wrote heavily in both *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (1991) and *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (2006) on the history of fundamentalism in American culture and stated that it could be viewed through four separate interpretations: social, political, intellectual, and as an American phenomenon. *Fundamentalism and American Culture* sought to delve into the dynamics of fundamentalist thought and action as its adherents reacted to various perceived crises in the twentieth century.[3] Marsden's work addresses the effect of fundamentalism on immigrant groups but only briefly mentions Anabaptism. Historian Beulah Hostetler, in *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements: A Cultural Paradigm* (2002), examines religious movements among Mennonites, arguing that groups differed in their approach to ideas like pietism and fundamentalism.[4] I agree

[1] Paul Toews, "Fundamentalist Conflict in Mennonite Colleges: a Response to Cultural Transitions?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (1983): 244.
[2] Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 20.
[3] George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3-5.
[4] Beulah S. Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements: A Cultural Paradigm* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 5.

with Hostetler's assessment but on a smaller level as she looks at Mennonite groups like the General Mennonite Conference and the Mennonite Brethren groups. I believe that these approaches differed on a colony level as colony isolation encouraged ministers to pursue different practices and ideas to match their congregation's beliefs. This split at a congregational level helped Mennonites keep their identity as religious upheaval threatened congregational splits in their community.

The cycle of periodic internal and outside influenced discord repeated as Anabaptist congregations settled in the United States. While the Anabaptist congregations who migrated to southeastern South Dakota in the 1870s experienced many challenges over the decades, this thesis examines a time of change in the early twentieth century when congregations struggled with their identity amid the meanings of evangelism and fundamentalism. The early 1900s brought troubling times for American Mennonite groups as religious interest heightened among congregations. Religious historian Beulah Hostetler believes that this religious swing started a Mennonite awakening, mimicking the Great Awakenings that had influenced American Protestant movements since 1739.[5] This movement became influenced by American nativism from World War One that targeted the German culture of the Mennonite religious identity. Additionally, religious changes in America, brought about through modern ideas, resulted in an overreaction from some Mennonite religious scholars and ministers, who argued that Mennonite congregations needed to embrace a more conservative religious movement called fundamentalism.

Fundamentalist ideas had far-reaching effects, influencing Mennonite congregations in South Dakota as they sought to navigate the changing religious scene. This thesis will look at

[5] Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements*, 155.

how the Mennonite community in Freeman-Marion, South Dakota reacted to the fundamentalist movement between 1920 to 1940 and how their history played a role in their decision making. The congregations in Freeman-Marion show diversity in response as the movement influenced each one differently. This heightened religious fervor generally waned by 1940, with the exception of the Mennonite Brethren church in Marion. What happened to Mennonite congregations in southeastern South Dakota during this religious movement contrasts with Mennonite churches in Kansas and Minnesota, whose congregations found themselves embroiled in the debate for much longer. Internal and external forces influenced this rise and fall and contributed to making the congregations more accepting of American culture.[6]

Early twentieth century religious challenges to Anabaptist Mennonites influenced the religious practices of numerous Swiss and Low German Mennonite churches in southeastern South Dakota. I have chosen the Freeman-Marion area as it contains the largest and most diverse Mennonite colonies in South Dakota. Chapter one follows the history of Mennonite immigration to the United States and their settlement in the Dakota Territory. I argue that minute religious differences kept these Mennonite colonies separated, which made them vulnerable to other Christian denominations, especially the Seventh-Day Adventists. These interactions with other denominations induced some Freeman-Marion Mennonite congregations to embrace new religious ideas and influenced their German identity, causing some of them to embrace new American religious ideas. Chapter two concentrates on how the Freeman-Marion Mennonite community interacted with the fundamentalist-modernist debate through Freeman Junior College. I argue that modernism scared Mennonites into critiquing Mennonite colleges, who

[6] George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 5.

struggled financially during the Great Depression, and they embraced fundamentalist beliefs and programs to survive. Chapter three focuses on the influence of evangelical-fundamentalists on four Freeman-Marion Mennonite churches through revivals and charismatic supporters. These evangelicals encouraged Mennonite churches to embrace American religious practices, which caused religious splits in the Freeman-Marion Mennonite community. This change influenced the religious identity of the Freeman-Marion Mennonites as their forebearers had centered it on cultural and ethnic ideas carried over from German states. However, by the end of the 1930s, this identity shifted along cultural lines as they lost the German core of their identity. It is important to understand that Anabaptist, and by extension Mennonite, doctrine issued the main tenets that mediated the relationship between each colony or congregation and the outside world. Colonies in southeastern South Dakota emphasized different tenets depending on the countries they encountered in their long migrations in Europe before arriving in America and also due to the religious leanings of each congregation's leader. Nevertheless, all four Freeman-Marion Mennonite congregations had their origins in the Anabaptist religion.

Formation of the Anabaptist Faith

Anabaptism originally formed as a separate body of Zwinglianism, a Protestant movement that began under Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland in 1518 during the Protestant Reformation.[7] Zwingli spoke openly against church tithes and military service, but his approach occupied a middle ground in disputes as he encouraged cooperation with political authorities. His stance drew the ire of both radicals and conservatives in his factions, but the deciding factor

[7] C. Henry Smith, *Mennonites of America* (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publishing House, 1909), 43.

happened when the Council of Zurich demanded the baptism of children and the banishment of the radical faction from the city, which Zwingli accepted. The Anabaptist movements formed out of this radical faction, foreshadowing the cycle that Anabaptists would go through until the twentieth century. Various theologians of the time picked up Zwingli's cause, like Balthasar Hubmaier of Switzerland and Jacob Hutter, who became first-generation Anabaptist theologians.[8]

The Anabaptist movement found a safe harbor in Nikolsburg, Holy Roman Empire in 1526 and its leaders succeeded in their attempt to convert the leading Lutheran preachers of the city to their side. Henry Smith, a Mennonite scholar, calculated that Anabaptists numbered around six thousand believers when they started a state church in the city. They received aid from Christopher Froschauer, a printer in Zurich who began publishing pamphlets with the theologian Balthasar Hubmaier on the question of baptism. However, Hubmaier began quarreling with his fellow leaders as he rejected nonviolence and favored Anabaptists holding political offices (public engagement many Anabaptist congregations eschewed). He found a rival in Hans Hut, a Franconian who combined his preaching and bookselling skills to proselytize while evading magistrates in Nurnberg. Hut believed in adult baptism, even being imprisoned for his refusal to baptize his own child but clashed with other Anabaptists over the issue of military service. He believed that if the Turks did not wipe away the aristocracy, which he saw as being wicked, the Christian peasants held the right to declare war. This inflammatory rhetoric waned a bit as years progressed and he communed with other religious leaders, but his beliefs remained unchanged. He maintained a reputation of being an energetic and eloquent preacher who baptized people in his travels while evading the law. Unfortunately, Jesuits apprehended him after the Martyrs'

[8] Smith, *Mennonites of America,* 20.

Synod in 1527 and burned him to death that same year. Hubmaier's other rival, Jacob Hutter, argued that the Anabaptists needed to embrace communalism and that Hubmaier did not enforce church discipline enough. Hutter eventually formed the Hutterites under his ideals.[9] These men: Hutter, Hutt, and Hubmaier, constituted the first generation of the Anabaptist faith. They had laid some of the groundwork for their beliefs, but doctrinal and personal issues caused divides that split the church, a process that repeated as the Anabaptists migrated throughout Europe. It would be the second generation of Anabaptist leaders that consolidated these practices into a solid doctrine (though they would also face problems).

Menno Simons, a second-generation Anabaptist leader born in the Frisian village of Wimarsum in 1496, obtained a position in the Catholic Church during his early years but began researching other Christian faiths. He quit the Catholic church and joined the Groningen Anabaptists in 1536, where he spent some time working on his position in the movement while debating with Lutheran and Zwinglian theologians.[10] He consolidated the work of his predecessors into a set doctrine and reaffirmed the pacifistic nature of the movement. Menno's followers became known as the Mennonites, centering their faith around his tenets, heavily rooted in seven articles of faith.

The Tenets of Anabaptism

Anabaptism centered around seven articles of faith, which carried over to the late 19th Century as Mennonite congregations began their move from Russia to America and southeastern South Dakota. The first article of faith revolved around adult baptism. Members needed a full

[9] Smith, *Mennonites of America*, 60.
[10] Smith, *Mennonites in America,* 89.

understanding of the Bible to receive baptism and they needed to voluntarily join the church. Baptism happened through sprinkling or pouring, symbolizing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as immersion conveyed salvation, which Mennonites rejected. Mennonite ministers believed that salvation could only be accomplished through following the Gospel; baptism is only the start of redemption.[11]

The Anabaptist emphasis on adult baptism brought inherent beliefs on the relationship between God, children, and education. Congregations considered children to be unable to understand the Bible and therefore children could not be admitted as members until puberty. Instead, all Anabaptists believed that children did not need baptism for grace and could enter Heaven while adults needed to show faithfulness. Mennonites needed to be able to read the Bible, so schools became valued in the communities. Some religious leaders considered literacy tantamount, and its value persisted hundreds of years later in the transplanted Dakota colonies. One Dakota story, for instance, recounts how Tobias Unruh of Karolswalde refused to baptize a group of young adults after he discovered their illiteracy. Dismayed, he worked to educate them before allowing them to formally join the church.[12] This stance bled over into another tenet which addressed the ministers and called on them to teach their congregations to advance their spiritual lives. Members also needed to undergo communion for their salvation. The Anabaptists believed in the symbolism of the Lord's Supper and the necessity of communion to encourage communalism between the members.[13] This emphasis on community became a central part of the Mennonite identity as colonies distanced themselves from dominant cultures.

[11] Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements*, 100.
[12] Daniel Unruh, *Tobias Unruh: A Biography* (Freeman, SD: self-published), 7.
[13] Smith, *Mennonites of America*, 43.

The second primary article of faith centered around separation from the world. Anabaptists rejected worldly items like fashion and jewelry in favor of humble clothing. Mennonite churches required plain dress and preachers kept a keen eye on their flock to ensure obedience. Plain black clothing and hats became a stereotypical image of these German-Russians and this belief stayed with them after their immigration into America. Finer details about fashion erupted in 1908, for example, as Mennonite preachers debated the worldliness of marriage rings.[14] The Mennonites of the Dakota Territory also shared stories regarding the watchfulness of their ministers in addressing worldliness among their congregations. Rueben Goertz of the Swiss Mennonites in Freeman, South Dakota once recalled a man who kept attending church in military boots, a frivolous act. The preacher met him at the door one day and, as he washed the feet of the congregation, took the man's boots and sliced them with a knife before returning them to the owner and instructed him to obtain laces so that they conformed with the dress code.[15] Other discouraged worldly activities included drinking, gambling, and smoking. Smoking in the church drew criticism (ministers allowed smoking in moderation outside of church) and excessive drinking often called the attention of ministers to the problem.[16] However, disciplinary measures by the congregation varied, at least in the Dakota settlements, with the majority only addressing the vice when it became a problem, but congregations had tools like "the ban" to tackle these problems.

Excommunication posed a challenge to United States and Dakota Anabaptists in the 20th century. The community utilized "the ban," a long-used practice in which members of a

[14] *Herald of Truth,* Feb 4, 1908.
[15] "Mennonite Religious Practices," n.d., Rueben Goertz Collection, Center for Western Studies (CWS), Box 41, Folder 6.
[16] "Mennonite Religious Practices," n.d., Rueben Goertz Collection, CWS, Box 41, Folder 6.

congregation, including friends and family, socially shunned individuals to convince them to repent. When people overstepped their bounds sometimes ostracization seemed necessary. The ban involved a process in which individuals could not talk with other members of the community, including their families, or commune in any way with them. However, the community expected a banned individual to remain within the fold. Excommunication functioned as both a tenet and a punishment to ensure that congregations remained within the faith. Repentance involved a public admission of sin and a request of the congregation for forgiveness.[17] German-Russians carried this tenet over to America during the nineteenth century as Rueben Goertz recalled a story growing up about a banned member of the Graber family. When Goertz visited the family with his father, he noted that the husband ate separately from his family and could not even interact with his daughter. However, shunning often led to a different outcome for families in America as they often simply embraced other churches, cutting ties with their old congregations. The Graber family pursued this path when they switched to the Presbyterian church. Because of the failure of this action, ministers often found themselves relying on community members to help keep congregation members from unwanted actions instead of formally issuing "the ban."[18] Family units became extremely important in this regard. The churches, formed in the 1880s Dakota Territory, centered around families. Because of this, ministers relied on families to anchor individuals to their respective churches.

The idea behind "the ban" has a long history of being debated in Anabaptism. Believers challenged the ban and other ideas that flowed from central tenets during the early years of the faith as ministers sought to enforce tenets that they believed to be critical to their denomination.

[17] Hostetler, *American Mennonites,* 83.
[18] "Mennonite Religious Practices," n.d., Rueben Goertz Collection, CWS, Box 41, Folder 6.

In the German city of Emden, during the 16th century, Simon Menno experienced his first backlash to the tenets. A Dutch woman, Swaantje Rutger, refused to follow the ban and allowed her husband to eat with the family and share her bed. Menno stressed moderation to his fellow preachers and advised that the consciences of the parties needed to govern the matter. He believed those involved did not need outside help. However, his fellow ministers, Leonard Bouwens and Gillis von Aachon, called for enforcement. The disagreement spread to the rest of the Lowland region of Central Europe as congregations chose a side in the debate. Menno received a delegation, who wanted to confer on the matter before they urged the Dutch believers to calm down, which they failed to do. The matter continued to burn and caused a division between the German and Dutch Mennonite churches. The German congregations disagreed with the strict enforcement of the ban that the Dutch supported.[19] These disagreements echoed the internal divisions that plagued the Anabaptists as congregations disagreed over doctrine, causing them to split apart. These divisions can be seen with the Low Germans, but the Swiss Anabaptists faced similar splits.

The Swiss Anabaptists faced similar difficulties as in the late 17th Century a split occurred among them. Jacob Ammann argued that the ban needed to be used to enforce conformity to the community and advocated for a stricter withdrawal from the outside world. Hans Reist challenged him, and the debate swept over the Alsace Lorraine and Palatinate regions. In the end, Ammann split the congregation, forming the Amish, while the Swiss remnants joined the Mennonites. The Amish spread out into the Palatinate and Alsace Lorraine before, eventually, they made their way into Galicia and Volhynia. These groups interacted with Dutch and Low German Mennonites and may have become Mennonites themselves through these interactions.

[19] Smith, *Story of the Mennonites,* 108.

By the time of the American immigration, these Swiss Amish found themselves caught between their traditional heritage and the Mennonite branch.[20] From the early years of the faith, division influenced the Anabaptists as they questioned their religious doctrine while ministers struggled to lead their congregations. These splits helped keep groups small and more united in their beliefs on the application of their doctrine but also caused divisions among different Mennonite groups who immigrated to America, especially to the Freeman-Marion area.

Similar articles of faith shaped the Anabaptists' view of and relationship with the outside world. Members could not join secret societies or take civil positions and relied on ministers instead to handle communal disputes and to lead congregations in political matters.[21] Ministers also expected members to follow the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" and refuse military service. Religious leaders could ensure commitment to these tenets due to the circumstances that surrounded their position. Colonies elected their ministers, usually these individuals held large, profitable land and obtained the trust of their community. Elected members then used lots to give God the final choice of minister.

These religious tenets bled into Mennonite religious practices and beliefs regarding discipleship, humility, and cultural ties. Services started in the morning with the congregation divided by sex and children sitting in the front pews with their mothers. The services lasted two hours, as ministers preached in Low German or Swiss German. Services began with singing several verses, a person would set the pace and pitch. Mennonites eschewed musical accompaniments as they believed musical instruments to be too worldly. A minister then read a scripture passage and made the opening prayer. Sermons lasted about an hour with the minister

[20] Roy Kaufman, "A Strategic Retreat? The Amish Experience," in *Centennial Talks and Sermons* (Freeman, SD: Salem Mennonite Church, 2008), 1.
[21] Smith, *Mennonites in America,* 20.

giving memorized sermons focusing on the Word of God and his love before communion commenced. There is a debate on how the Mennonites practiced communion as they either passed two large cups on either side of the congregation or had the congregation approach the altar in a line, sipping from a large communal cup.[22] Afterwords, Mennonites practiced foot washing to copy the humility of Jesus. The pastor read the passage of Jesus washing the disciples' feet before the congregation broke into pairs, taking turns washing each other's feet. The congregation then made the closing prayer and sang a closing song before a final benediction. Congregations rarely gathered offerings as lay ministers did not receive pay and the community helped maintain the church, which highlighted the communal aspect of the church.[23] These points will be discussed later in chapter one and two as Mennonite congregations in Russia, and later South Dakota, began to shift their messages and practices.

Menno's tenets, based in the teachings of the 1500s and 1600s remained very alive in the Dakotas of the 1870s to 1930s, but new Dakotans emphasized and altered certain aspects of these Anabaptist tenets. The core tenets encouraged an isolation from the world to ensure that congregations could focus on their relationship with God, which allowed ministers to ensure their flock fell in line with church doctrine. This stance also reflected their relationship with the outside world. Wars and social upheavals helped reaffirm their distaste for bloodshed and politics. Their isolation encouraged the sectarian virtues of frugality, hard work, piety, and mutual helpfulness but also frequently led to division. By the mid-20th century, however, many Mennonites became deeply involved in the social, educational, and economic world around them, a situation that led to revolutionary changes in their lifestyle and thought. It also prompted

[22] Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, *Looking Back 100 Years, 1880-1980* (Freeman, SD: self-published, 1980), 177.
[23] Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, *Looking Back 100 Years,* 80.

a new search for identity as a distinct group in the modern world, through study of their denominational history, sociological analysis, and theological interaction with other groups.[24] Many of the Mennonite congregations who arrived in the Dakota Territory fought against this change and ministers had tools at hand to deal with revolutionary thinkers.

Mennonites of Freeman-Marion: Their European History

The history of the Swiss Mennonite Salem and Salem-Zion churches of southeastern South Dakota is rooted in their migrations in Europe and their split from the Amish faction. These Swiss Anabaptist families in Tyrol moved through the Palatinate before settling for a time in Holland. The Protestant friendly Netherlands welcomed these Anabaptists, and the Dutch accepted the immigrants to help them drain swamps and farm. The Dutch also waived military conscription in exchange for higher taxes from them.[25] For the Anabaptists in Holland, the reprieve allowed an opportunity to establish a theological school to train their ministers and address problems in their doctrine.[26] In 1713, King Louis XIV of France expelled the Anabaptists from Alsace as part of his drive to keep France Catholic. The Swiss found refuge in Volhynia, Poland under the Polish prince, Czartoryski, in 1791, but found themselves under Russian rule after the final partition of Poland four years later.[27] Tsarina Catherine the Great provided these Anabaptists the same privileges as their Low German cousins but their geographic location brought problems as nobles forced them to rent the land and abide by their rules. During this time in Russia, many Swiss Amish loosened the strict church discipline of their

[24] Redekop, *Mennonite Identity*, 8.
[25] Freida Schmidt, *Ludwig and Sarah (Janzen) Deckert* (Freeman, SD: self-published, 2006), 8.
[26] Smith, *Story of the Mennonites*, 58.
[27] Roy Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle: It's Prehistory, Birth, Growth, Maturity, Decline, and Rebirth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 53-54.

congregations and became Mennonites. However, because of this difference between geographic location, the Swiss Mennonites became poorer than their Low-German cousins, who also gradually migrated into Eastern Europe.

With the reign of the Hapsburg Emperor Charles V, from 1500-1558, the Low German Anabaptists found their position in Europe threatened, prompting them to migrate east into Prussia. However, Catherine's call on German farmers in 1795 to settle in the Ukrainian lands taken from the Ottoman Turks encouraged them to move again in 1819. She hoped that German expertise in farming would help boost food production in the country and increase revenue. To this end, she advanced a deal to the Anabaptists, called *privalegium*. Catherine allowed the churches to freely worship in their own way and they could keep their Low German culture alive through their settlements. She also exempted them from military service under the same conditions as with the Dutch. In fact, the Russian government centered the agreements around the Dutch language and their laws, a familiar process for the Anabaptists. In return, the colonies could not proselytize and had to pay a larger tax to the state than their Orthodox neighbors.[28] The Mennonites welcomed this agreement, especially as the Prussian government began passing conscription laws targeting them. The wide-open plains of Russia allowed these families to settle near each other while also making communication among colonies difficult. Their special privileges also drew envy from their Russian neighbors who faced drafts and whose Orthodox nature clashed with the newly arrived Protestants. These events deepened the isolationist nature of the Anabaptists and colonies continued to experience rifts over doctrinal issues, especially as colonies began to debate the prohibition on missionary work by Russia.[29] The Bethesda

[28] Schmidt, *Ludwig and Sarah Deckert*, 28.
[29] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB* (Marion, SD: self-published, 1968), 16.

Mennonite Church and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in the Freeman-Marion area of southeastern South Dakota had their roots in these Low German migrations.

This geographic split did not stop colonies from intermingling. Some Low Germans tried to settle in Polish areas, like the Karolswalde Mennonites, a congregation that would eventually settle near Freeman, in southeastern South Dakota, but they also ran into the same difficulties as their Swiss brethren. They could not buy land; they could only rent it. Similarly, some Swiss Mennonites tried to move to Ukraine but encountered a backlash from the Low Germans there. The Low Germans refused to support their Swiss Mennonite brethren and often tried to drive them out. Some Swiss Mennonite settlements did survive in modern day northwestern Ukraine, but the unexpected troubles highlight the tumultuous relationship of the Anabaptists.[30] This relationship between Swiss and Low German Mennonite colonies or sects carried over from Russia with the settlers into the Dakota Territory, as the two communities frequently kept their distance from each other. Low Germans often purchased their land outright while the Swiss Mennonites needed to homestead, even though they both shared the same reasons for immigrating. However, other differences arose during their stay in Russia.

The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in the Freeman-Marion area had its roots in a religious movement that swept through Russia in 1869, influencing a small Mennonite colony in Simferopol, Crimea.[31] The movement, called Pietism, began in Reformed and Lutheran churches in Moravia during the 17th Century; the practice emphasized a stricter discipleship through the removal of outside entertainment like gambling and drinking while encouraging a personal and emotional conversion. The conversion experience relied on evangelical work that

[30] Kaufman, *Drama of a Rural Community,* 57.
[31] Cornelius Plett, *The Story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Christian Literature, 1985), 30.

irritated Russian officials but centered on an issue in the Mennonite churches, missionary work. Recall that in Western Europe, the Anabaptists suffered under religious persecution and needed to proselytize to replenish their numbers. However, rulers often forbade Anabaptists from missionary work in their countries. The barring of missionary work led to the belief that Anabaptists had lost a core part of their identity and these Pietist Mennonites argued that they could rekindle that lost aspect. This Pietist movement resulted in the formation of the Krimmer Brethren Church under Jacob A. Weibe, who had his own conversion experience during a drought while farming. This Krimmer Brethren Church would later influence the beginning of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in America at the end of the 19th Century as pietist ideas traveled to America with the immigrants. In response to Weibe's radical new ideas, Mennonite churches in southern Russia banned the Krimmer Brethren Church.[32] This split mirrored the cycle that Anabaptists experienced since their founding as outside ideas influenced congregations and caused internal strife among Anabaptist churches.

The German and Swiss Anabaptist migrants from Russia continued to experience this cycle of discord since their establishment in the United States in the 1870s. The modern American context and new religious ideas also affected the Mennonite congregations that settled the Freeman-Marion area of southeastern South Dakota. These congregations had moved to the Dakota Territory to retain their Mennonite identity, culture, and language after the revocation of their privileges in Russia and settled near each other. While other denominations exerted an influence on these Mennonite colonies, their proximity to each other (and the Hutterites) alongside their large numbers allowed them to be partially insulated against outside threats.

[32] Plett, *The Story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church*, 32.

Chapter One

A Cycle of Discord: The Establishment of German-Russian Mennonites and Their Churches in South Dakota

As a child, Martha Becker looked forward to the revival meetings that occurred near Marion, South Dakota in the 1920s. George P. Schultz, an exceptional speaker, often delivered fiery sermons which extolled his audience to embrace the new life Jesus had died to give them and to walk a path of righteousness. A fundamentalist preacher, Schultz utilized a fire and brimstone type sermon that captivated his audience and succeeded in drawing large crowds from multiple denominations. While Martha did not understand his words fully, she certainly wanted a piece of this life. This feeling induced her to make her way past the crowd to join the twenty other people seeking forgiveness at the altar before Schultz. They all shared this feeling of desiring to feel the presence of Jesus. As she knelt by the altar near her aunt, she recalled the words whispered to her, "Martha, pray! Martha, pray!" However, she felt she had not received enough education on what to exactly pray for and felt lost as a result. The full weight of the meeting did not settle in on her until she helped her sister wash dishes and recalled the words of Schultz: "God has provided salvation for everyone in the world. You need to accept God yourself." It dawned on her that God loved everyone and wished to cleanse them of sin and that they only needed to accept it and believe in the Bible. Her sister sensed this change and asked her what had happened and upon learning of this experience, her mother informed her to tell their father, who accepted these glad tidings. Martha had her first personal experience with God and took her first steps to joining the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church.[33]

[33] Martha Becker, *Aunt Martha's Story* (Marion, SD: self-published, 2010), 9.

Martha's parents had arrived in the United States as part of the Karolswalde, Low German Mennonites when they were just children; fleeing Russian assimilation and military conscription, they joined the throng of Anabaptists heading to North America under their local minister, Bishop Tobias Unruh.[34] The Becker family and a good portion of the Karolswalde German-Russians, among many other Anabaptist-identified immigrants, settled in the Dakota Territory during the 1870s in the Freeman-Marion area of modern-day southeastern South Dakota. They became part of a community that shared a religious, German identity. This chapter will argue that splits in the community occurred because of distinct cultural and religious ties that had formed in Russia and, later, in America. Periodic divisions influenced how these diverse groups interacted with each other, how they established their churches, and if they accepted religious techniques outside of their traditional German-based practices.

The Freeman-Marion area contains the largest and most diverse Mennonite colonies in South Dakota. This chapter describes the establishment of four main German-Russian Mennonite churches in South Dakota: The Salem-Zion and Salem Mennonite Churches of the Swiss Mennonites, the Bethesda Mennonite Church and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church (EMB) of the Low Germans. I explore two components that compose the history of the four churches discussed throughout this thesis: immigration to America, which brought these congregations into closer contact with other religious denominations and their evolving religious

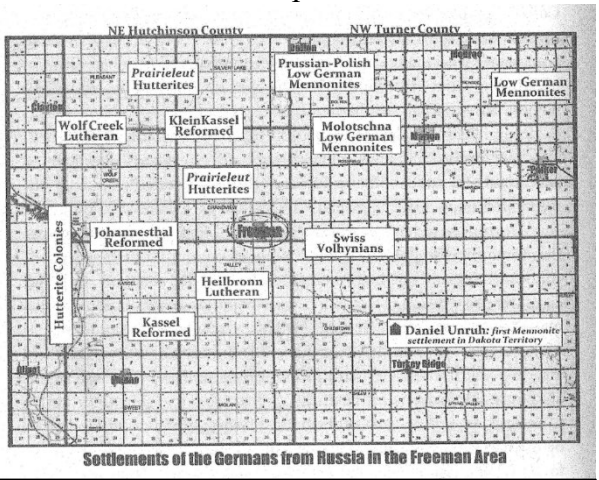

*Figure 1:*German Russian Settlements in the Freeman Area. Courtesy of Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle*, 90.

[34] Becker, *Aunt Martha's Story*, 24.

beliefs that often fractured congregations soon after their arrival in southeastern South Dakota. These Anabaptists arrived in the United States with a sense of isolationism as persecution had scattered these small congregations across Europe, and eventually to Russia. Persecution and the spacious geography of Russia allowed them to develop differing practices and beliefs. I will argue in this chapter that when the Swiss and Low German Mennonite colonies settled in the United States and southeastern South Dakota, they split up initial congregations as they developed on a continuum of conservative and open-minded religious ideas. By open-minded, I mean how the congregation opened their congregations to the wider world through new religious practices and ideas while abandoning traditional practices that had followed them from Russia.

All of the Anabaptist Mennonite congregations or colonies discussed in this thesis migrated from Russia in the 1870s, where they had taken root in geographically isolated congregations since the 1760s, when Czarina Catherine the Great invited them to settle. In return for their agricultural expertise, she offered them military exemption and freedom from religious persecution. Czar Alexander II, who ascended to the throne in 1870, began revoking the privileges Catherine had granted as part of a broader reform plan. His experiences in the Crimean War, new economic pressures to industrialize, and a new round of serf revolts convinced him of the necessity of social reform. He hoped that by making schools teach Russian and by opening draft laws to include all Russian citizens, he could encourage a national identity in his subjects. To this end, he introduced universal conscription.[35] These reforms were part of a larger national movement to provide a central Russian identity that the tsar hoped would unite his people against external threats.[36] However, the Anabaptists viewed these events with horror as national

[35] Schmidt, *Ludwig and Sarah (Janzen) Deckert*, 12.
[36] Smith, *Mennonites of America,* 290.

pressures forced them to either change their identity or to immigrate again. For these Anabaptists, their eventual journey to the United States became another piece to a history of migration that shadowed the group since their formation in the 16th Century.[37]

Previous social upheavals across the 1800s contributed vastly to the decision of many Anabaptist German-Russian colonies to leave Russia. The 1848 social revolutions in the German states and the social changes brought by the industrial revolution convinced the Russian elite that Russia needed change. The 1848 revolts reminded the elites of the Decemberist revolts, which occurred over two decades before, on December 26, 1825 led by nationalists who aimed to destroy serfdom in Russia. So, when Alexander II came to power, the Anabaptists soon sent a delegation to convince the new tsar to continue the agreement they had with Catherine. However, Alexander II rebuffed the Anabaptist leaders. They, in turn, began discussing another migration.[38] Amanda Kaufman, a Swiss Mennonite in Freeman and grandchild of Elder Christian Kaufman, stated that "The ominous rumbles became an awful reality. Meetings were called to discuss the pros and cons of this grim situation. The issue under discussion was whether to stay, or to pull up stakes and leave everything that was dear to them."[39] Despite cultural differences between the Low German and the Swiss Mennonites, Czar Alexander II's new emphasis on the Russian identity caused many German-Russian communities to consider leaving Russia for a new place to maintain their religious traditions. The decision by Anabaptist colonies to leave Russia for America echoed their own history of moving into Russia, assisted by events that drove interest in America. Letters from families that had already made the trip to the United States

[37] Smith, *Mennonites of America,* 6.
[38] Becker, *Aunt Martha's Story,* 3.
[39] Amanda Kaufman, *Memories of My Life* (Freeman, SD: self-published, 1980), 3.

reported vast lands, relatively inexpensive and fertile, convinced numerous Mennonites to emigrate.

In the 1850s, Americans began to incorporate the land that German Russians settled on when they arrived in the 1870s. Historian Patrick Wolfe notes that "invasion is a structure not an event" as settler colonials entered indigenous lands to assimilate or replace them with European settlers with their own understanding of laws and property.[40] Settler colonials acquired indigenous land through treaties, sometimes declaring individuals as representing entire tribes to obtain treaty signatures, which diminished native's resources. Violence erupted between Native Americans and settlers which led to military involvement and further treaties, repeating the cycle.[41] The United States incorporated the land that became Dakota Territory through the Yankton Treaty of 1858, which opened up land to settlers.[42] While the Anabaptists did not see themselves as invaders, the cheap land encouraged them to settle in America and take part in the settler colonial system as they secured the land for the United States government.

For the Anabaptists of Russia, the passage of the 1862 Homestead Act encouraged them to move. The act ensured that every man or single women who entered the United States could file for 160 acres of public land for ten dollars (although the act did require applicants to declare that they intended to become citizens eventually of the United States). Owners needed to cultivate the land for five years and had to prove that they had developed it before they received the legal title. Settlers could also file for additional land under the Timber claim in which the owner had to plant trees. Additionally, the settler could purchase 160 more acres at $1.25 an

[40] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* (December 2006), 388.
[41] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 402.
[42] Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota,* 4th ed (Pierre, SD: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004), 84-89.

acre.[43] The Homestead Act encouraged hope that America had enough land for families and entire Anabaptist congregations to settle in colonies and continue their isolationism.

In 1873, many of the Anabaptist colonies living in Russia sent a delegation of twelve to America and Canada to search for suitable places.[44] A combination of Hutterite and Mennonite leaders led this loose delegation and left at various dates with an agreement to meet again in New York before returning home. Jacob Buller, Leonard Suderman, Cornelius Toews, David Classen, Lawrence Tschetter, Jacob Peters, Cornelius Buhr, Heinrich Wiebe, William Ewert, Tobias Unruh, Paul Tschetter, and Andreas Schrag represented the various Russian Anabaptist communities. These last four men settled with their congregations in the Dakota Territory.[45] Andreas Schrag led two Swiss Mennonite colonies, who eventually founded the Salem and Salem-Zion Mennonite churches near Freeman. Tobias Unruh led a group of multiple Low German colonies, which established the Bethesda Mennonite and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren churches near Marion. Although not the focus of this study, Paul Tschetter led a Russian Hutterite colony that also settled in southeastern South Dakota and similarly, William Ewert settled a Low German Mennonite colony near Avon in South Dakota. Boomers and businessmen, acquainted with the area, acted as translators for the groups. The particularly persuasive C.B. Schmidt, a German-speaking representative for the Santa Fe Railroad Company, convinced many Mennonite colonies to settle in Kansas.[46] Canada also sent representatives to the delegation, promising them cheap land, group settlement, and military exemption. However, while these Anabaptists joined a common migration pattern and cooperated in the journey, they

[43] Schell, *History of South Dakota,* 170.
[44] Kaufman, *Drama of a Rural Community,* 71.
[45] Smith, *Mennonites of America,* 329.
[46] Plett, *The Story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church*, 56.

soon noticed differences between their own congregations and established many diverse American Anabaptist congregations.

John F. Funk, a prominent American Mennonite in Elkhart, Indiana extended a general invitation to the delegation and their immigrants and encouraged American Mennonites to contribute hospitality and financial resources to their Russian-based brethren. These American Mennonites had descended from Dutch Mennonites who had answered calls by William Penn for immigrants, helping to establish Germantown in 1683.[47] By the 1840s, these Mennonites had also settled in Ohio and Indiana forming congregations in Elkhart, Indiana and Chicago.[48] These established American Mennonite families happily provided living arrangements for the travelers. Tobias Unruh's delegation stopped in Indiana and continued to the Great Plains and found suitable land for his congregation. Unruh found the area enjoyable but Paul Tschetter, the leader of a Russian Hutterite colony, felt more apprehensive as the actions of American Mennonites disturbed him. He noted that preachers in Elkhart gave off-the-cuff sermons, that many in the congregation chewed tobacco in church, and that ministers commonly owned guns. Typically, Anabaptist ministers prepared their speeches beforehand to give thoughtful sermons and disdained the usage of tobacco, a worldly practice. Additionally, Hutterites maintained a stricter view on violence than their Mennonite counterparts. A Hutterite preacher's congregation provided him with food, including meat; a Hutterite preacher typically refused to kill anything, man or animal.[49] This contrast highlights the changes that American Mennonites underwent compared to their more seemingly static Russian-based brethren, who often viewed these changes negatively.

---

[47] Plett, *The Story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church*, 53.
[48] Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,* 46.
[49] "Paul Tschetter Diary," *Gospel Herald,* May 20, 1930.

The diffuse delegation that represented the Russian Anabaptist colonies met up in the summer when President Grant invited them to the White House for a discussion. They approved of the president, noting his humble dress and somber demeanor. They asked him for permission to settle in colonies so that the families could settle near each other like in Russia. He informed them that he could not reserve land for individuals or groups but assured them that the country held plenty of land for their people to occupy. Additionally, he assured them of their freedom to worship without government intervention but that he could not guarantee freedom from military service.[50] In the spring of 1873, the delegation returned to Russia to meet with their congregations and colonies to discuss the next steps. Their Anabaptist communities almost finished their preparations to leave by the time of their return. Most of the colonies that settled in the Dakota Territory arrived before 1881, when Alexander III ascended to the throne and began increasing the pressure brought by his father. German schools came under the control of the government to ensure that they only taught the Russian language and educated pupils in government approved subjects.[51] Those who stayed in Russia, some of whom had friends and relatives in South Dakota, experienced persecution

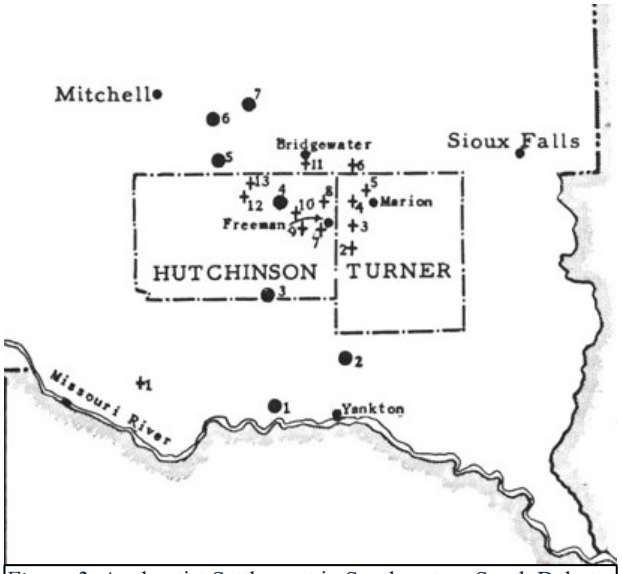

Figure 2: Anabaptist Settlement in Southeastern South Dakota. Courtesy of Cornelius Krahn, *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* 4 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), 585.

Note: crosses designate Mennonite churches and circles designate Hutterite churches.

[50] "Paul Tschetter Diary," *Gospel Herald,* May 20, 1930.
[51] Plett, *The Story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church*, 47.

following the Russian Revolution and the consequent collective farming policies implemented by Joseph Stalin, in which many thousands of German Russians starved to death.

In the end, the many Anabaptist groups represented by the initial scouting delegation of 1873, began to leave Russia for North America in high numbers. By 1900, some 18,000 Mennonites had left Russia for the United States.[52] They joined a general surge of immigrants that reached the Dakotas in the same period and constituted a mixture of Americans, Scandinavians, Hollanders, and Germans. Sixty percent of the American-born settlers in 1900 claimed to have moved from Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, or Illinois.[53] The second wave of German-Russians that settled in the territory in 1884 helped to give the towns like Roscoe, Hosmer, and Eureka a predominantly German character.[54]

As discussed earlier in the chapter, Mennonites already established settlements in America after William Penn's call for settlers. These Pennsylvanian Mennonites helped colonies like Tobias Unruh and Andreas Schrag's groups through assistance in obtaining temporary lodging and train tickets. Riding the rails, these Anabaptists reached Newton, Kansas where they spent the winter, hunkering down in immigrant houses or railroad cars. They considered lands that had already been scouted while the colonies prepared to leave Russia. The first German-Russians entered Dakota Territory through Yankton in 1873. While the first arrivals consisted of Lutherans who also sought to escape pro-Russian policies, Anabaptists arrived soon after with Daniel Unruh, who led a small group during the fall of 1873 and settled in the Childstown Township of Turner County. The following year saw two hundred Mennonite families enter the

[52] Smith, *Mennonites of America,* 320.
[53] Schell, *History of South Dakota,* 168.
[54] Harry F. Thompson, *A New South Dakota History*, 2nd ed (Sioux Falls, S.D: Center for Western Studies, 2009), 128.

territory with estimates of over one thousand individuals.[55] Martha's father, Jacob B. Becker, for example, left Russia as a child in 1874 with his father Benjamin as part of this surge. A smallpox outbreak forced his family into quarantine with other immigrants at Castle Garden, the immigration detention center in New York, upon arrival to the U.S. Bishop Tobias Unruh, leader of the Karolswalde Low Germans in Russia, elected to stay with the victims while the other families carried on to Kansas. By 1875, all had reunited at Newton and Mennonite leaders began making preparations for their move into the Dakota Territory. Tobias Unruh began the Karolswalde Low German Mennonite migration northward from the Newton, Kansas settlement at the head of several Mennonite colonies besides his own Karolswalde colony. He and Andreas Schrag ended up settling in both Hutchinson and Turner County, in southeastern South Dakota, buying the five homes left behind by the Hutterites when they moved to nearby Wolf Creek.[56] This Mennonite migration constituted a portion of the greater surge of immigrants hoping to make Dakota Territory their home.

Settlement in the Dakotas generally situated around the southeast region of the territory as the Yankton railroad provided a center for families to sell products. However, a rush for land from 1878 to 1887 led to a population boom in the territory as southeastern Dakota Territory's population grew from 10,000 in 1870 to 81,781 in 1880.[57] Railroads, the economic bloodline of settler life, soon expanded from the Iowa and Minnesota borders westward. Towns anchored communities as they could buy equipment and supplies on credit until harvest season brought them funds. The Wolf Creek Hutterite colony maintained a flour mill, which nearby residents gladly flocked to for their services. Marion Junction formed in 1881 as a railroad town,

[55] Schell, *History of South Dakota,* 117.
[56] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial* (Marion, SD: self-published, 2008), 5.
[57] Schell, *History of South Dakota,* 159.

becoming a center of trade that pioneers quickly jumped on as the other closest town, Yankton, required a two-day trip. In 1879, the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway Company extended the rail line from Marion to Freeman. This general settler society expansion coincided with favorable weather conditions that helped ensure bountiful harvests in the late 1870s to the mid-1880s. These events allowed factory-made farming implements to become easier to obtain and farming improvements like the self-binding reapers allowed for better harvests. Wheat brought into the territory by Anabaptists flourished and became a cash crop that contributed to flour mills in Minneapolis, Minnesota.[58] Newspapers also established themselves in the community with *The Marion Record* founded in 1900 and *The Freeman Courier* established in 1901. The influx of settler colonials allowed towns to flourish as they brought farming experience and hardier crops to the Dakota Territory. This flourishing strengthened American claims on the region while the military relocated Native Americans to dwindling reservation lands.[59]

Towns constituted a necessity in prairie life and the Anabaptists helped establish Freeman and Marion Junction to serve as economic centers of their lives. American settlers and the German-Russian settlers divided Marion demographically as the Mennonites occupied the western side of the township. Marion itself constituted a population of Scandinavian and German-Russian settlers. Prominent congregations also rooted themselves in 1874, such as the First Church of God Reformed congregation in Marion and Seventh-day Adventists had established themselves east of Marion, in Hurley Township. In contrast, Freeman lays between multiple Anabaptist colonies with the Hutterites on the western side, Low Germans to the north

[58] Schell, *History of South Dakota,* 160.
[59] Schell, *History of South Dakota,* 159.

and east, and the Swiss Mennonites to its south and east. Scandinavian settlers occupied the land south of these Swiss Mennonites and established the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1876 and the Salem Lutheran Church in 1877.[60] Unlike in Russia, Mennonite immigrants quickly found themselves surrounded by other Christian denominations with little space between them.

Mennonite congregations in the Dakota Territory constantly found themselves caught between new religious ideas due to their proximity to other denominations. Itinerant ministers often traveled through the area, performing sermons in homes. Some of these ministers followed the Mennonite faith but most of them followed other denominations and carried new ideas with them. These evangelicals influenced the Mennonite churches through their activity and their mingling with the four Mennonite churches discussed in this study. For the Low Germans, the Brothersfield Mennonite Brethren congregation provided an example of evangelical difficulties. The congregation had a large Low German Mennonite population but found itself struggling without leadership as they could not find a minister before its congregation split among the Silver Lake Mennonite Brethren church, the Seventh-day Adventists, and the Methodists.[61]

Members of the colonies typically settled together as they could build their churches in the center of the community and neighbors felt easier relying on each other instead of other communities. Cultural differences also divided the new settlements. Rueben Goertz, a Swiss Mennonite who grew up near Freeman, remembered that roads divided colonies. Goertz deemed it odd that congregations might mingle with each other.[62] A skittishness toward mingling, however, did not stop people who relied on businesses, as the Freeman community depended on

[60] Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle,* 62-63.
[61] Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle,* 113.
[62] "Swiss Mennonites, General," n.d., Rueben Goertz Collection, CWS, Box 41, Folder 6.

the Hutterites to grind their flour for sale.[63] The geographical locations of the Anabaptist colonies in the Freeman-Marion located closer together than in Russia, where these colonies maintained a larger distance from each other. In the Dakota Territory, this close proximity made it difficult for colonies to ignore each other's differences in religious practices but allowed them to work together, especially in the face of outside pressures.

These German-Russian Anabaptist Mennonite groups eventually built the four churches discussed herein to formally contain their congregations and anchor their communities and compose only a portion of the religious congregations that formed in the Freeman-Marion area. Other Anabaptist churches are mentioned as they relate to the history of the four churches under study. Furthermore, these churches will be addressed in regard to their culture, Swiss Mennonite or Low-German Mennonite, and in regard to how much each leaned on American ideas.

Many of these churches changed due to their leaders pulling them into separate directions, while others changed their congregations by utilizing American practices to pursue goals in revitalizing the Anabaptist faith. Because of these differing ideas, addressing which congregation retained their original faith the most is fruitless as they all argue that they retained core aspects of Menno Simons' teachings. These four churches under study in this thesis: Salem-Zion, Salem, Bethesda, and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren are interconnected in their founding but practiced different views of faith and identity, which contributed to their initial years of friction and compromise.

The Establishment of the Swiss Mennonites of Freeman

[63] Schmidt, *Ludwig and Susanna Deckert,* 20.

The two Swiss Mennonite churches, Salem-Zion and Salem, have a closely intertwined history due to their shared religion, history, and culture. The Salem-Zion church is located four miles east of Freeman. A Swiss Mennonite congregation, it currently numbers around three hundred members under Pastor Cory Millor. The Salem church, located three miles southeast of Freeman, contains around 330 members under the current pastor, Robert Engebrecht.[64] The two Swiss Mennonite churches often shared ministers when leadership absences occurred. The Salem church highlights how ministers and colleges affected religious institutions. The Freeman Junior College also affected the Salem Church as its proximity brought issues closer and their pro-fundamentalist leanings encouraged revivals in the Freeman community. These differences in religious practice and geographical locations, rooted in their history, played an integral part in how the Swiss Mennonites addressed fundamentalist changes to their communities in the 1920s and 1930s.

These two Swiss Mennonite churches changed in the American context. Both abandoned numerous Anabaptist practices like foot washing. The Salem church became the first Mennonite church in the community to dispose of traditional practices like foot washing, while foot washing in the Salem-Zion church only became optional in the 1930s. Salem church also embraced new and educated American pastors, which local historian Roy Kaufman explains as a propensity of employing ministers from outside rather than within the community.[65] Both Salem-Zion and Salem practice baptism through sprinkling water and, originally, both also used "the ban." The relationship between these two Swiss Mennonite congregations reflects their history in colonizing the Dakota Territory. Both the Swiss Mennonite colonies had settled in Russia during

[64] Roy Kaufman, "The History of the South Church," in *Centennial Sermons and Talks* (Freeman, SD: self-published), 1.
[65] Kaufman, "A Strategic Retreat? The Amish Experience," in *Centennial Sermons and Talks,* 4.

the 1700s and, like the other Mennonite groups, left after the Russification policies of the tsar, arriving in the Freeman area in 1874. These colonies, Horodischers and Waldheimers, had split from the Amish tradition during their stay in Russia, becoming Mennonites in their beliefs. The two groups believed in discipleship with a heavier usage of the ban than their Low German counterparts. This religious identity became challenged during their settlement in southeastern South Dakota as the two colonies changed throughout the late nineteenth century.

The first Swiss Mennonite group of thirty-four families, the Horodischers, hailed from Horodyszcze in Russian-occupied Poland (now western Ukraine) led by Elder Peter Kaufman and Reverend Joseph Graber, while the second group consisted of twenty-four families from Waldheim, Ukraine known as the Waldheimers, led by Elder Johann Schrag and Reverend Christian Graber. As discussed in the introduction, some Mennonite groups in Poland tried to migrate to Ukrainian Russia to buy land but faced difficulties from other Mennonite groups. Both of these groups, Horodischer and Waldheimer, had sent Andreas Schrag as part of the delegation, and he convinced them to settle in the area. At first, these two colonies tried to unify their congregations but found it difficult as the groups differed over customs and opinions.[66] Roy Kaufman noted that the Swiss Mennonite divisions could be seen with the former village loyalties that came into play with the formation of the congregations.[67] The Horodisch group saw the leader of the Waldheim colony as unacceptable. However, their own leader suffered a stroke in 1878 and the Swiss Mennonites decided to elect new leaders and these positions became occupied by Andreas Schrag, for the Waldheimers, and Christian Kaufman, for the Horodischers.[68] These two groups formed an offshoot congregation in Marion, SD called the

[66] Kaufman, *Drama of a Rural Community,* 105.
[67] Kaufman, "A Strategic Retreat? The Amish Experience," in *Centennial Sermons and Talks,* 4
[68] Kaufman, "A Strategic Retreat? The Amish Experience," in *Centennial Sermons and Talks,* 10.

Bethel Mennonite church in 1879. These Swiss Mennonites had been living northwest of Marion and desired to form a church closer to home. Ministers from the Salem-Zion congregation were chosen to help lead the flock and in 1892, formed the Bethel Mennonite church four miles west of Marion. This history helps to show how geographic proximity played a role in encouraging congregations to accept different religious practices that influenced their relationship, but both groups allowed religious leaders to assist them in times of crisis. However, leadership troubles constituted only a portion of their problems as outsiders influenced the congregations.

Itinerant ministers often traveled throughout the Great Plains, influencing families to either split from their church to join another denomination or to assist them spiritually. When families left churches, it resulted in hard feelings among congregations, which could be damaging for families that settled with their colony. In the 1870s, evangelicals convinced a portion of the Swiss Mennonite Community to split and form an Evangelical Mennonite Church.[69] John Unruh recalled that "the few members that left the church to organize a new group with the absolute correct interpretation of the Bible, did not progress as well as the Salem Church."[70] After twenty-five years, the Evangelicals dwindled despite determined efforts by their ministers. The church disbanded and the remaining congregation members joined the Salem Church. Similarly, Nazarenes convinced Swiss Mennonites to join their denomination, but it became discontinued after a few years.[71] The Church of the Nazarene had emerged from the Wesleyan-Holiness Movement within the Methodist church and focused on emotional evangelicalism and discipleship, which the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in Marion shared. These splits in Mennonite churches reinforced a belief among Freeman-Marion

[69] Curtis Preheim, *Salem Mennonite Church: History and Reflections* (Freeman, SD: self-published, 2008), 24.
[70] John Unruh, *As I Recall,* 8.
[71] Preheim, *Salem Mennonite Church,* 38.

Mennonites that evangelicals only caused divisions and needed to be watched carefully as they worked to develop their surroundings. Moreover, I believe that these splits and reunions of evangelistic Swiss Mennonites with their traditionalist Mennonite brethren caused the Salem Mennonite Church to become more open-minded in the late nineteenth century. Because of these events, the Mennonite General Conference urged the Swiss Mennonites to join them, with promises to help them find ministers and acquire financial support when needed. The Mennonite General Conference, chartered in Lee County, Iowa in 1860, formed to help connect Mennonite families west of the already established East Pennsylvania Conference and protect the Mennonite faith in the frontier. In 1879, Salem-Zion joined the conference, but the Salem Church refused (they joined in 1907) and continued to become embroiled with Adventists and Nazarene evangelicals.[72]

In 1890, Pastor S.F. Sprunger traveled to South Dakota on behalf of the General Mennonite Conference to investigate rumors of heresy among the Swiss Mennonite congregations. Instead of heresy, he found a spiritually dead congregation struggling to survive. In a letter to Andreas Schrag, Sprunger accused the Elder of failing to keep the faith alive among the Mennonites. Part of this concern centered around the religious activities of Seventh-day Adventists and pietist Mennonites from the Church of Nazarene who had managed to draw some Salem Mennonite Church members away to their own congregations. As discussed earlier, the Mennonite churches still considered the Pietists as heretics at this time and the Brothersfield Mennonite fragmentation, in which Adventists converted leaderless Mennonites in Brothersfield and caused the remaining Mennonites to move west toward Silver Lake, occurred during this time frame. In response to these critiques, Andreas Schrag pointed out the struggles of the

[72] Kaufman, *Drama of a Rural Community,* 108.

congregations in raising crops and managed to secure aid for the Swiss Mennonites of Freeman, but Sprunger stressed the importance of raising churches and encouraged the groups to join the Conference.[73]

Both Swiss Mennonite groups built their own churches, the Salem Church and the Zion Church, two miles away from each other and in 1894, the two groups successfully merged their congregations into the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church. This success may have been due to Elder Andreas Schrag's migration to Oregon, leaving only a small congregation of Waldheimers. In 1902, a tornado destroyed the Zion church building and the congregation decided to use the remaining Salem Church building. However, in 1907, the congregation realized their building could not adequately contain the combined congregations and called a meeting to discuss the conditions of the standing church. The groups voted on whether they wanted to expand the existing church or to build another church. They decided that a new church would be built two and a half miles south of the Salem-Zion church. The decision could have reflected a concern that families living on the edge of the community found it difficult to attend church due to the congregation being widespread and that another church would spare extra miles from those individuals. However, Emil J. Waltner, a Swiss Mennonite local of Freeman, believed that this split occurred because of a disagreement over utilizing ordained ministers for the congregation, with the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church arguing in favor of lay ministers.[74] Because of this decision, the Salem Church, found itself comprised mainly of Waldheimers while the Horodischers primarily attended the Salem-Zion Church.[75] This split shows that despite the

[73] Letter from S.F. Sprunger to Andreas Schrag, September 1890, MS 18, Box 3, Folder 4, Samuel Ferdinand Sprunger Collection, Mennonite Library and Archives (MLA), Newton, Kansas.
[74] Salem Mennonite Church, *Salem Mennonite Church 50th Centennial* (Freeman, SD: self-published, 1958), 22.
[75] Kaufman, *Drama of a Rural Community,* 107.

desire to bring the colonies together, the Swiss Mennonites failed to cement this bond. Division affected the congregations as practices differed. Because of this split, the two churches interacted with the revival movement (discussed in chapter three) differently, due in part to their geographic location, as the Salem-Zion Church laid closer to more pro-revival congregations while the Salem Church laid closer to the Freeman Junior College and became more embroiled in the fundamentalist debate. The two churches also had different beliefs on the role of spiritual renewal in their colonies. By 1920, both the Salem-Zion and Salem churches contained the largest Mennonite congregations. The Salem-Zion church boasted 319 members while the Salem church followed them with 294 members.[76] By 1940, the Salem-Zion church had increased to 417 but became outstripped by their brethren located two and a half miles south, which boasted a congregation of 465 members.[77] Ultimately, these Swiss Mennonites functioned better on shared concerns than their northern Low German brethren, which had more lasting divisions.

The Salem Mennonite Church abandoned foot washing early as Elder Christian Kaufman noted that cliques had begun to form, defeating the purpose of fellowship that the practice emphasized. Additionally, the church embraced ordained ministers, as seen in their 1906 split with the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, and acceptance of Christian Hege from Nebraska as a minister in 1911. These ordained ministers brought new ideas with them into the Salem Mennonite Church, such as confessing ignorance of biblical passages and presenting multiple points of views on the scriptures to their congregation. The Salem-Zion church, however, retained foot washing until the 1930s and used lay ministers, retaining the idea that the minister is the center of the community, until 1935. These differences highlight how the Salem-Zion

[76] 1920 Northern District Conference Meeting Minutes (hereafter NDCMM), Heritage Hall Museum and Archives (hereafter HHMA), 12.
[77] 1940 NDCMM, HHMA, 13.

church retained their traditionalist mindset while their southern brethren experimented with new ideas. I believe that because the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church sat between Anabaptist congregations, they retained their religious identity and did not feel the need to change. While they had left their Amish heritage, they still retained Anabaptist traditions that stuck with them until the 1930s. Meanwhile, the Salem Mennonite Church found itself influenced by Adventists and Nazarenes that encouraged them to adapt. Elder Christian Kaufman may have also played a role in encouraging their change. I believe that this change allowed the Salem Mennonite Church to embrace new ideas at an earlier period and slowly shift their religious identity by the 1920s, which enabled them to better adapt to religious challenges.

The Establishment of the Low German Mennonites of Marion

Like their Swiss Mennonite brethren, the history of the Low Germans started in discord. In 1875, Low German Mennonites arrived in the Dakota Territory and began settling in the Freeman-Marion area. They constituted a mixture of colonies such as the: Karolswalde (Poland), Molotchna (Ukraine), Michalin (Kiev), and Krimms (Crimeans). As the various colonies relied on each other for religious matters in the past, the community willfully shared ministers like Tobias Unruh, who led Low Germans from Newton, Kansas to southeastern South Dakota, in religious services like baptism. The Molotchna colony encouraged this cooperation as they lacked a minister despite being a large group.[78] However, economic disparity between the Dakota Anabaptist communities during the 1870s caused differences to manifest into rifts. Remember, Polish Mennonites (like the Karolswalde) could only rent land and left Russia poorer

[78] Kaufman, *Drama of a Rural Community,* 109.

than their land-owning brethren. Because they lived in Ukraine before the migration, the Alexanderwohl (a Molotchna colony) group arrived in America with more wealth than their brethren which often caused division between them in the Dakota Territory. They often attended church in wealthy outfits which caused friction with the other colonies, inciting accusations of worldliness.[79] These religious divides happened alongside economic woes that impacted the Low German Mennonites and Swiss Mennonites too.

Figure 3: Tobias Unruh. Courtesy of the Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, KS.

Within a few years of arrival, all the colonies—Swiss and Low German—met with natural difficulties. The congregations had thought that their experiences on the Russian steppes had made them prepared for the harsh environment of the Dakota Territory. Instead, they maintained a constant vigilance for locusts as they arrived in gray clouds that consumed plants and animals alike in their frenzy. As some of the colonies had left Russia with little money, many families found themselves destitute with few crops to harvest. Similarly, tornados proved a threat as they quickly destroyed homes and churches, forcing churches to hold services in homes while the community began the arduous task of rebuilding their churches. These difficulties resulted in numerous families migrating into Canada or returning to Kansas, for what they deemed more favorable weather and soil.[80] These migrations challenged colonies as they broke up communities and allowed non-Mennonites to settle abandoned farmlands. Congregations also faced difficulties as ministers sometimes left with these migrating families, leaving congregations to scramble for more leaders or join sister churches, as discussed earlier

[79] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial,* 20.
[80] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial*, 5.

with the Swiss Mennonites. In response to these environmental difficulties, Tobias Unruh, leader of the Low German Mennonites, traveled to Pennsylvania to ask the Mennonite branch for a loan.[81]

The Swiss Mennonite communities also had to send their own delegation in the form of Andreas Schrag and Joseph Graber to ask for loans from the Pennsylvanian group in January 1877 and obtained $7,400 in loans and $1,000 in gifts. Each community covered these loans, not individuals, and the congregations worked tirelessly to pay them off by 1905.[82] It is important to note that despite sharing ministers, both the Low Germans and the Swiss Mennonites did not interact on monetary matters. They addressed these loans separately and their separate congregations covered each bill. Despite their interactions, they tried to establish borders between each other that separated them into groups.

After addressing the issue of monetary support in 1877, Tobias Unruh continued his work in ministering to the Low German colonies in the Freeman-Marion area, holding house services. As with the Swiss Mennonites, the Low Germans managed to hold a cohesive front as they worked together to fight the Dakota environment. It is believed by members of the Mennonite community in Freeman-Marion that Unruh held these colonies together due to his respectable nature and energy. However, this unity began to splinter after Unruh began suffering from health problems and fell apart when he passed away in 1879 from tuberculosis. His successors, encouraged by Tobias Unruh's unifying presence, decided that the Low German colonies could be united into a central congregation. The same year as Tobias Unruh's passing, the Low

[81] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial*, 11.
[82] Kaufman, *Drama of a Rural Community,* 102.

Germans Mennonites built the *Grosse Kirche* (or Big Church), where the various Low German colonies in the Freeman-Marion area could worship together. [83]

The ministers, however, ran into difficulties in addressing the large congregation. Remember, these Low German Mennonites contained numerous colonies and the troubles over practices and tradition that affected the Swiss Mennonite colonies definitely also affected the Low Germans. It is unclear to the community today the specifics of what happened and what caused the church to fall apart but it is believed that cultural differences caused the discord between the various colonies. This split started with the congregation's decision that new ministers would be elected. Peter Fast became deacon and Peter Becker soon after received the position of Elder. Elder Johann Schrag of the Swiss Mennonites administered the ordination, suggesting the pattern of cooperation in crisis or in broad Mennonite cultural practices such as ordination.[84] This choice may have been because Anabaptist ministers would often help other congregations in the short term to help them stabilize but the choice may have also been a compromise between the Low Germans, allowing none of them an overall position of power. These troubles are a mirror to the splits that affected the Swiss Mennonites but, due to the Low German's congregational size and differences, the resulting fragmentation had a larger impact.

These splits centered around congregation leaders, who often left the *Grosse Kirche* as they clashed with other colonies. As discussed in the introduction, congregations chose respectable and wealthy members of their communities to lead them. If a leader left, most of the colony left. The first split among the Low Germans happened in 1878—before the *Grosse Kirche* was established—when Elder Peter Becker left with the Karlswalde colony (Tobias

[83] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial,* 8.
[84] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial*, 9.

Unruh's group) to form his own congregation. In his place, Fredrick Schartner became Elder, however, divisions continued to arise, and Schartner withdrew from the *Grosse Kirche* with his own group in 1883. Tensions became so high between Schartner's group and the remaining Grosse Kirche members that one story recounts how the congregation decided to physically divide the church in half with saws, but tempers cooled by the time people returned with their tools in hand.[85] This story shows how volatile these splits became as congregations argued, leaving resentment between the two groups. Schartner's group merged with Peter Becker's group, and they formed the Schartner Church six miles west of Marion (Schartner suffered a heart attack in 1905 and his congregation began to leave for other churches, eventually disbanding). The remaining 88 members (mostly consisting of Molotchna colonists) requested Elder Aaron Wahl from Mountain Lake, MN to serve the community alongside Deacon Fast, while they elected new ministers and erected a new church building calling it the Bethesda Mennonite Church. The final split in the *Grosse Kirche* happened in 1893, when Benjamin Becker (Rev. Peter Becker's brother) left with eleven families (of Molotchna Mennonites) to establish the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church in Marion.[86]

The Low German Bethesda Church, the third Anabaptist congregation discussed herein, is located three miles west of Marion and consists in recent years of a congregation of around one hundred members under pastor Steve Moerman. The congregation became nondenominational in the 1960s, when the church split from the General Mennonite Conference. The Bethesda Church highlights how geography influenced congregations as the church's neighbors like the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church regularly held meetings close by that

[85] Schmidt, *Ludwig and Sarah (Janzen) Deckert,* 15.
[86] Becker, *Aunt Martha's Story, 2*5.

enticed Bethesda members. The Bethesda Mennonite Church entered the twentieth century as a conservative group with foot washing being used until 1964, baptism through sprinkling, an emphasis on plain clothing, and lay ministers being used until 1939. These lay preachers, continued with Bethesda Church's formation in 1885, with the election of Derk P. Tieszen, who became Elder in 1894.[87] Additionally, the congregation refused musical accompaniment in the early twentieth century, relying on vocal singers in their services. Out of the four churches discussed in the thesis, Bethesda Mennonite Church retained their linguistic connections the longest, holding services in Low German until 1939.[88] These practices help to emphasize the difference between the Bethesda Church and the Swiss Mennonites as the Low Germans kept older traditions alive.

The Low German Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church currently rests in Marion with a congregation of 110 members under pastor Randel Maass. It emerged from the eleven families Benjamin Becker led from the *Grosse Kirche* in 1893. The *first* Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in America, however, began in 1889 at Mountain Lake, Minnesota when their own Mennonite church splintered into three churches after debates about Sunday Schools. Elder Aaron Wahl, the same individual who assisted Deacon Fast and the Low German congregations in Freeman-Marion in 1885, embraced Pietist teachings and accused the Mountain Lake Mennonite Church of lacking religious discipline. Wahl led fifteen families to form their own church in Mountain Lake, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church. Later that same year, they organized their own conference to help coordinate missions and ministers. The church

[87] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial,* 15.
[88] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial*, 19.

believed strongly in fostering Christian education and formed a school that served as an elementary school for the congregation.

In 1893, the small group of Karlswalde Mennonites, including Benjamin Becker, who contributed to the disintegration of the *Grosse Kirche*, invited two pastors, both named Henry Fast, from an Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in Mountain Lake, MN to conduct religious services in their homes.[89] Itinerant preachers from Mountain Lake had already traversed the Freeman-Marion area and had impressed their ideas on Benjamin Becker and his extended family. Again, itinerant ministers often influenced families to form their own churches, especially when churches had weak leadership. Elder Aaron Wahl, the same pastor who assisted the Grosse Kirche and had led a split from the Mennonite church in Mountain Lake, accompanied two reverends to help form a new congregation which became the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren or the *Bruderthaler Church*, after its mother congregation.[90] Interestingly, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren establishment also represented a growing concern within the Mennonite faith over the role of evangelicalism in the church. These concerns played a role in the formation of the Pietist movement. However, this emphasis on evangelicalism meant that the Mennonite Brethren churches needed to retain a constant religious spirit or face dwindling congregations.

Benjamin Becker—the grandfather of the young girl, Martha Becker, who converted at a 1920s revival that opens this chapter— became the leader of the church until his death in 1897.[91] In 1900, the church acquired a new leader, Henry C. Unruh. Until his ordination, the church had relied on the Mountain Lake brethren to supply lay ministers to help in religious tasks. It is

[89] Becker, *Aunt Martha's Story,* 24.
[90] Becker, *Aunt Martha's Story*, 25.
[91] Becker, *Aunt Martha's Story,* 5.

unclear why the congregation had such a hard time filling their pulpit as the problem could have been due to the Mountain Lake congregation needing to provide ministers to numerous congregations due to their new formation. This trouble could have also been due to the congregation having either difficulty in electing a new preacher due to their small size or possibly, the mother congregation did not prioritize the relatively new Evangelical Mennonite Brethren congregation. Henry Unruh, however, rushed to establish a church building, 18 by 28 feet, in 1901 and organized intermittent tent meetings to help draw families into the church. The move succeeded and the church outgrew its size in 1904, prompting the religious congregation to construct a new building.[92] This pattern would happen again, when absent leaders and a dwindling congregation would be saved by a new persuasive minister using revivals to stimulate the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church.[93]

In the 1910s, families began to emigrate from southeastern South Dakota, including numerous Mennonite families as children reached adulthood and wanted to establish their own farms. Surprisingly, ministers like Evangelical Mennonite Brethren's Henry Unruh joined this migration, and the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church suffered another blow when their deacon, John C. Unruh, left for Mountain Lake in 1920. Leaderless again, the congregation reached out to Mountain Lake for help. The Conference Home Missions Committee, an arm of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren congregations, responded by sending Dave P. Schultz and his wife, who would drive the area into what one congregation member called, "The George Schultz Era."[94] George Schultz preached the sermon that sparked Martha Becker's personal religious experience.

---

[92] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB,* 10.
[93] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB,* 43.
[94] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB,* 12-14.

This Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church adhered to pietist practices that encouraged evangelicalism, arguing that a strong religious spirit is needed in Christian life. As discussed in the introduction, missionary work by the Mennonites did not happen in Russia and some Mennonites believed that they needed to regain this aspect of their religion, which influenced their religious practices. Baptism happened through forward immersion as individuals enter life toward God.[95] Members also needed to be baptized twice, once after reaching adulthood and again after experiencing a personal Christian experience. For Martha Becker, this experience occurred after a revival meeting and introspection while doing the dishes and praying, allowing her to join the church fully after reaching adulthood. Additionally, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church utilized more music, utilizing the nationally popular evangelical preacher Dwight L. Moody's *Gospel Hymns* in their services. Foot washing, unlike their Swiss Mennonite cousins, occurred before communion. Communion consisted of broken bread in pans passed and large glasses of wine (which members sipped from) on either side of the congregation. Dinner followed the service with Sunday School following closely after.[96]

The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren churches—whether in Mountain Lake or Marion—originally found themselves at odds with other more established Mennonite groups because of their incorporation of American practices, specifically with their heavier usage of evangelical preachers, both itinerant or regular pastors of their congregations. These preachers often practiced revivalism, a practice centered around five beliefs: individual salvation, evangelism as a mission of the church, non-denominational Christianity, lay-oriented theology, and a conservative biblical position.[97] These beliefs are conveyed through emotional appeal designed

[95] Gertrude S. Young, "The Mennonites in South Dakota," 10 *South Dakota Historical Collections* (2015), 476.
[96] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB*, 20.
[97] Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Identity,* 286.

to induce people to confess and promise to return to the Christian faith. Traditionalist Mennonites disdained these fire and brimstone type speeches as they preferred the more paced and intelligent services that their own pastors administered. The question arose as to whether people truly converted or just made empty promises.[98] By 1910, many Mennonites began accepting these practices, but it varied among the churches and families as many groups became suspicious of these preachers and what they preached. However, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church embraced these new religious practices (like revivals) since its founding, as it complemented their pietist beliefs and could be used to uplift evangelism in the Mennonite churches. While these changes shifted their identity away from the Mennonite mainstream identity, they still considered their identity as being Mennonite.

The Swiss Mennonite Salem-Zion and Salem congregations and the Low German, Bethesda and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren congregations discussed in this chapter are ordered by how much they let new ideas influence their congregations and by their cultural ties. The differences among the congregations echo each of their unique historical religious splits, as leaders had different interpretations of Mennonite identity and practices. Some Mennonites argued for a religiously pure tradition based on their German roots, tying their language and culture to their religion, while others argued for change based on the world around them. These differences kept Mennonite congregations separated as seen with the Swiss Mennonite keeping each other at a distance and with the Grosse Kirche split. However, these splits made them vulnerable to other forces like the Seventh-day Adventists and wandering evangelists. These forces prompted Mennonite congregations to join the General Mennonite Conference or rely on

[98] Charlie Wollman, "SDOHC 48," interview by Stephen Ward, *University South Dakota Oral History Center*, 1970.

sister congregations like the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren churches. Ministers led these decisions as they sought to preserve their congregation's identity in the new century. With their establishment of societies in the early 20th Century secured, the Mennonite congregations faced still more challenges to their religious identities from American culture and religious practices.

Chapter Two: Freeman Junior College and the Fundamentalist Drive

The late 1910s saw a rise in concern among the General Mennonite Conference regarding modernism in its educational institutions as congregations grew worried about new religious ideas in the post-WWI landscape. However, Freeman Junior College faced the opposite problem. The junior college found itself caught between a conservative fundamentalism that anchored on traditional ideas and a militaristic fundamentalism that argued for new religious practices that would fight against modernism. This struggle arrived at the junior college on the advent of the Great Depression. Institutional funding, student attendance, and local support became tantamount to Freeman Junior College as its leadership navigated the new dispute at their doorstep. The chapter begins by introducing modernist-fundamentalist debate, focusing on how Mennonite communities viewed the conflict, and how the Freeman Junior College navigated between financial concerns, a concerned local populace, and a dubious Mennonite General Conference. Educational institutions like the junior college found themselves at the center of the conflict due to their role in teaching youths and influencing the next generation of religious leaders. Freeman Junior College settled on a middle path, limiting their spending to weather the Great Depression while slowly expanding their religious programs to retain student attendance and calm that local congregations who intermittently donated funds to the school.

In the 1870s, the Presbyterian church split between modernists and fundamentalists over four main issues: the inerrancy of the Bible, the support of evolution over creationism, whether God's kingdom would happen naturally or spiritually, and over leadership in denominational structures.[99] Modernists, mainly composed of religious intellectuals, pushed for a biblical

[99] Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture,* 117.

reading focused on the spiritual message rather than treating the Bible as historically accurate. This stance induced a reactionary backlash from their peers, mostly composed of evangelicals and conservative preachers, who accused modernists of misleading Christians from the correct path toward Heaven. Modernists argued that Christians needed to accomplish good deeds, helping poorer or sickly members of society, to reach Heaven, which fed into the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th Century. This approach emphasized Christian work in the present world, but fundamentalists argued that life is temporary, and that Christians needed to focus on their spirituality to enter Heaven. This spiritual stance meshed with evangelicals, who centered their meetings on salvation.[100]

Similarly, the two sides disagreed on God's kingdom, as fundamentalists supported premillennial dispensationalism, which argued that Jesus Christ will return to lift Christians into Heaven before a seven-year tribulation of Earth begins. After judgement, Christ would return with all his saints to rule for a thousand years. This belief harmonized with evangelicals and believers of prophetic biblical studies.[101] In 1910, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church adopted a five point statement in which they affirmed the historical inerrancy of the Bible, that the Virgin Mary conceived Jesus, that Christ sacrificed himself to purge sin, that he arose from the dead, and that Christ delivered miracles.[102] These points would be picked up by both the Mennonite founded Bethel College in Newton, Kansas and the Mennonite founded Freeman Junior College in Freeman, South Dakota in their publications when they attempted to discuss the modernist threat to their communities.

[100] Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture,* 119.
[101] Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements*, 205.
[102] Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements*, 215.

Mennonites joined the theological debate that griped the Christians of the United States over liberalism (modernism) versus fundamentalism, according to Swiss Mennonite minister and local historian Roy Kaufman. He noted liberals believed Christianity could accommodate the values of American culture while other more traditional Christians perceived the modern world of the dominant American culture as being dangerous to the fundamentals of their faith. A part of this concern centered around the diminishing Low German language as English became more prevalent among the Freeman-Marion Mennonites. For South Dakota Mennonites, their identity included the Low German and Swiss German dialects, which had stayed with the Mennonites throughout their emigrations in Europe.[103] However, while Mennonite preachers enjoyed the traditionalist aspect of the fundamentalists, they soon found it changing their congregations. Mennonites emphasized discipleship and community within a traditionalist structure, but fundamentalism made congregations commit to proposed doctrines while supporting personal faith and assurances of eternal life. [104] These influences emphasized the American value of individualism and helped absorb the German Mennonite culture through language. Paul Toews, a religious historian and member of the Mennonite Brethren church, noted that Mennonite fundamentalism formed as a response to the modern world influencing Mennonite communities. However, while fundamentalism reinforced Mennonite separatism, it also accelerated the integration of Mennonites into the dominant society.[105] Similarly, Calvin Redekop, a Mennonite historian, argued that fundamentalism encouraged pro-nationalism, forcing Mennonites to revise their stance on pacifism and social service, causing them to align with capitalistic and militaristic

[103] Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements*, 139.
[104] Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle,* 143.
[105] Paul Toews, "Fundamentalist Conflict in Mennonite Colleges," 244.

ideals.[106] An example of this nationalism can be seen in the actions of evangelists Billy Sunday and William Riley, who would underlay their fundamentalist speeches with patriotic and pro-American messages.[107] This militarism alarmed some Mennonites, who leaned more towards a conservative fundamentalism than a militant fundamentalism.

World War One contributed to this clash as American frustration at the German resistance to assimilation, which often led to conflict. Bethel College, a Mennonite institution, in Newton, Kansas treaded lightly after Americans burned down a nearby school for suspected disloyalty to the United States.[108] The Mennonite community in Freeman-Marion also faced difficulties when nearby Americans from Hurley attacked a cattle-drive meant as a donation for post-war Germany.[109] These nativist events served as the backdrop to the greater debate that influenced the Mennonite communities as they tried to navigate the threat of modernism.

Mennonite churches first believed that they could avoid these debates, but they became convinced in the 1920s that modernism had infiltrated their schools and churches through literature and preachers. In August 1921, the Mennonite General Conference launched an investigation to determine if modernism had infiltrated the church. Mennonite writers like John Horsch of the *Gospel Herald* and George Brunk of the *Sword and the Trumpet* began publishing articles defining the fundamentalist-modernist debate to their readers to keep them informed. Horsch, a strong proponent for militant fundamentalism derided the liberals and stated in 1924 that "modernism is a perversion and denial of the fundamentals of the faith yet, by an obvious distortion of church history, it claims to be true Mennonitism."[110] Writers such as Brunk and

[106] Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,* 289.
[107] Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelism,*100.
[108] Junhke, James C, "The Daniel Explosion: Bethel's First Bible Crisis," *Mennonite Life* 44 (September 1989), 20.
[109] Becker, *Aunt Martha's Story,* 32.
[110] John Horsch, *The Mennonite Church and Modernism,* i.

Horsch contributed to their newspapers through discussion that included a call for churches to purge themselves of liberals. In contrast, Harold S. Bender of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review,* argued for a more conservative fundamentalist, eschewing the militancy of Horsch. In July 1925, this focus switched from churches to schools as a Tennessee court charged a teacher named John Scopes for teaching evolution in his classroom, despite a state law that forbade the practice. The debate gained national attention and while the court found him guilty, Christians began to worry over how many teachers influenced their students subtly.[111] Similarly, a major concern for Mennonites in the 1920s and 1930s, centered around the "New Theology" which argued that the Bible contained historical inaccuracies and that Christians needed to only follow the spirit of the book.[112]

Critiques of colleges became a growing concern among the Mennonite communities in the early twentieth century. One controversy occurred in October 1916 when Professor Jacob F. Balzer of Bethel College in Newton, Kansas delivered a sermon to Anabaptist students about scholarly research that suggested that the Book of Daniel occurred in 300 BCE instead of 500 BCE. He ended this sermon by calling on the attendees to look for the spirit of the text instead of focusing on the historical inerrancy of them. The sermon unleashed accusations from parents and ministers alike that the college encouraged modernism on the campus and caused an investigation to take place. Subsequently, the college board either fired, encouraged to resign, or barred from religious activities on the campus seven teachers and President John Kliewer submitted his resignation.[113] Additionally the board forced faculty to sign a 12-point Protokol

[111] Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelism,* 59-60.
[112] Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelism,* 58.
[113] Junhke, "The Daniel Explosion: Bethel's First Bible Crisis," 20-21.

that included an outright statement of support for fundamentalism.[114] To the surprise of the investigating committee, they found modernist books in the campus library and immediately removed the offending items.[115] John C. Kaufman, a professor at the college at the time, referred to the incident as the "Daniel Explosion," as it marked the start of educational investigations in the Anabaptist faith by the General Conference. Meanwhile, Mennonite editors and preachers encouraged students to attend a different school for their education, though other colleges faced these same difficulties, as Goshen College closed from 1924 to 1925, when a professor expressed modernist views and even Freeman College failed to escape criticism as the 1920s would see a shift to more fundamentalist principles for the institution.[116]

Freeman Junior College (FJC), chartered in 1900 by Elder Christian Kaufman of the Salem Mennonite Church and nearby Mennonite congregations, opened in 1903 as an academy with the purpose of biblical education and maintaining the German language. The institution (conjoined with a high school) offered Teacher Training Courses starting in 1911 and gradually expanded their courses throughout the early twentieth century, becoming an accredited junior college by the South Dakota State Accrediting Board of Colleges in 1927.[117] Students would complete their primary education, teaching degrees, or Associate of Arts degree at the institution before moving to another college for a master's or doctorate degree. A survey by the Northern District Conference in 1930 found that around sixty percent of FJC students attended Bethel College in Newton, KS with Tabor College in Hillsboro, KS and Grace Bible Institute in

[114] Letter from Samuel Burkhard to the Bethel College Board, January 1, 1919, MS 16, Box 7, Folder 154, Peter Richert Collection, MLA, Newton, Kansas.
[115] Letter from Peter Richert to J.E. Hartzler, May 27, 1921, MS 16, Box 7, Folder 154, Peter Richert Collection, MLA, Newton, Kansas.
[116] Junhke, James C, "The Daniel Explosion: Bethel's First Bible Crisis," 20-21.
[117] Unruh, *As I Recall,* 2.

Henderson, NE following closely behind.[118] The propensity of students who attended Bethel is unsurprising considering the history between the two towns. Remember in chapter one that the Freeman-Marion Mennonites had originally arrived in Newton, Kansas before heading north into the Dakota Territory. When settlers experienced adverse weather in Dakota, many families went back to Newton, starting their new lives in Kansas. This connection swayed families to advise their children to continue their education at Bethel College. The two institutions also worked closely together during the twentieth century as Freeman Junior College also invited Bethel College President J.E. Hartzler to give yearly Bible lectures to students during the 1920s and the Freeman community enjoyed concerts by the Bethel College Choir.[119] Similarly, the Salem Mennonite Church invited Hartzler to give the Thanksgiving sermon at multiple other Mennonite churches.[120] FJC President John Unruh also served on Bethel's Advisory Board in 1934.[121] These interactions help to underline the relationship between the college and the Freeman community.

Initial Reactions at Freeman Junior College to Fundamentalism

In 1923, the Freeman Junior College instituted similar steps as Goshen and Bethel in attempting to curb any suspected modernist discussion. The *Freeman Junior College Bulletin* released a twelve-point document that required teachers to sign to continue working at the college. Similar to the *Protokol* of Bethel College, the document required teachers to "strive to implant these truths and convictions into the hearts and minds of the students; that each teacher

[118] 1931 NDCMM, HHMA, 3.
[119] *Freeman College Bulletin*, January 1923, HHMA, 1-2.
[120] *Freeman College Bulletin*, November 1918, HHMA, 2-3.
[121] Letter from Kaufmann to Unruh, January 5, 1935, Freeman Junior College Correspondence (hereafter FJCC), HHMA.

will use his influence to use only such Text-Books which will serve to support the contents of these Articles"[122] The articles affirmed belief in the Trinity and that the Bible is the Word of God and is inerrant in its inspired content and contains the only reliable message of Salvation for a lost world. Some teachers resigned rather than signed. These resignations, however, had a minimal impact on the college as the faculty signed nine-year contracts to begin teaching instead of longer-term contracts like with Bethel College.

Similar to their sister college in Newton, Kansas, Freeman College's school board felt compelled to institute the requirements. This board consisted of individuals appointed by a corporation, whose membership could be bought by individuals and congregations. A person or congregation could join through a twenty-five-dollar contribution and obtained a vote for every hundred dollars contributed for up to five votes. Unlike Bethel College, which could draw upon various funds beyond congregations, Freeman College relied heavily on congregational support. The college's choice to keep tuition costs low by selling votes to affiliated congregations made them reliant, which gave these paying congregations a larger voice in decision-making. John D. Unruh, a professor and president of Freeman College between 1931 and 1948, noted that during the 1920s and 1930s, the college struggled to keep its budget afloat amidst religious changes.[123] Economic and political factors influenced the Freeman Junior College as they attempted to avoid a shutdown of the school.

Freeman Junior College needed to maintain financial and local support and took steps to prove the support of its faculty and staff for fundamentalism. The first step centered around obtaining the employment of Peter Schroeder, a fundamentalist with a large reputation in the

[122] *Freeman College Bulletin*, February 1923, 1.
[123] Unruh, *As I Recall*, 18.

General Mennonite Conference, and with the establishment of Bible courses in 1924 under a three-man committee chaired by John D. Unruh, Peter Schroeder, and Benjamin P. Waltner.[124] These Bible courses encouraged fundamentalist discussions and coupled with weekly prayer meetings, they helped ensure that students attained a proper Christian education. Peter Schroeder, president of Freeman College between 1928 and 1930, maintained a popular reputation as a fundamentalist and persuasive speaker, which helped the collage's image as he fought for stricter discipline.

Raised in Mountain Lake, Minnesota, Peter Reuben Schroeder attended Bethel College in 1912, taking additional classes at the University of Chicago and the University of South Dakota. He had originally planned to become a missionary to India, but his plans were derailed when his congregation offered a ministerial position. He became the assistant pastor of the Berne Mennonite Church in Indiana the same year and succeeded in expanding the congregation from 776 to 1042 members. In 1928, he became president of Freeman Junior College until 1930, when he accepted a position at the local Salem Mennonite Church (though he retained employment as a Bible school teacher at the college until 1936). Schroeder used his position in the College to encourage fundamentalist teachings and obtained spots on several Northern District Conference committees. He required students to attend church weekly and tightened restrictions on entertainment like dances.[125]

During the 1920s, however, Schroeder began to clash with the college board president, Benjamin Waltner, over the school's budget and Schroeder used his influence with the General Mennonite Conference as a leading fundamentalist to pressure the board into allowing him to

[124] Unruh, *As I Recall*, 15.
[125] Freeman College Faculty Minutes, June 27, 1925, Box 28, Folder A, HHMA.

form fundamentalist organizations. These groups consisted of the Winter Bible Institute, a three month bible course led by approved, fundamentalist pastors, like David Schultz of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church and P.P. Tschetter of the Krimmer Brethren Church.[126] The board made more concessions in 1931 and made Schroeder the head of the Bible department and part of a three-man committee, now in charge of the entire college with John D. Unruh and Benjamin P. Waltner, who the board hoped would rein in Schroeder's frivolous tendencies.[127] However, Schroeder's additional work on behalf of the General Mennonite Conference made his role difficult and he resigned his presidency of Freeman Junior College in 1933, allowing John D. Unruh to become the sole president of the institution. Schroeder would continue to work biweekly through the Bible Department until 1939. These events show how the fundamentalist movement clashed with Freeman Junior College in the 1920s and 1930s.

Firebrands like Schroeder believed that the institution needed to stress biblical studies by introducing fundamentalist programs and events even if it sent the Freeman Junior College into debt. This belief clashed with the school board and teachers like John D. Unruh, who fought to balance fundamentalism and finances. This clash between Schroeder and the Freeman Junior College partially solved itself when Schroeder accepted a ministerial role at Salem Church and taught at the college biweekly, but the institution still struggled with preserving its reputation and maintaining its finances.

Fundamentalism, the Great Depression, and Freeman Junior College

[126] *Freeman College Bulletin*, October 1925, 2.
[127] Unruh, *As I Recall,* 19.

John D. Unruh faced a challenge from the start of his presidency. The school needed money but found the General Mennonite Conference unsympathetic to its situation, as the organization doubted the fundamentalist strength of the school. He stated that "Essentially, many of the ministers in the outer area were not convinced of the necessity of a well-rounded education. They were much more obsessed with the biblical emphasis prevailing in the so-called Bible schools or institutes."[128] In a letter to President P.C. Heibert of Tabor College, John D. Unruh lamented that only two churches fully supported FJC (Salem and Salem-Zion Mennonite Churches[129]) while other churches offered half-hearted support.[130] Schroeder's relegation played a role in this apathy as the Freeman Junior College lacked a similarly energetic individual in their board or presidency. Moreover, the General Mennonite Conference concerned itself with the building of Grace Bible Institute at Omaha, Nebraska, which would be fully staffed by fundamentalists, forcing the FJC to continue to rely on the support of local congregations, who gave less money every year due to the Great Depression. Grace Bible Institute also joined the modernist-fundamentalist debate and often accused their fellow institutes of being too lax in stamping out the New Theology.[131] These accusations convinced Tabor College, Freeman College, and Bethesda College to work more closely together and assist each other by directing students and teachers to each other's institutes.

Throughout the 1930s, John D. Unruh worked to help Freeman College through holding special events, fundamentalist programs, and hiring "good" fundamentalist teachers to compete with the new Grace Bible Institute and quell rumors of modernism. In a 1934 letter to Reverend

[128] Unruh, *As I Recall*, 20.
[129] 1934 NDCMM, HHMA, 6.
[130] Letter from Unruh to Heibert, May 4, 1934, FJC Correspondence, HHMA.
[131] Unruh, *As I Recall,* 21.

W.J. Bestvater of California, John D. Unruh pointed out that the college planned to implement a two-year Bible course that would match both the Moody Bible Institute and the Northwestern Bible School.[132] In 1937, the college invited evangelical John Essau to hold a revival at the beginning of the school year, expanded its evangelical training courses to a two-year program, and held a religious emphasis week to help encourage student spirituality.[133] These moves partially worked as John Essau entertained a popularity among the Freeman-Marion community for his prayer meetings. Unruh also began hiring teachers from Moody Bible Institute for his Bible classes, tying the college to the fundamentalist institute.[134]

A part of the Freeman Junior College Board and an ex-minister of the Salem-Zion Church, Alred P. Waltner, applauded the college for its fundamentalist drive stating in the college's newspaper that "If other denominational schools do become modernistic, let this institution remain true and loyal to the word of God, and let a true Christian spirit permeate all departments."[135] However, he also stated that the college needed to ensure that non-religious departments also needed to be staffed with outspoken fundamentalist teachers. This call may have been due to Grace Bible Institute hiring only fundamentalists, but I believe that it centered around who students sought out to discuss the theological problems that troubled them.

During the aftermath of the "Daniel Explosion" at Bethel College in 1917, David Reichert, a math teacher, stated to his brother Peter, president of Bethel's board of directors, that students did not approach religious teachers with theological questions but teachers they firmly trusted.[136] It seems likely that Waltner wanted to ensure that whomever the students asked, they

[132] Letter from Unruh to Bestvater, March 3, 1934, FJC Correspondence, HHMA.
[133] *Freeman College Bulletin*, August 1937, 4.
[134] Freeman College Faculty Minutes, 1934, Box 28, Folder D, HHMA.
[135] *Freeman College Bulletin*, December 1937, HHMA, 3.
[136] Letter from David H. Richert to Peter H. Richert, 1917, MS 477, Box 6, Folder 7, David H. Richert Collection, MLA, Newton, Kansas.

would not be swayed toward modernist thinking. Since many of these students would go on to Bethel, Tabor, or Grace colleges for their four-year degree (sometimes in theology), it fell on institutions like Freeman Junior College to ensure a solid religious foundation in their students.[137]

The turmoil over the Old Theology that affected educational institutions like Bethel and Goshen also affected Freeman Junior College. The college instructed students from multiple denominations in both scientific and religious education and felt compelled to take a stance on the fundamentalist-modernist debate. Congregations felt that the college needed to reflect the religious values of the community that made up the bulk of their students. The college also had the goal of trying to become accredited and needed funds to ensure it could fulfill the requirements necessary to achieve that goal. These two aspects, along with support from fundamentalists like Schroeder, convinced the school to shift to support fundamentalist practices and hold revival meetings. Fundamentalist religious teachers like Peter Schroeder and John Unruh worked to ensure that they oversaw religious training so that students could be free from modernist thought. Freeman Junior College worked to spread fundamentalist teachings while supporting the cause through revivals. These efforts by fundamentalist higher education institutions produced evangelists like George Schultz and John Essau, who could help convince members of the Freeman-Marion Mennonite community, into embracing the movement. Additionally, these efforts produced Sunday School teachers for local communities who taught the Old Theology to their students.

Fundamentalism brought a challenge to Freeman-Marion congregations as they weathered the Great Depression. The Freeman Junior College, formed to provide education to

[137] *Freeman College Bulletin*, December 1937, HHMA, 2-6.

the surrounding Mennonites, found their curriculum and teachers under scrutiny. While the focus on the college by fellow institutions and the surrounding community centered on the New Theology, this examination extended to other perceived signs of modernism. The Great Depression meant that the college already faced financial difficulties as they sought accreditation, but the scrutiny threatened to send them into heavy debt. Religious firebrands like Schroeder encouraged this belief as they sought to expand religious studies. Freeman Junior College decided on a middle path, expounding their religious credentials to please fundamentalists from both the Freeman-Marion area and the General Mennonite Conference while trying to make themselves a responsible, well-rounded institution to draw in more students and ensure their financial well-being. The college's efforts to gain more students meant that they needed to encourage religious activities as they used mass revivals under prominent (in South Dakota) evangelicals and added some religious courses like Biblical Prophecy to their curriculum. These attempts gained some attention from other Mennonites, who faced similar challenges in their churches.

Chapter Three: Evangelicalism and Individualism in the Mennonite Church

On a hot summer day in 1931, Edward F. Tieszen waited with thirty-three other men near the Vermillion River. A member of the Bethesda Mennonite Church, he had attended a revival held by George Schultz and felt electrified by the experience. Like the others around him, he felt touched by God and realized that he wanted to join the Evangelical Brethren Church that Schultz represented. One by one, the reverend baptized them in the river as the congregation watched. As he finished baptizing the last one, Schultz turned to the men and bade them to kiss each other only to laugh as the flustered men looked at each other. He informed them that a peck on the hand did the job too and, while laughing, Tieszen and the other men completed the ritual and joined their new congregation on the banks.[138] These mass style revivals provide a lens into a larger movement that affected the Freeman-Marion Mennonite community, evangelical-fundamentalism. The movement, which began in America during the late nineteenth century, influenced Mennonite congregations in southeastern South Dakota during the 1920s and 1930s.

This chapter will focus on evangelicalism in the Mennonite community of Freeman-Marion and how it helped spread individualism through these communities, with specific reference to the four congregations discussed in chapter one: the Salem-Zion and Salem Mennonite Churches of the Swiss Mennonites, and the Bethesda Mennonite church and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church of the Low Germans. I will then discuss how ministers and evangelicals encouraged revivals in their communities to gain more converts for their churches so they could pursue a message of fundamentalism. These efforts brought concern from mainstream, more conservative ministers as the evangelists who preached at revivals often

[138] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB,* 42.

stressed individual salvation instead of salvation through religious institutions and their ministerial leadership. Individual salvation led to a non-denominational push that forced Mennonite congregations to rethink their identity as new ideas wormed their way into congregations.

Individualism is a part of the greater American culture that began bleeding into the German-Russian culture that the Anabaptists had maintained since their formation, often causing a question of identity.[139] The question of identity is a crucial aspect of Anabaptist history. Remember, before arriving in the United States these related but diverse congregations consistently underwent periods of religious divides in response to outside and inside forces that shaped each colony's view on religious practices and doctrine. Religious historians have examined these groups since the 1950s to learn what made these Anabaptist groups separate from each other. These historians focus on defining Mennonite identity with local historians like Roy Kaufman, a retired pastor of the Salem Mennonite Church, arguing that traditional communalism is the center of their identity while religious historians like Calvin Redekop argue that the center is on traditional German discipleship. Beulah Hostetler argues that pacifism is the center. I believe that discipleship is at the center of the Mennonite faith, as they wrestled with doctrinal questions. Mennonite commitment to following their own understanding of how to be a Christian influenced their identity and influenced them through discussions on evangelism, forgiveness, and pacifism (which is a part of discipleship and not a separate entity). Communalism is an important part of the Mennonite faith and can be seen with the cultural divides between Swiss German and Low German, alongside colony divides discussed in chapter one as allegiance to a group superseded their commitment to an overarching group. But I believe

[139] Hostetler, *American Mennonites,* 55.

that this communalism relied heavily on isolationism as families did leave the Mennonite faith in America if they disagreed with their neighbors, as seen with the Becker family split in chapter one. Despite differing interpretations, these three historians agree that the church stood at the center of the community as churches acted as the political and judicial head of their communities.

These various interpretations by historians touch on a particular subject that affected Mennonites during the early 1900s: evangelicalism. Anabaptists found themselves forced into constant emigration, which due to membership loss, required evangelism to help replenish members.[140] The pietist movement discussed in chapter one arose partially due to this stagnation as members wanted to revitalize the faith. Some host countries tried to stop this proselytizing through contracts with Anabaptist Elders, who agreed to limit outreach to locals, and by the time Anabaptists settled in Russia, the colonies completely stopped evangelizing to other groups and focused solely on their own congregations.[141] When Anabaptist colonies moved to America, the focus on evangelism became more important as individuals like John Horsch, editor of the *Gospel Herald*, argued in favor of evangelical programs like revivals and encouraged fundamentalist preachers in Mennonite churches.[142] This chapter argues that the fundamentalist-modernist debate allowed Mennonite communities in the Freeman-Marion area to preserve their identity against Americanization through the adoption of fundamentalist principles delivered often through revivalist evangelicals but the debate itself also encouraged them to change their Anabaptist culture. These changes came because of outside and inside forces affecting the

[140] Plett, *The Story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church,* 32.
[141] Plett, *The Story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church,* 28.
[142] Horsch, *The Mennonite Church and Modernism*, 132.

Mennonite community as religious ideas that influenced other churches, like the Presbyterian church, began to influence the Mennonites.

Fundamentalism in America

Cavlin Redekop noted that because fundamentalism grew out of the revival movement, it borrowed heavily from the practice. Revivals stressed individual salvation, evangelism as the primary mission of the church, a conservative position on the Bible, and non-denominational Christianity. Fundamentalists emphasized the Bible as infallible and the foundation for theological formulations and argued for the personal and spiritual experience of conversions. These arguments, combined with a righteous feeling, made the group a combative element that divided congregations over combating liberalism and attacking perceived heresy.[143] This point of individual salvation and an aggressive attitude is a core component of this chapter as I believe aggressive action combined with its calls for traditionalism made fundamentalism desirable to Freeman-Marion Mennonites. However, fundamentalism's belief in individual salvation troubled congregations as individual salvation suggested one not believe in the necessity of an organized church in salvation and in which ministers believed their role important in saving individuals. In a later twentieth-century local church history, the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church in South Dakota noted that the ministry faced a tough choice in addressing challenges to their doctrine. If a congregation felt that the church could not sustain a heightened spiritual interest among their numbers, then many would leave to find a more engaging congregation that they felt helped connected them to God. However, if the ministry began enhancing the religious emotion of the

[143] Redekop, *Mennonite Identity,* 286.

congregation too much, then division surely followed as congregations soon also began to insist on doctrinal changes.[144]

In *Drama of a Rural Life*, which focused on the Mennonites of southeastern South Dakota, Roy Kaufman partially blames the religious deterioration of the Mennonite community on the fundamentalists. He believes that fundamentalism encouraged families to make faith a private and individual affair that undermined the communal and discipleship aspects of the faith. Instead of Anabaptism being a core part of their identity, the individualistic nature of the fundamentalist preachers encouraged their congregations to fall back to delineating along cultural lines, such as identifying as German or by occupation as farmers. This shift, Roy Kaufman argues, encouraged families to become narrow-minded which further changed the state of the Anabaptist faith as they became divided over encroaching American assimilation.[145] Beulah Hostetler agreed with this sentiment, noting that the revivalism used by fundamentalist-evangelical preachers focused on the individual and claimed the church's primary task became saving individual souls instead of the community. She claimed that sin became individualized with the emphasis being on sinful acts and sensuousness and not selfishness.[146] She also pointed out that "revivalism was a movement, a process of Americanization of the churches." Relying on several scholars she observed, "The closely parallel developments of evangelical revivalism and the American democratic faith have been noted."[147] The theological changes brought on by the fundamentalist movement in American chipped away at the established Mennonite identity that the original German-Russian congregations in southeastern Dakota hoped to preserve.

---

[144] *History of the Salem KMB Church* (Bridgewater, SD: Self-published), 80.
[145] Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle,* 170.
[146] Hostetler, *American Mennonites,* 152.
[147] Hostetler, *American Mennonites,* 175.

Evangelicals and Mennonites

When the Second Great Awakening rocked the United States in 1790 to 1840, Mennonites hesitated to join the movement. Religious leaders saw revivals as too sensational, as evangelicals frequently induced their followers into a religious frenzy. Anabaptists saw such outbursts as excessive. The focus on Satan also troubled Mennonites as they believed that Jesus had defeated the devil and cleared the path for followers to walk toward Heaven. Finally, evangelicals underlined God's relationship with man through terror, believing that humans needed to be scared into repentance. Mennonites tended to stress God's love being the focus, instead of secondary.[148]

By 1880, the Second Great Awakening had influenced eastern United States Mennonites. Mennonite leaders like David Brenneman mixed these revivalist ideas into their faith, causing a schism with traditional leaders. Brenneman had been inspired by Dwight L. Moody, a non-denominational evangelist at the forefront of the Bible Conference Movement, who established the Moody Bible Institute in 1886. Moody's usage of scholarly arguments instead of sensational sermons endeared him to urban Christians and appealed to Brenneman. John F. Funk, the same Mennonite leader who sheltered Tobias Unruh and Paul Tschetter during their tour of America in 1873, and Brenneman held their first revival meeting in 1872. However, Funk returned to the Mennonite fold while Brenneman leaned into revivals, became banned by the Mennonite Church, and founded the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church. [149] By 1900, numerous Mennonite churches had been won over but the isolationist nature of the Anabaptists, as

[148] Hostetler, *American Mennonites,* 153.
[149] Hostetler, *American Mennonites,* 188-189.

discussed in the introduction and chapter one, meant that congregations with diverse histories and traditions often reacted to religious movements differently.

When Anabaptist groups began arriving in the United States from Russia in the 1870s, they settled in colonies and mostly kept to themselves. The ideas that gained traction in the eastern states may have seemed inspiring to some of their ministries, but churches, especially the isolated churches in southeastern South Dakota, operated in their own way. The Mennonite General Mennonite Conference, aware of this fact, tried to provide some organization for the churches and provided a platform for churches to meet, share ideas, and direct funds though smaller conferences like the Northern District Conference. The Northern District Conference encompassed the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska and allowed local Mennonite churches to loosely organize with some oversight.[150] Remember, some churches like the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church begrudgingly joined the General Mennonite Conference while others like the Salem Mennonite Church joined for financial support and to gain support against evangelists like the Nazarenes, Mennonites who had embraced evangelicalism and Methodist religious teachings.

The *Gospel Herald,* published and edited by John Horsch, a prominent fundamentalist, became one such vehicle in which Anabaptist ministers could discuss congregational fears and possible solutions. Minsters in the 1920s warned each other almost monthly about the evils of modernism and the need for a revival of the church among their communities. Preacher Gerald B. Winrod, stated that "A man is either a modernist or a fundamentalist: he cannot be both at the

[150] Northern District Conference, *The Northern District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church, 1891-1991: A History of the Conference Committees and Churches of the Northern District Conference* (Freeman, SD: Northern District Conference, 1991), 4.

same time…. There is no middle ground."[151] To a community which believed that modernism infiltrated their ranks causing fractions among them, Winrod's words proved persuasive. An anonymous writer to the *Gospel Herald,* on the same April 3, 1924 issue, warned his fellow ministers of modernists working within the church to quietly destroy their congregations' foundations. He ended his warning confident that ministers could use religious rhetoric to convince modernists to get back on a righteous path.[152] Other ministers took a more confrontational stance. A sermon delivered by Allen H. Erb at Emmanuel Mennonite Church in La Junta, Colorado and reprinted in the *Gospel Herald* called for more aggressive attitude, arguing that passivity helped modernists consolidate their positions in churches. He declared that preachers could not afford to stay out of the war between these two groups.[153] On April 10, 1924, J.H. Baylor wrote on the imminent end, pointing to the modernists as a sign of the flagging discipline in the church that could only end with a separation of churches.[154]

Modernists questioned the historical accuracy of the Bible, believing the book to be untrustworthy, which alarmed ministers who refused to question the Bible's legitimacy and argued that it would lead to atheism. Religious leaders stood at the center of their communities, whose members looked upon these figures to resolve disputes. These ministers derived their power from traditional practices established at the core of the Anabaptist's beliefs.[155] However, taking a stance on changes to church doctrine often brought difficulties. Harold Bender, a prominent Mennonite preacher in the US, believed that these modern ideas were a part of outside

[151] Waltner, John, "Gerald B. Winrod: Deluded Defender of the Faith," *Mennonite Life* 24 (January 1969), 30.
[152] *Gospel Herald,* April 3, 1924, 5.
[153] Allen H. Erb, "Fundamentalism Versus Modernism: A Militant Attitude Necessary," *Gospel Herald,* August 21, 1924, 2.
[154] J.H. Baylor, "Indications of the Near Return of the Lord," *Gospel Herald,* April 10, 1924, 2.
[155] Fred Kniss, *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 137.

influences making changes to Mennonite churches. These influences changed church doctrine in ways that confused both congregations and their neighboring churches. However, these changes allowed some Mennonite congregations to form ties with non-Mennonite groups, a marked change as Anabaptists usually kept their distance from other Christian groups. For example, these evangelicals did not bar other denominations from viewing revivals, which followed the footsteps of Moody's nondenominational teachings. Bender warned his readers of the potential of congregations becoming lost, pointing to the United Missionary Church as an example of a group embracing foreign ideas like "eternal security," a belief that converting to Christianity saved one's soul from damnation forever.[156] These doctrinal challenges became amplified by the spiritually charged feelings of the revivalists, who exercised a large influence over local regions, as they did in southeastern South Dakota.

In 1910, the Freeman-Marion area hosted around three revivals a year.[157] The Methodists, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and the Krimmer Brethren Mennonite Church held these meetings and while the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church irregularly held revivals, it depended on if they thought the congregation needed a spiritual renewal. As discussed in chapter one, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church split from the Bethesda Church partly because they believed that the congregation failed to keep their faith alive. If the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church failed to sustain a lively spirit, then members would leave for more fulfilling churches. By 1920, the number of revivals increased as the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church began hosting yearly revivals. By 1925, the number of revival meetings increased again as churches began collaborating with each other to hold these meetings, increasing the number of

[156] Bender, Harold S, "Outside Influences on Mennonite Thought," *Mennonite Life* 10 (Lancaster, PA: Mennonite Life, 1969), 47-8.
[157] This examination is from the *Marion Record* and *Freeman Courier* during the year 1910.

revival meetings from five to about ten a year. The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church utilized two evangelicals a year and worked with the neighboring Silver Lake Mennonite Brethren church and the Church of the Nazarene.[158]

The fundamentalist movement drew its support from evangelical preachers who felt threatened by the perceived impending influences of modernist thought. To combat the modernist threat, these Mennonite preachers focused on mass revivals and other religious events to heighten religious feelings in communities and argued for fundamentalist programs. The Freeman-Marion community in South Dakota had dealt with wandering evangelicals in the late nineteenth century, but the mass revivals and the lack of "the ban" for these events by the 1920s and 1930s meant that ministers relied on their congregation members to apply familial pressure to wayward members rather than utilizing pressure as a communal group. Congregational pressure meant that like-minded groups may split from the community to join a separate church, hurting congregations beginning to face the Great Depression, but most Mennonite ministers thought the risk of revivals worth a chance to reinforce the faiths of their congregations.

Revivals had tremendous influence in raising spiritual awareness in communities and understanding the typical revival in southeastern South Dakota can suggest why revivals across the U.S. appealed to many religious persons. Revival meetings in the Freeman-Marion area typically occurred over two weeklong affairs that usually happened at a time decided upon by the itinerant evangelicals with the earliest starting at 10:00 am and the latest being at 7:00 pm. Evangelicals preached in the dominant language of the area with revivals done in the Low German language in the Freeman-Marion area until English gained dominance. Interestingly, in the 1930s, preachers like Emil Lacour of the Methodist church maintained certain days for

[158] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB*, 20.

English revivals while others happened in Low German. Churches maintained a regular schedule of revivals and newspapers posted reminders a month in advance. The Silver Lake Mennonite Brethren church started their revivals on the fourth Sunday of August while the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church started theirs on the first Sunday of September.[159] Popular evangelicals, such as George P. Schultz of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, drew large crowds with their speeches and people flocked to these gatherings from miles away.[160] Cars played a role in this expansion as the vehicles allowed people to travel for miles to attend these meetings and helped evangelicals reach their destinations more quickly.

Revivals occurred among Mennonites and other Protestant churches; they all drew eclectic audiences. The *Freeman Courier,* for example, noted that Adventist revivals drew the largest crowds.[161] Eva Unruh Deckert recalled travelling to Salem from Silver Lake to attend their Methodist revival meeting, underneath a large ten-by-forty-foot tent.[162] This meeting may have been in conjunction with the Silver Lake Mennonite Brethren church, which had welcomed Methodist preachers since their founding. These meetings consisted of hundreds of people in large tents with those inside sitting on wooden benches while those outside stood and watched. An evangelist placed an altar on one side of the tent where the evangelical would lead the group in song and sermon and preach his message toward the masses. He would then call on the audience for individuals who felt the need to confess. People would come forward and publicly confess their sins, which prompted forgiveness from the evangelical. Those who felt the need to convert would also announce their intent or would approach the church at a later date. The

[159] Mary Kehn, *The Diary of Eva (Unruh) Deckert (1879-1945),* trans. Frieda (Deckert) Schmidt, Martha Becker, and Mrs. Frieda Nickel (Freeman, SD: self-published) Aug 20, 1934.
[160] *Freeman Courier,* Sept. 22, 1934.
[161] *Freeman Courier,* June 14, 1923.
[162] Kehn, *Eva Deckert Diary,* Aug 18, 1934.

volunteers would then return to their seats while the preacher finished his sermon.[163] Between meetings, the evangelicals lived in a congregation member's house. These meetings brought extra cash flow to both the evangelical and the host minister. In the case of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, in 1934, the Methodist evangelist named Lacour made $125 during a revival week while David Schultz, the minister of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, made $55.[164]

Evangelicals held a non-denominational sway among communities as their mission centered around saving the most souls possible. They often worked with their own denominations, as seen with George Schultz, but cross-denominational assistance occurred, as seen with Lacour of the Methodist Church. While host churches helped evangelicals set up their tents, the evangelical preachers held services separate from the local churches. The spiritual messages at these events did not center around specific denominational lines such as Anabaptist beliefs of adult baptism, but instead focused on individual salvation. This stance allowed evangelicals to spread their message across denominations and their switching between English and local languages allowed this message to spread to a wider audience. Money also helped soothe relations with churches as donations helped the hosting church operate and encouraged them to continue supporting evangelicals.

In response to these cries for a revival of church spirit in the twentieth century, revivalists' meetings became more frequent. Fundamentalists encouraged this surge as they increasingly supported trans-denominational evangelical agencies during the 1920s and 1930s.[165]

---

[163] Charlie Wollman, "SDOHC 48," interview by Stephen Ward, *University South Dakota Oral History Center*, 1970.
[164] Kehn, *Eva Deckert Diary*, Aug 18, 1934.
[165] Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelism,* 66.

Evangelist-minded churches in South Dakota usually held revival meetings once a year, but this changed to a couple times a year. The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church held their annual meetings with George Schultz but also invited other evangelicals like Jacob Kleinsasser, of the Hutterthal church, and the Methodist evangelical Lamour to include Freeman-Marion in their tours.[166] The worth of these meetings served a variety of functions for the churches. Converts helped replenish church numbers as individuals migrated away from the Freeman-Marion area or stopped attending and allowed churches to maintain themselves amidst adversity while saving souls from damnation. The pro-revivalist Mennonite churches in particular promoted these meetings as they helped raise spiritual interest in their religion. Mennonite Brethren churches believed in the necessity of revival meetings for a spiritual awakening in the congregation. Remember, for Mennonite Brethren members to receive baptism, members needed a spiritual experience as they believed in the necessity of being touched by the Holy Spirit. Because of this stance, Mennonite Brethren churches typically favored emotional revival meetings. However, remember that many Mennonites disdained these practices for being too sensational (they would have preferred a less emotional/enthusiastic spiritual touch).

Evangelists believed that their mission to revive the Christian religious spirit needed to transcend denominational loyalty, prompting them to embrace a non-denominational stance. These points resonated strongly with the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, whose adherence to Pietism matched closely with revivalist goals. Because of this coexistence, Pietist churches often used revivalist practices to enhance their sermons and religious messages, bringing in more converts to their churches with the Marion Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church being a prime example of this good fortune. However, the mixing of these two ideas,

[166] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to...EMB*, 19.

pietism and revivalism, often sowed division in congregations.[167] Remember, revivals tended to reduce the role of organized churches (and their ministers) in salvation, stressing non-denominationalism and focusing instead on the individual. This focus on the individual became a new idea, among many others, that entered churches as evangelical preachers came from a wide variety of Christian churches. An example of this conflict can be seen with the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, who became influenced by the idea of trine perfectionism from the Nazarene Church in nearby Viborg (which will be discussed later in the thesis). Other Mennonite churches had separate problems with the revivalists.

Unlike the Mennonite Brethren congregations, other Mennonite churches, such as the Swiss Salem Zion Mennonite Church, argued that emotional revivals amounted to prideful displays that used music and fiery speeches to induce conversions. These churches doubted the conversions as many converts soon returned to sinful ways or regularly returned to these meetings to repent. During his interview with evangelist Charlie Wollman, historian Stephen Ward charged that many critics of revivalism point out that the festive nature of the events often produced a drunken state that caused people to relapse after the event. However, Wollman's recollection of these revivals portrayed a gentler mannerism, as he stated that he cared little if his confessors stayed true to their conversions as he only wished to help them. [168]

[167] Fred Kniss, *Disquiet in the Land*, 135.
[168] Charlie Wollman, "SDOHC 47," interview by Stephen Ward, *University South Dakota Oral History Center*, 1970.

The Swiss Mennonites and Evangelicalism

The Swiss Mennonite Churches tackled evangelistic influences in different ways. The Salem-Zion Church held a suspicious attitude of evangelicals while the Salem Church supported them. During their early years in the Dakota Territory, itinerant ministers from various Christian denominations wandered between towns, offering their services to congregations. These ministers sometimes preached in line with congregational beliefs, but others brought foreign ideas with them and caused congregations to view them with trepidation. A clear example of this dichotomy is with the early minister, Christian Kaufman, who preached at both churches. Amanda Kaufman recalled that her grandfather Christian Kaufman often allowed these wandering preachers to stay at his house and he commonly conversed with them.[169] However, if these evangelicals began drawing congregation members away, Kaufman would deliver a fiery speech to the miscreant. During one sermon, Elder Christian Kaufman spotted an evangelical in the crowd. He immediately switched with Minister Mueller at the pulpit, asking him to pull on his tailcoat if he got carried away, and fired off a fierce speech directed at the evangelical. His sermon "against proselytizing, attempts to lure members away from other churches, became more empathetic."[170] When he asked Mueller why he did not pull on his coat, Mueller replied that he had not said too much. The incident drove home the point to the congregation, to be wary of outside evangelicals, and it stuck with many congregation members.

The evangelical movement that swept through the Swiss Mennonite churches drew different reactions. Maynard Kaufman, of the Salem-Zion church, noted that the issues of the larger world seldom influenced the lives of his community in Freeman, claiming that they were

[169] Kaufman, *Story of My Life,* 8.
[170] Kaufman, *Story of My Life*, 25

isolated from world events. Religion held an "unquestioned aspect of our lives, as it was for our friends in this homogeneous Mennonite community."[171] He noted that a few evangelists came through the community and "saved" people through emotional appeals before moving on, but that the Swiss Mennonite community remained unaffected by these preachers except under special circumstance.[172] Preachers did not feel threatened by outside ideas, though they felt compelled to take stands on topics like the New Theology. Reverend Alfred P. Waltner of the Salem-Zion Church, as discussed earlier with the Freeman college, argued for the college to stress the Old Theology in every classroom. This attitude may have been due to their geographic location, nestling between Mennonite congregations, but their choice of preachers also affected them. The preachers of the Salem-Zion Church, Alfred P. Waltner and John J.A. Schrag, served the church from 1908 to 1934, suggesting that by keeping established lay preachers (who viewed new ideas more critically and promoted tradition), a congregation might participate in revivals, but still adhere to tradition. Their successors, H. Albert Claasen (an ordained preacher) and Jacob J. Regier (a lay preacher), felt less inclined to influence the congregation after the church fell into a heated debate over extended calls to them.[173] Additionally, the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church shifted linguistically since their foundation as they held services in English while the minister delivered the sermon in Swiss German.[174] This shift may have been due to Claasen as ordained ministers often pressed for English services but could have been due to the Salem Mennonite Church already implementing these methods in 1911.[175] However, eventually, the Salem Church found itself facing pulls from evangelical communities that helped shape them.

---

[171] Maynard Kaufman, *Salem Mennonite Church* (Freeman, SD: self-published), 8.
[172] Maynard Kaufman, *Salem Mennonite Church,* 8.
[173] Kehn, *Eva Deckert Diary*, Jan. 8, 1934.
[174] 1934 NDCMM, HHMA, 17.
[175] Salem Mennonite Church, *50th Anniversary of the Salem Mennonite Church: Freeman, SD* (Freeman, SD: self-published, 1958), 27.

Recall in chapter one the discussion about the Salem Church and their relationship with Evangelicals and Nazarenes in the late 19th Century. The evangelicals of the Seventh-Day Adventists of Hurley convinced a number of local Swiss Mennonites of the Salem Mennonite Church to form their own church, but these church building attempts failed, causing the remaining members to rejoin the Salem Church. These circumstances may have revolved around the ideals of individuals who may have felt discouraged by their church and felt that other congregations matched their own religious ideas. These brief splits help to highlight the religious leanings of the Salem Church as a section of the church preferred the evangelistic spirit found in other denominations. This preference may have been reflected in the preaching style of Elder Christian Kaufman (1878-1906), who harbored a reputation for his fiery sermons that stuck with the congregation. Curtis Preheim reported in his reflections of the church that evangelicals enjoyed some popularity and that community members sometimes loved the fire-and-brimstone type speeches.[176] This rejoining of evangelical minded congregation members had an impact on the Salem Church that shaped the religious practices of the congregation and combined well with another change, experimentation.

As discussed in chapter one, the Salem Church went through a process of hiring new ordained pastors from outside the Freeman community, leading to new ideas entering the church during the early 1900s. While the Salem-Zion Church retained the services of Alfred P. Waltner in the 1920s and 1930s, the Salem Church went through three ministers in the twenty-year period.[177] These ordained ministers came from outside the Freeman community and often brought new ideas with them. One member recalled a brother stating that "every time we get a

[176] Curtis Kaufman, *Salem Mennonite Church,* 8.
[177] Waltner, "History of the Salem Mennonite Church," 20.

new minister, we get something new into our church."[178] Some ministers admitted to ignorance of biblical passages while others delved into the scholarly research on what certain passages meant, encouraging members of the Salem Church to form their own conclusions.[179] I believe that these ideas, which arrived piecemeal, allowed the congregation to pick and choose which ideas they preferred while matching religious practices in America. This method allowed the Salem congregation to absorb new ideas in a way that kept the church stable instead of facing congregation members urging a larger transformation of religious practices.

The altar call is an example of this method in action as Reverand Peter Schroeder tried to implement the altar call in the 1930s, where members would approach the altar to confess their sins publicly. This approach originated in the early church, but Schroeder likely used its popularity in revivals to justify its implementation. The congregation tried altar calls but found them distasteful and removed the practice from the service.[180] These attempts placated evangelical-leaning members while drawing interest from other Mennonites in the area. I believe this experimentation contributed to the Salem Mennonite Church's increased membership and allowed the congregation to try different religious practices that entertained a popularity in non-Mennonite American theological spheres. This religious experimentation allowed them to draw in members while continuing to allow the official church ministers to be a part of the conversion process.

Two ministers, William Gottschall and Peter Schroeder, led the Salem Church through the evangelist wave in Freeman, South Dakota. William Gottschall, an evangelical who often held revivals in South Dakota, had toured the area during the early 1920s to assist ministers on

[178] Salem Mennonite Church, *50th Anniversary of the Salem Mennonite Church*, 59.
[179] Salem Mennonite Church, *50th Anniversary of the Salem Mennonite Church*, 58.
[180] Curtis Preheim, *Salem Mennonite Church,* 64.

behalf of the General Mennonite Conference and became well known to the Salem Church. His ministry focused less on revivals and more on ensuring fundamentalist ideas had a presence in Bible lectures through Freeman Junior College.[181] His successor, Peter R. Schroeder from Berne, Indiana, took less tactful strategies, insisting on fundamentalist programs during Northern District Conference (formed by the General Mennonite Conference) meetings, such as revivals, and requesting financial support for evangelicals working for the General Mennonite Conference. This aggressive stance did not make him friends with the other congregations and Roy Kaufman noted that his attempts may have weakened Schroeder's Salem congregation due to his divisive nature.[182]

As minister of the Salem Church, Schroeder pressed for more revivals in the community to stimulate the religious faith. During Northern District Conference meetings in 1935 and 1937, he gave presentations on the importance of revival meetings to his colleagues. However, this approach met with skepticism from the other congregations, like the Bethesda Church and Salem-Zion Church. To them, more emphasis needed to be placed on supporting struggling congregations like at the Friedensburg congregation in Avon and the Emmanual Church in Doland, both of which came close to closing their doors in the 1930s.

Biblical retreats, introduced to the Northern District Conference in 1936, also enjoyed more support from local churches as many congregations felt retreats addressed fundamentalism and engaged youths better than revivals.[183] As discussed earlier with Freeman Junior College, congregations grew concerned at perceived modernist teachings in educational institutions. To more conservative ministers, retreats offered better discourse between young adults and

[181] 1927 NDCMM, HHMA, 4.
[182] Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle,* 125.
[183] 1936 NDCMM, HHMA, 6.

preachers instead of sensationalist meetings that produced heady feelings. Additionally, the retreats offered a way for official churches and ministers to become more involved in the relationship between individuals and God, a process that revivals cut. These retreats became normative for congregations by the decade's close once the Northern District Conference had established a workable schedule.

Schroeder approved of these measures but also faced backlash from his colleagues in his fundamentalist drive, causing some congregations to ignore him.[184] But while Schroeder's stance may have caused him trouble outside the congregation, his own congregation supported him. This support stemmed from the Salem Church's long-standing use of ministers from outside the congregation to revitalize the congregation through new ideas, adding to its religious culture.

The culture of each congregation may have been a significant factor in their relationships to tent meetings. As discussed previously, while many of the colonists shared similar religious beliefs, their practices differed. These colonists settled in groups, so that their families lived close together. Their historical background and geographical position in South Dakota shaped their views on outside influences. As detailed in chapter one, the Swiss Mennonites had arrived as two main groups and had settled separately from each other. The Horodischers in the Salem-Zion Church may have been more accepting due to the cultural connections with other cultures in Polish lands while the Waldheimers may have been more affected by the Old Mennonite mentality due to their position in Ukraine. It should also be noted that the Waldheimers had been forced to make their own choices of religious leanings in the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century. Roy Kaufman notes that the Swiss Mennonites of the Zion Church (the original Horodischer church) had to decide between becoming Mennonites or staying as Amish.

[184] Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle,* 175.

Their leader, Johann Schrag, had been a proponent of his colony becoming Amish, but his son Jacob Schrag eventually decided that the congregation needed to join the Mennonite General Conference. This leaning toward the Amish faith would have had an effect on how the colony interacted with the world. The Amish are the most conservative of the Anabaptist groups and would have been against the revivalist movement that affected the community.[185]

In 1937, the interest in the spiritual renewal evangelicals brought became dampened after a scandal broke regarding a favored evangelical, Ralph Underwood. A fire-and-brimstone preacher, Underwood's reputation sank when news arrived at the Salem Church that he had cheated on his wife after he gave a stellar sermon on the sins of infidelity. Curtis Preheim, a congregation member, recalled that the congregation verbally attacked the evangelical and decided that Underwood did not preach from the heart. Moreover, the congregation had spent one hundred and twenty-five dollars to secure his services. Preheim noted that "That amount was a major hurdle for the congregation to overcome. We became very judgmental, in believing that Ralph Underwood came just for the purpose of the money."[186] Remember, some Mennonites harbored suspicions of evangelicals and this hypocrisy by Underwood seemed to confirm suspicions. The crop failures of the 1920s and the Great Depression may have made the situation harder on the community. Additionally, the congregation had already started to pay their ministers at this time with Rev. Schroeder being paid $1,200 a year. These factors, according to Curtis Preheim, helped turn the congregation away from evangelicalism and tempered their approach to fundamentalism.[187]

[185] Kaufman, *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle,* 40.
[186] Curtis Preheim, *Salem Mennonite Church,* 62.
[187] Curtis Preheim, *Salem Mennonite Church,* 62.

Part of this shift, I believe, also occurred because of Peter Schroeder. The minister had resigned from Freeman Junior College as he had trouble maintaining time between his duties teaching and running General Mennonite Conference programs like organizing Home Missions. His acceptance as minister of the Salem Church in 1930 brought the congregation new ideas approved by the conference, but he also retained his professorship at Freeman Junior College and became president of the General Mennonite Conference from 1933 till his death in 1941 from liver cancer. Schroeder's time as General Mennonite Conference president led to a repeat of his experience as Freeman Junior College president, where he would be absent for extended periods of time, preventing him from effectively leading his congregation. Moreover, his fellow pastor, John C. Kaufman, a first-generation immigrant, suffered from age and diabetes, which hampered his abilities until his death in 1956.[188] However, this did not stop the large inflow of members, as 114 new members joined between 1930 and 1940. These events highlight how quickly religious interest can change in congregations as mistakes committed by popular preachers turned people away from spiritual renewal.

The Low German Mennonites and Evangelicalism

Unlike the Swiss Mennonite churches, the Low German churches faced a different problem. Their close proximity to evangelist-leaning churches had a more direct impact on the congregation and brought deeper splits than their Swiss cousins. The Low German Bethesda Mennonite Church had 188 members at its founding in 1890 and 186 in 1920. Part of the reason for this status quo derived from the migration of members to Montana, North Dakota, and

[188] John C. Kaufman Obituary, 1956, HHMA.

Canada due to the Great Depression.[189] Additionally, concern over congregational attendance sharpened due to the Great Depression as Mennonites moved to cities for work. Generally, the congregation utilized a different approach that involved not becoming involved in the activities of the other churches. Members often worked with the other churches like the Salem-Zion Mennonite church among the Swiss Mennonites when discussing education and town problems, but mainly kept to their own religious practices. However, the group still retained ties to the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, who had split from the Bethesda Church in the 1880s. These ties show an interesting dynamic between the two Mennonite churches as the evangelist push entered their domain.

Like the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, the Bethesda Mennonite Church relied on lay ministers to support their congregation but unlike the Swiss Mennonite church, the Bethesda Mennonite Church had a more established leader in Elder Derk Tieszen during the 1920s and 1930s. A first-generation immigrant, Derk P. Tieszen won his position in the traditional fashion in 1890 and became Elder of the church in 1894 after the splits discussed in chapter one. Derk Tieszen supported the traditional practices of the Bethesda Mennonite Church along with the Old Theology being taught in Freeman College due to his traditionalist stance. However, he received pressure from a section of his congregation to support evangelical endeavors in the 1920s. To keep the peace, Tieszen allowed special meetings to be held, where these individuals could enjoy events like prayer meetings.[190] Starting in 1924, the church also engaged with the General Conference in raising evangelicals to preach in Asia and assist new Mennonite churches in North America who lacked ministers.[191]

[189] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial*, 25.
[190] John Unruh, *The Derk Tieszen Story* (Freeman, SD: self-published), 20.
[191] Unruh, *Derk Tieszen,* 9.

Revivals in the Freeman-Marion area also drew attention from the congregation, as members like Eva Deckert often attended revivals held by the Mennonite Brethren churches. These revivals drew members of the Salem-Zion Church, Bethesda Church, the Silver Lake Brethren Church (mentioned in chapter one), and the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church as stellar evangelists like George Schultz delivered sensational sermons to the crowd. Derk Tieszen's actions shows a moderate approach to the emerging evangelical faction that is unsurprising considering his, and the Bethesda Mennonite Church's, history. The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren split in 1893 (discussed in chapter one) had caused anger on both sides as both groups essentially debated proper religious doctrine and Derk Tieszen certainly did not forget his own experiences during it. The interest families had in the revivals also played a factor in this approach as multiple families routinely attended these evangelist services, drawn by the festive atmosphere and public confessions. It would have been hard for Derk Tieszen to know how many families would leave the church if he cracked down on them and Bethesda's membership numbers made this decision harder as people migrated away from Marion, South Dakota as the Great Depression worsened. However, this stall tactic did not please the evangelistic sect and a small split happened.

In the mid-1930s, evangelicalism started to wane, prompting a division in the Bethesda Mennonite Church. On September 1, 1935, this evangelistic pull evident in revivals had dwindled, much to the surprise of Eva Deckert. Despite the evangelist being George Schultz, the majority of regular attendees did not attend the revival and instead went to church with the Bethesda Sunday School recording a high.[192] This particular revival also had the notable absence of Salem-Zion Church members and the Silver Lake Mennonite Brethren church, both of whom

[192] Kehn, *Eva Deckert Diary,* Sept. 1, 1935.

turned back toward their own congregations rather than pursuing faith at revivals. However, the scarcity of attendees that day also brought a backlash from Bethesda's evangelist leaning faction. Recall in chapter one the discussions over Mennonite splits among the Low Germans. When groups of individuals disagreed with the minister over theological beliefs and practices, dissenting families often split to form their own congregation, leaving behind bitter feelings between the old and new groups. This pattern reemerged in 1939, when a minor split occurred in the Bethesda Church as almost thirty-two families left their congregation for the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church. While the church had experienced individuals leaving before, whether by marriage into other churches or to because of perceived issues with the congregation, these losses only happened once to three times a year, according to Northern District Conference membership records.[193] This 32-family split rent a fifth of the Bethesda congregation and left bitter feelings between the groups as individuals like Eva Deckert had friends and relatives in the splinter group. Later in 1939, as the congregation took a more negative view of evangelists, Elder Derk Tieszen delivered a fiery sermon against an evangelist from another church, who had tried to sway members of the congregation.[194] These events highlighted the growing animosity the evangelistic sect felt over Elder Tieszen's failure to push the congregation more toward evangelicalism and the resulting bitterness that the original congregation felt toward their evangelical neighbors.

The rift had left a mark on the congregation that changed them. Elder Tieszen retired later at the end of 1939 and urged his congregation to invite an ordained minister to lead them. Alfred P. Waltner of the Salem-Zion Church received this call and accepted the offer of the Bethesda

[193] Statistics are from church membership records in the NDC meeting minutes between 1919 to 1940.
[194] Kehn, *Eva Deckert Diary,* August 12, 1939.

Mennonite Church, leading the congregation until 1947.[195] In 1940, Bethesda's membership rose as the Schartner Church (once a part of the Grosse Kirche) closed and twelve families joined their Low German brethren, bringing them back up to around two hundred members. The congregation had become more involved in biblical retreats and prayer meetings along with alternating services in Low German and English.

While this split with their evangelistic sect hurt the Bethesda church's reputation and finances, it also reveals a unique aspect of the Freeman-Marion Mennonites situation. The earlier split between the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren and Bethesda church allowed members to easily cross into each other's congregations. Bethesda members, who viewed their own congregation as being spiritually dead, could join the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, who embraced the revival movement, while retaining their Mennonite identity. While pastors disparaged this switching of congregations, it stopped large splits from happening within the larger Mennonite community and lessened bitter feelings between families. Instead, families left at their own initiative. This natural relationship between the Bethesda Mennonite Church and the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church meant that the two could retain stable congregations.

In contrast to their Low German cousins, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church at Marion had enjoyed revivals since the 1890s. As discussed in chapter one, their proximity to the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Church of the Nazarene, both of whom established churches to the east and south of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, respectively, made revivals a shared experience for them.[196] Like the Church of the Nazarene, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren also believed in a personal experience to obtain membership in the church. Due to this

[195] Bethesda Mennonite Church, *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial*, 21.
[196] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB Church,* 24.

shared belief, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church often worked together with the Adventists and Nazarenes to host revivals and stimulate the religious life of their congregations. However, for the Mennonite Brethren, these attempts failed and in 1919, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church faced dire straits. The congregation, which had boasted a membership of fifty families in 1880, now only held twelve families. These remaining families held intermittent services while lacking a minister. In 1920, David A. Regier of the Mountain Lake Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church invited his fellow reverend, David P. Schultz of Mountain Lake, Minnesota to take over the ministry of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church. A daughter congregation of the Mountain Lake church, Regier felt the Marion church's dire circumstances needed assistance.[197]

Schultz had grown up in Mountain Lake, Minnesota before attending Moody College in 1911. In 1915, he went to the Chicago Seminary School and became the superintendent of the Brighton Mission Chapel. Afterwards, he became a traveling evangelical.[198] Originally, David Schultz agreed to serve during the summer months, but his stay became a twenty-year ministry that left a mark on the Marion Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church. The poor condition of the congregation can be seen in its membership of only twelve families, which made the 1910s one of the lowest periods of the congregation since its founding. Many of their brethren had moved to Montana for better land or moved to Minnesota to join the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren at Mountain Lake.

[197] Becker, *Aunt Martha Story,* 26.
[198] Harry Franklin Weber, *Centennial History of the Mennonites of Illinois 1829-1929* (Goshen, IN: The Mennonite Historical Society), 1931, 373-4.

David P Schultz started a revival at the Marion train depot, which succeeded in drawing a large crowd.[199] In order to stimulate faith in the community, David Schultz felt the necessity of revival and contacted his brother George Schultz, a prominent evangelical in Chicago. George Schultz agreed to do a two weeklong revival meeting on June 16, 1921, under a tent purchased by the church.[200] This decision would start a period that the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church would remember as the "Schultz era" that lasted from the 1920s to the 1930s. Previously, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church had held a revival meeting every couple of years, whenever membership declined. These actions highlight the importance of spiritual renewal in the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church. If the Mennonite Brethren failed to retain spiritual vitality, their churches risked losing their congregations as they would migrate toward more vibrant congregations, but this loss could be stopped by outstanding preachers. However, Calvin Redekop notes that this fondness of Evangelical Mennonite Brethren churches for revivals enabled fundamentalist ideals to enter their congregations easily.[201]

Churches like the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren loved prominent evangelicals due to their impact on the community. Churches paid for evangelicals to cover transportation costs along with their services and locally loved preachers drew large crowds, giving churches a larger religious impact for their payment. A particular favorite by the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, Reverend George P. Schultz, enjoyed a stellar reputation among the Mennonite community. His efforts to convert "dope fiends, drunkards, whoremongers, [and] prostitutes of the lowest kind" made him a favorite to the Anabaptists. Historian Royden Loewen notes that Schultz became known for his services beginning with lively singing from books with notes

[199] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB Church*, 37.
[200] *Freeman Courier,* June 19, 1921.
[201] Redekop, *Mennonite Identity,* 288.

before delivering a 20-minute, hard-hitting sermon that ended with the altar invitation. He often decried new religious methods in his sermons, stating that churches and their community needed to reembrace their traditionalist roots.

George Schultz's call for traditionalism reflected the problems in the Freeman-Marion Mennonite community as they debated the New Theology that had entered its doorstep with its open-minded ideas and the community's struggle to retain their identity. To George Schultz, Mennonite churches needed trained, fundamentalist leadership that would help guide younger members to a better future.[202] George Schultz utilized a loud, clear voice, which he used to carry simplistic, fire and brimstone type messages to attendees. He carried a potent charisma that compelled members of his audience to admit to theft and debt, which encouraged them to approach the altar to confess and declare their intent to repay their victims and debtors. Others felt pulled to conversion and asked for baptism, which he granted in one instance on a Wednesday afternoon in the Vermillion River.[203] Martha Becker noted that "most of the nights, people were standing on the outskirts three deep to listen and then at the end of the meeting there were many that responded to the altar call."[204] These services brought large donations from the community for the host church, which encouraged more revivals, and garnered interest from the community.

George Schultz's revival meeting in 1921 couped the costs of the tent used in the meeting ($400) and garnered enough funds for an expansion of their church. By 1922, the congregation had swelled to fifty-eight members and attended services in a two-story church. In 1931,

[202] Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 242.
[203] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB,* 12.
[204] Becker, *Aunt Martha's Story,* 26.

Bethesda members like Edward F. Tieszen, joined the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church during the Schultz era in 1931 with thirty-three others from various denominations.[205] By 1932, the congregation had reached 152 families.[206] George Schultz would return throughout the twenties and thirties along with Reverend Emil Lacour, a Methodist preacher. While David Schultz completed his mission of reviving the church, the meetings continued till 1940, renewing spiritual interest in a community that the congregation feared had lost its way. These events highlight how the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church viewed these services. While revivals reignited religious interest, they also brought money and members, both equally important factors for the church.

While the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church reaped the benefits of the evangelistic spirit in their community, it had a calamitous effect on their neighbors when the Nazarene Church went too far in changing doctrine for the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren to follow. A friend of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, the Church of the Nazarene had their roots in pietism. Since their founding, the two churches maintained a friendly relationship due to their identity with the Mennonite Brethren movement as they leaned heavily on themes of evangelicalism (though biblical disagreements strained this relationship). The fundamentalist movement left the Nazarene church with a revivalist spirit that brought doctrinal changes as they abandoned their pietist roots. In the 1920s, members of the Nazarene Church in South Dakota embraced trine perfectionism, a Wesleyan belief that members needed three baptisms: once through water and twice through personal conversion experiences to be saved and, by doing so, members would be perpetually free from sin.[207] The Nazarenes became split on the subject, with

[205] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB*, 12.
[206] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB*, 15-17.
[207] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB*, 28.

some members desiring to retain their identity and practices while others embraced this new idea and argued for its implementation. The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren viewed this split with concern, which changed into alarm when their own members began to espouse the same rhetoric and some began to attend the Nazarene church. Pastor David Schultz distanced his church from the Nazarenes, cutting off shared activities with the sister church, and began shifting his sermons to avoid dissention in the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church. Previously, the two churches had often worked together on revival and prayer meetings and the change in relations hampered their ability to reach out to members of their communities and save souls. David Schultz's strategy worked as the radical members of his congregation left for the Nazarenes while he retained control over the remaining Evangelical Mennonite Brethren members. Eventually, after Nazarenes managed to quell their own divisions, David Schultz began to tentatively open discussion with them again.[208] This change by the Nazarenes reflected the Holiness Movement that changed numerous churches in the early twentieth century.[209] Additionally, the event is important in understanding how ministers dealt with doctrinal conflict among their congregations arising from fundamentalism.

As discussed earlier with the Bethesda Mennonite Church, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church revivals started to cool down in late 1935. Marion resident Eva Deckert, noted during an Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church revival that "That congregation is divided into two parts and the other part was not there. The Mennonite Brethren Church people usually are there, but now there are only a few of them."[210] Additionally, she listed that the revival in 1935 harbored its usual crowd of Hutters, Low-Germans, and Brethren but does not state

[208] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to...EMB*, 29.
[209] *History of Milltown* (Milltown, SD: self-published, 1987), 22.
[210] Kehn, *Eva Deckert Diary*, August 24, 1935.

anything about the Swiss Mennonites except in regard to a few Salem-Zion Church members.[211] Baptism records also show a slowing down in Evangelical Mennonite Brethren membership as the congregation baptized thirty members after George Schultz's initial revival in 1920 and 32 individuals in 1931 and 1933 but baptisms declined by 1936, with only eight young people being baptized in 1936.[212] This trend mirrored the general revival movement in the Freeman-Marion area. While evangelical congregations like the Mennonite Brethren churches were still committed to the practice, the Mennonite churches began having less of them. Ministers began to realize that the threat had been exaggerated and Bender called on his readers to reject both fundamentalism and modernism. He pointed out that Anabaptism has no place for modernist ideals and that fundamentalism emphasized doctrine and technique too much, hampering the evangelist side of the religion.[213]

In 1940, the revival movement had somewhat cooled as David P. Schultz's terminated his ministry when he moved to other areas to help their flagging congregations. Abraham T. Duerksen, David Schultz's successor, had been an evangelical who had held revival services in the community, but he seems to have failed to have lived up to the successes of his predecessor. This may have been for two reasons. Despite the congregation losing a large number of members in 1934 due to emigration, the church still maintained high membership but faced a populace tired of the meetings. Conversely, while revival meetings continued in the area (a necessity for personal conversion in Mennonite Brethren Churches), other matters like crop failures may have convinced residents that praying for rain required more commitment than worrying about spiritual renewals. The Krimmer Mennonite Brethren church, for example often held rain prayers

[211] Kehn, *Eva Deckert Diary*, August 24, 1935.
[212] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB*, 18-20.
[213] Bender, "Outside Influences on Mennonite Thought," 48.

that ran for weeks at a time, which Eva Deckert and others attended.[214] The Marion church retired their prominent tent in 1949, which operated as a spot for prayer meetings and congregational gatherings during that decade.[215]

Fundamentalist evangelists influenced the Mennonite communities of Freeman and Marion through charismatic characters like Schultz and Schroeder and sensationalist events like revivals. These influences promoted individualism among congregations, emphasizing personal experiences with God that cut out local churches from the process. The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church avoided this pain by hosting these revivals themselves and encouraging interest in their congregation. The diverse nature of the Mennonite churches, established by their history, meant that Mennonite congregations addressed the religious upswing differently. These differences allowed families to attend churches that agreed with their beliefs while retaining their Mennonite religious identity. However, this shift blurred their established cultural identity and the evangelicals encouraged Americanization, as they pushed for the Mennonites to abandon traditionalist beliefs. Fundamentalists encouraged Mennonites to embrace the English language in services and evangelists often held their revivals in English. The adoption of new religious practices, formed by other denominations, also shifted Mennonite religious practices.

[214] Kehn, *Eva Deckert Diary*, June 24, 1933.
[215] Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, *Hither to…EMB*, 18.

Conclusion: Americanization of the Mennonite Identity

Mennonite congregations faced turmoil as a religious fervor affected their lives. Fundamentalism leaned heavily on evangelicals, who used their oratory skills to hold mass revivals but often spread new religious ideas that challenged local church doctrine. These ideas convinced families to embrace new beliefs that sometimes ran counter to the established church, leaving them to either pressure the minister or cut ties with their church. Preachers were unable to reign in these individuals for multiple reasons. The first issue is that the ban, discussed in chapter one, often backfired on the congregation. Individuals would take their families and leave for other congregations instead of apologizing for their behavior. Secondly, the relations between the churches had begun to change in the early 1900s. Since their establishment, the churches had isolated themselves in some fashion away from each other, drawing cultural differences between them. But the inventions of the radio and cars, alongside Freeman Junior College, blurred these lines. American anger at German culture in World War One also convinced congregations to work more alongside each other. However, the religious ideas brought by evangelicals challenged the shared German religious identity that the Mennonites had carried with them from Russia.

In response to the revivals, the churches had to rely on two routes. Ministers could change their doctrinal position or accept the emotional appeal of the tent meetings into their congregation to retain membership. Believers who left the church did so because they believed their church failed them in some fashion and needed to change. However, this action produced risk as the remaining congregation could resist the change, either pressuring a minister to change the service or removing him from his position. The next option involved leaving the services unchanged and accepting the losses, relying on the community to help retain membership. While

this approach may seem useless today, the approach proved to be useful sometimes to these communities. As seen in the case of the Beckers, when a family left a congregation, they did not just leave with their immediate family. Grandchildren and cousins sometimes left as well, which caused membership problems in the churches, but the reverse also happened. Families had settled as closely together as they could to support each other and leaving a particular congregation brought familial repercussions. Religion helped tie families together and attempting to leave could cause pressure from the extended family to stay in the congregation. The fact that the churches were often in the center of these communities also brought social pressures from an individual's neighbors that could cause them to stay. This approach, while not an outright ban, reflected a more subtle approach for the community to deal with their problems.

The fundamentalist-evangelical movement, however, influenced Mennonite identity as Mennonites began to shift from a German-centric religious identity to an identity based on religious differences. Individualism also grew in prominence as families focused on their individual relationship with God instead of communally through their church. The fundamentalist movement did not introduce a monumental impact on the Mennonite community of Freeman-Marion, but it did produce a change in how they saw themselves both religiously and culturally at the beginning of the twentieth century as South Dakota Mennonites joined the religious debates in North America.

The various religious splits that shaped Anabaptist congregations in pre-20th century Europe influenced their religious practices and relationship with the outside world. These splits continued during their settlement of the Dakota Territory during the 1870s as pietists and American congregations like the Adventists and Nazarenes sought to spread their influence in the Great Plains. Additionally, American Mennonites from the east coast sought to influence

these new European Mennonite arrivals with new practices. In response, some Dakota Mennonites attempted to retain their religious roots through isolationism as they interacted with wandering evangelicals. Some Mennonite congregations, like the Salem Mennonite Church and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, embraced new ideas and incorporated them into their services. Other congregations, like the Bethesda Mennonite Church and Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, sought to continue their traditional religious practices. These changes influenced service language, altar calls, and hymnals among others which influenced how these congregations fared during the religious upswing of the 1920s as fundamentalism became thrust into the forefront of American religious politics.

American Mennonites supported the rise of fundamentalism in the 20th century. Its emphasis on biblical inerrancy complimented their beliefs and Anabaptist organizations like the General Mennonite Conference sought to encourage its growth while diminishing modernist influences. Prominent Mennonite writers like John Horsch encouraged this movement, gaining support from Mennonite ministers who worried about diminishing Mennonite followers and modernist influences in schools. However, Mennonites in South Dakota found themselves struggling to withdraw from these militant attitudes and pursue a middle ground between the two ideals.

Fundamentalism drew support from evangelicals, who argued for a revitalization of the Christian faith and Mennonites felt this pull. Evangelicals crossed denominational lines to give stellar sermons to attendees, often in English, which drew different reactions from Mennonite ministers. Some Mennonites, like the Brethren churches, used revivals to gain more converts for their congregations, which often saved them from disbanding. The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in Marion, South Dakota is a prime example as their congregation of ten

families in 1920 grew in contrast to the Schartner Church (once a part of the Grosse Kirche), which disbanded by 1940. However, these practices induced religious turmoil in congregations as the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church had to deal with questions around perfectionism and trine baptism. Bethesda Mennonite Church is an example of this trend as their membership slowly declined in the 1920s and 1930s as members either left the Marion area or joined other churches. The resulting loss in membership led the congregation to change, embracing the English language in services, utilizing ordained preachers, and accepting new ideas like biblical retreats. I believe that the earlier *Grosse Kirche* split that established the Bethesda Mennonite Church and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, allowed Mennonites who sought to retain their religious identity while embracing the evangelical swing to easily move from the former church to the later one.

The Swiss Mennonites had different experiences than the Low Germans with the evangelicals. Their proximity to Freeman Junior College and their past allowed them to embrace change more readily with the Salem Mennonite Church being a good example. The Salem Mennonite Church experimented with new ideas since the passing of Elder Christian Kaufman, like using ordained ministers, trying new religious practices, and interacting with wandering evangelicals. I believe these changes allowed them to weather the religious upswing of the 1920s and gain from it. The congregation nearly doubled in size in a twenty-year period, outstripping the membership of other Mennonite congregations in the region. Some of this gain can be attributed to the movement of Mennonites into towns but the bulk of it came from a devout pastor and their acceptance of new ideas. The Salem-Zion Mennonite Church also experienced an upswing in membership, but this can be attributed to its location between Hutterite colonies and Mennonite congregations, insulating the congregation from non-Mennonite congregations.

Additionally, their interactions with the Salem Mennonite Church may have operated as a reverse to their Low German cousins, as Mennonites who rejected the religious changes could move to a more traditionalist Mennonite congregation near them.

The religious history of these four Mennonite Churches: Salem-Zion, Salem, Bethesda, and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren, influenced how they dealt with the religious turmoil of the 1920s and 1930s. The Great Depression and their relationship with the Freeman Junior College added an additional aspect to this debate as congregations grew concerned over local education. Neighboring denominations, such as the Nazarenes and the Adventists, and the General Mennonite Conference exerted an influence over these congregations as evangelicals and fundamentalists brought doctrinal disputes to their doorstep and inspired religious splits within congregations. Ministerial leaders from either inside or outside the Freeman-Marion Mennonite community sought to weather these disputes through different means, either through separation, compromise, or adaption. These influences shaped how the Mennonite congregation shifted to a more Americanized culture that relied on the English language, utilized new religious practices, and shaped how they viewed themselves in regard to the outside religious world. While the Swiss Mennonites grew larger during this time, the Low Germans had opposite experience, with the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren church surviving while the Bethesda faced a stream of congregational losses and gains. Fundamentalism and evangelicals left a mark on the Mennonite congregations as they entered the WWII period of American history.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Manuscript Collections

Center for Western Studies (CWS), Augustana University, Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Rueben Goertz Collection

Heritage Hall Museum and Archives (HHMA), Freeman, South Dakota

Freeman Junior College Bulletin

Freeman Junior College Correspondence (FJCC)

Freeman Junior College Faculty Minutes

Northern District Conference Meeting Minutes (NDCMM)

Obituary Files

Mennonite Library and Archives (MLA), Bethel College, Newton, Kansas

David H. Richert Collection

Peter H. Richert Collection

Samuel Ferdinand Sprunger Collection

Published Materials

Becker, Martha. *Aunt Martha's Story.* Marion, SD: self-published, 2010.

Bethesda Mennonite Church. *125th Celebration Quasquicentennial.* Marion, SD: self-published, 2008.

Centennial Talks and Sermons. Freeman, SD: Salem Mennonite Church, 2008.

Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church. *Hither to…EMB.* Marion, SD: self-published, 1968.

History of Milltown. Milltown, SD: self-published, 1987.

Horsch, John. *The Mennonite Church and Modernism.* Scottsdale, PA: self-published, 1924.

Kaufman, Amanda. *Memories of My Life.* Freeman, SD: self-published, 1980.

Kaufman, Maynard. *Salem Mennonite Church.* Freeman, SD: self-published, 1980.

Centennial Sermons and Talks. Freeman, SD: Salem Mennonite Church, 2008.

Kehn, Mary. *The Diary of Eva (Unruh) Deckert (1879-1945)* translated by Frieda (Deckert) Schmidt, Martha Becker, and Mrs. Frieda Nickel. Freeman, SD: self-published, 1945.

Kliewer, John W. *Memoirs of J.W. Kliewer or From Herdboy to College President*. North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1943.

Preheim, Curtis. *Salem Mennonite Church: History and Reflections.* Freeman, SD: self-published, 2008.

Salem Mennonite Brethren Church. *A History of the Salem Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church: Bridgewater, SD, 1886-1986.* Bridgewater, SD: Self-published, 1986.

Salem Mennonite Church. *50th Anniversary of the Salem Mennonite Church: 1908-1958*. Freeman, SD: self-published, 1958.

Salem-Zion Mennonite Church. *Looking Back 100 Years, 1880-1980*. Freeman, SD: self-published, 1980.

Unruh, John D. *As I Recall.* Freeman, SD: self-published, 1970.

Waltner, Amanda. *Memories of My Life: Amanda (Kaufman) Waltner: Early 1900s-1980s*. Freeman, SD: self-published, 1980.

Weber, Herry Franklin. *Centennial History of the Mennonites of Illinois 1829-1929*. Goshen, IN: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1931.

Periodicals

Freeman Courier (Freeman, SD)

Gospel Herald (Scottsdale, PA)

Herald of Truth (Scottsdale, PA)

Marion Record (Marion, SD)

Mennonite Life (Lancaster, PA)

Interview

Wollman, Charlie. “SDOHC 47.” By Stephen Ward. South Dakota Oral History Center (SDOHC), University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD. 1970.

Secondary Sources

Published Materials

Hostetler, Beulah S. *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements: A Cultural Paradigm*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002.

Junhke, James C. "The Daniel Explosion: Bethel's First Bible Crisis." *Mennonite Life* 44, no. 3 (September 1989): 20-26.

Kaufman, Roy. *The Drama of a Rural Community's Life Cycle: It's Prehistory, Birth, Growth, Maturity, Decline, and Rebirth.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020.

Kniss, Fred. *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Krahn, Cornelius. *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* 4. Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959.

Loewen, Royden. *Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930.* Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Marsden, George. *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Marsden, George. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991.

Northern District Conference. *The Northern District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church, 1891-1991: A History of the Conference Committees and Churches of the Northern District Conference.* Freeman, SD: Northern District Conference. 1991.

Plett, Cornelius. *The Story of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church*. Hillsboro, KS: Board of Christian Literature, 1985.

Redekop, Calvin. *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988.

Schell, Herbert S. and John E. Miller. *History of South Dakota*. 4th ed. Pierre, SD: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004.

Schmidt, Freida. *Ludwig and Sarah (Janzen) Deckert.* Freeman, SD: self-published, 2006.

Smith, C. Henry. *The Mennonites of America.* Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1909.

Thompson, Harry F., ed. *A New South Dakota History*. 2nd ed. Sioux Falls, S.D: Center for Western Studies, 2009.

Toews, Paul. "Fundamentalist conflict in Mennonite colleges: a response to cultural transitions?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (July 1983): 241-256.

Unruh, Daniel. *Tobias Unruh: A Biography*. Freeman, SD: self-published.

Unruh, John. *The Derk Tieszen Story.* Freeman, SD: self-published, 1970.

Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* (December 2006): 387-409.

Young, Gertrude S. "The Mennonites in South Dakota." *South Dakota Historical Collections* 10 (1920): 473-283.