

## Vignettes from the History of Mennonite Women

Presented at the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of Mennonite Women Canada (formerly Canadian Women in Mission) at Mennonite Church Canada Assembly, July 2012

### Readers:

**Waltrude** Gortzen

**Lois** Mierau

**Ev** Buhr

**Myrna** Sawatzky

**Liz** Koop

**Carol** Penner

**Ev:** Mark 4:26-34 (translated by Eugene Petersen)

**Myrna:** Then Jesus said,

**Carol:** "God's kingdom is like seed thrown on a field  
by a man who then goes to bed and forgets about it.  
The seed sprouts and grows—he has no idea how it happens.  
The earth does it all without his help: first a green stem of grass,  
then a bud, then the ripened grain.  
When the grain is fully formed, he reaps—harvest time!  
"How can we picture God's kingdom?  
What kind of story can we use?  
It's like a pine nut.  
When it lands on the ground it is quite small as seeds go,  
yet once it is planted it grows into a huge pine tree with thick branches.  
Eagles nest in it."

**Ev:** With many stories like these,  
Jesus presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and  
maturity.

**Myrna:** He was never without a story when he spoke.  
When he was alone with his disciples,  
he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots.

**Carol:** How can we picture God's kingdom?  
What kind of story can we use?

**Ev:** As women of Mennonite Church Canada, we know that God has been faithful!

God's faithfulness endures from generation to generation.

**Myrna:** We listen to the stories of our mothers, of our grandmothers.

**Carol:** We listen to the stories of our daughters, and their daughters.

**Ev:** Generation after generation, small seeds sown in faith.

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**Liz:**

### **Early 1900's**

About twice a month in Mennonite households across Canada, mothers would check that their wooden-handled knitting bags contained either their embroidery work, crocheting or knitting supplies, and have their husbands hitch up the horses to take them to "Naehverein."

Sewing societies or Naehverein, were held in each other's home. If there were no older daughters to baby-sit, mothers took their pre-schoolers along, not just their nursing infants. The fathers often remained for the afternoon so they could visit with other men, help the women conduct their financial business and supervise the children. Most of the time, though, the children ended up at the feet of the women.

Sometimes the older girls stayed home in order to feed the menfolk, but the 1917 president of an Ontario sewing circle took her daughter along since "they had set out Father's dinner for him, and he could fry potatoes."

Women met to support and encourage each other, **and** to offer help where needed. Some rural sewing circles were primarily a social outlet for isolated women. For others, their goal was to make craft items to sell among each other in order to raise money. This would help the men fulfill their obligations to the mission board.

Many women's groups took scriptures that spoke of service to others as their motto. For example, Colossians 3:23 -24. "*And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, . . . for ye serve the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

**Carol:** Women **sewing** heartily,

**Ev:** women **meeting** heartily,

**Myrna:** women **raising money** heartily.

**Ev:** Sowing seeds in faith, heartily;  
for **this** we give thanks!

**Myrna:** Generation after generation, small seeds sown in faith!

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**Waltrude:**  
**The 1940's**

In 1930 the Women's Missionary Association (**WMA**) of the General Conference Mennonite Church appointed Mrs. Sophia Krehbiel from Saskatchewan to be the Advisor of Sewing Societies of the Canadian District. She began by listing all the sewing circles in Canada. In congregations where there were none, she encouraged women to form them.

In 1941, **Rev. David Toews**, moderator of the Canadian Mennonite Conference, asked Mrs. Krehbiel if the sewing societies in Saskatchewan would present an inspirational program at their annual sessions. This they did, under her leadership. The focus was missions.

One result of that **Evening** program was the formation of the Saskatchewan Women's Missions Conference. During her many years as WMA's Canadian representative, Mrs. Krehbiel continually stressed the value of women organizing provincially and the value of close connections to the US-based WMA.

In 1946 Mrs. Lohrentz, the WMA president, visited 66 women's groups from Ontario to British Columbia in order to strengthen the connections between the WMA and Canadian women. She said, "We should have visited our Canadian sisters long ago. ... We can learn a lot from them, such things as working harder for relief, and men interested in getting an overall picture of General Conference mission work."

Sophia Krehbiel's work was enhanced by Mrs. Lohrentz's visit, but in 1950 she still lamented, "We have over 100 societies, but there are many more who have not joined our conferences. How can a province provide support for a missionary if there is no organization?"

**Ev:** Decade by decade, women were sowing peace,  
stitch by stitch, seed by seed.

**Carol:** They organized and strategized,

**Myrna:** they fellowshipped and visioned,

**Ev:** Sowing seeds from across Canada together,

for this we give thanks!

**Myrna:** Generation after generation, small seeds sown in faith!

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**Lois:**

### **The 1950's**

During and after World War II, Mennonite Central Committee reported on the great need for overseas relief. In Ontario, the Women's Missionary and Service Auxiliary (WMSA) responded by establishing a centralized Cutting Room where the clothing and bedding designated for relief would meet MCC standards.

In 1942, they bought a cutting machine and hired a machine operator. They purchased yard goods and cut them into ready-to-sew clothing. Sewing circles paid two and a half cents for each garment they purchased. Several interest-free loans from the Non-Resistant Relief Organization enabled the Cutting Room to move from a farmhouse to the MCC relief depot in Kitchener, pay a full-time machine operator and maintain a large supply of fabric.

Despite ups and downs, by the 1950s the Cutting Room was generating a profit. By 1960 they had repaid the loans in full and a short time later provided an interest-free loan of \$2000 in turn to MCC Ontario.

The activities of the cutting room continued until 1996 when the responsibilities were handed over to MCC.

It is as Rev J.J. Thiessen, a wise church leader in western Canada, stated, "If it were not for the zeal of the women, their sacrificial service and generous giving, many projects would never have started, and others would have died on the way long ago."

**Carol:** The zeal of women working together!

**Myrna:** The zeal of women working together **for Jesus!**

**Ev:** The zeal of women with a business plan  
sowing seeds of peace, together!  
We give thanks for the zeal of women!

**Carol:** Generation after generation, small seeds sown in faith!

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Ev:

## **The 1960's**

When the Women's Missionary Association (the WMA) discontinued the German section of *Missionary News and Notes* in 1945, some Canadian women invited Miss Helena Siemens from Altona, Manitoba to edit a small German publication. She released the first issue of *Unser Missionsblatt* the next summer containing activities of Canadian sewing circles and reports from missionaries.

The November 1952 issue of *Unser Missionsblatt* contained this report: **July 8 was a day of special significance in the history of the work of women's societies of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. Over 300 women met in the chapel of the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba . . . eager to work on the agenda before them.**

That agenda was to formally organize the Canadian Women's Conference, our predecessor. An annual meeting would be held during the sessions of the Canadian Mennonite Conference. Mrs. Sophia Krehbiel was elected president, Mrs. Abe Neufeld from British Columbia vice-president and Mrs. Agnes Ewert from Saskatchewan secretary-treasurer.

It was a "golden era" for Mennonite women's societies. Women were generously giving material aid and money to a dizzying array of mission, church, MCC and other projects, and were praised for their "overwhelming work in the vineyard." Women were highly motivated to try a wide variety of fundraisers because the decisions where the money was going was theirs to make. Many new groups were formed, especially in our cities.

And women developed financial and administrative skills through leading their groups, skills which they willingly offered for building God's kingdom.

**Carol:** Women working in the vineyard

Ev: women working **together** in the vineyard

**Myrna:** women working together in the vineyard **for Jesus!**

**Carol:** Women planning for a rich harvest of faith.  
We give thanks for women working faithfully!

Ev: Generation after generation, small seeds sown in faith!

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**Carol:**

## **The 1970's**

When Margaret Ewert began her term as president in 1972, she gently encouraged the provincial presidents to challenge their women to do some serious thinking about the role of women in the church.

The feminist movement was well under way. Women missionaries in the Republic of Zaire had encouraged a visit by North American women, rather than men, in order to connect with them and the Congolese women. Rev J.J. Thiessen, who had ordained both men and women to ministry as missionaries, argued that if that ordination was valid for service abroad it was valid for Canada as well.

Women's groups studied such books as All We are Meant To Be, A Biblical Feminism for Today by Scanzoni and Hardesty.

As a result of a consultation that Canadian Women in Mission (CWM) helped to fund on "Women in the Church," each General Conference Commission began to include one woman as voting member.

In 1975 CWM requested that the topic, Women in church leadership, be discussed by the assembly delegates. "What are the consequences when all the decisions for the whole church community are made by men?" was asked. Another woman said, "In today's society women are more competent and better qualified to hold offices within the church [than in the past]."

It was in 1988 that assembly delegates voted to help congregations move toward including women in pastoral leadership. CWM had always gently encouraged this direction.

**Myrna:** Women telling stories in church,

**Carol:** women telling stories of God's faithfulness.

**Ev:** People listening to the voices of women,  
hearing stories from around the corner and around the world.  
We give thanks for the voice of women proclaiming God's faithfulness.

**Carol:** Generation after generation, small seeds sown in faith!

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**Myrna:**

## **The 1980's**

"Be a visible Christian in your community" was the challenge given to the women at the 1985 annual meeting of CWM. Already in 1982, a women speaker had asked, "Is it time to end being a fund-raising organization and concentrate on the personal healing needed by many, such as broken homes, divorce and

loneliness, and to which women have [unique] gifts to offer ?”

The answer was to continue giving **and** to focus on social issues and support those who are hurting. In 1986 CWM women donated \$938,413.00 for local, provincial, Canadian and General Conference projects plus to MCC and other non-Mennonite causes. That’s the biggest donation in our history!

Women’s groups were encouraged to speak out on family violence, liquor advertising, war toys, abortion, pornography. Some local groups promoted Christian family values through hosting guest speakers in their community. Manitoba WM sponsored a series of meetings on child abuse. The CWM council reviewed films at the Mennonite Resource Centre that would help congregations deal with family violence.

At their 1986 assembly workshop, women learned how to witness to government, to media and to business regarding moral issues in our society from a faith perspective. From writing letters to purchasing wholesome toys and books for children, they could be effective.

**Ev:** Women working to make Christ visible,

**Carol:** sowing seeds of peace in their own backyards, attending to injustice, hearing the voice of the voiceless.

**Myrna:** Women joining their voices to make a difference, working hard together to continue fruitful giving. We give thanks for women in solidarity sowing peace!

**Carol:** Generation after generation, small seeds sown in faith!

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**Myrna:**

### **The 1990’s**

Throughout the 90s, many local groups were saying, “We are getting old and younger women aren’t joining.” With membership, donations and service activities in decline, it was a time of struggling with present weariness and future concerns.

Women’s priorities, expectations and needs were changing. Salaried women preferred to give money rather than raise money. Busy moms wanted to do things with their family instead of other women.

There were still needs to be met, overseas and at home, even though the ways of helping had changed. Christ’s call to faithfulness still applied. Women of all ages still needed the friendship and nurture of other women, as they worked or studied the Bible together.

At every level, there were women who were willing to look for new and enriching ways to keep Women in Mission growing.

Some groups continued to meet until the illness and death of members forced them to disband. Older women learned to delight in the fact that younger women, who were choosing to use their gifts differently than them, were growing in their commitment to Christ and the church.

General Conference Women in Mission and Canadian Women in Mission captured the vision for aligning women with God's purposes in a revitalized mission statement. They developed a three-year program resource on the theme "Carrying God's Light" to motivate groups in their tasks with God's grace and power.

**Carol:** Women working in God's garden, sowing new seeds, gardening creatively!

**Ev:** Women finding new ways of working together making mission statements and living them out

**Myrna:** Generation after generation, small seeds sown in faith!

**Liz:**

## **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

During Erna Neufeldt's term as CWM president, she reminded us to celebrate our sisterhood and, at the same time, watch where God is leading us today and tomorrow.

That "sisterhood" included the integration of the Ontario Women in Mission and the Ontario Women's Missionary and Service Commission in 1995, partnering with Mennonite Women USA to publish Timbrel and the Bible Study Guide, and making greeting cards for international women at the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Paraguay in 2009.

God was leading in receiving a \$70,000 legacy from the "Two Pennies and a Prayer" fund, supporting female Witness workers through that legacy, and in donations to that fund today.

God was leading in the transition from Canadian articles in Timbrel to 6 pages annually in Canadian Mennonite, entitled "Women Walking Together in Faith."

We've watched as God led us in implementing the 2009 recommendation of the Task Force to redefine our membership to include all women in our churches, not just those in groups. Mennonite Church British Columbia created a Women's Ministry department. We eagerly watch for God's leading of Manitoba women.

And we watch for emerging connections between and among Mennonite women of all ages, ethnicities and energies through our blog-spot, the newsletter “Connections” and in ways yet unknown where our God of surprises will lead.

**Carol:** Mennonite women in Canada, decade by decade,  
sowing seeds of peace,

**Myrna:** faithfully, patiently, fruitfully, hopefully,

**Ev:** Mennonite Women Canada still meeting, still gathering,

**Carol:** Women listening carefully as women tell stories,

**Myrna:** stories from our homes, our communities, our world.

**Ev:** Women still and always asking the question,

**Carol:** How can we picture God’s kingdom?  
What kind of story can we use?

**Myrna:** Let’s pray to God together!  
God of grace,  
God of infinite love,  
God of all that’s good and growing:  
We give thanks for the small seeds sown by sisters long ago.  
Small seeds that have grown into huge trees with mighty branches.  
We find our home in this family tree of faith.  
Thank you that these stories have been fruitful in our lives  
encouraging us to be workers for your kingdom.  
As Mennonite Women Canada we continue to dedicate ourselves to your service,  
eager workers for the harvest of righteousness  
which you are sowing in our world. Amen.

**Carol:** And all the people said, “Amen!”            **People:** Amen!

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Acknowledgments:

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The historical sections were compiled by Naomi Unger of Rabbit Lake, SK and the litany sections by Carol Penner of Vineland, ON.

