

PROFILES

OF MENNONITE FAITH

Heinrich Voth

Founder of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada

When Heinrich Voth first came to southern Manitoba in the 1880s to witness to his faith among fellow Mennonites, he came to a community searching for new answers. Voth had arrived in the United States from Russia less than a decade before and settled at Bingham Lake, Minnesota. He and his wife Sarah (Kornelsen) had embraced a strong personal faith in Christ in Russia. Voth had been a teacher in Klippenfeld in the Molotschna Colony for several years before moving to the U.S.

When the Voths emigrated to America in 1876 they had not yet joined the Mennonite Brethren Church. About a year later, over the objections of his parents, they were baptized by a lay member of the small Mennonite Brethren Church at Bingham Lake. A few weeks later, Voth was chosen to be the minister of the group. He faithfully led this church for forty-two years.

Voth was a persuasive and attractive evangelist, a strong Bible teacher and preacher, and a vigorous conference leader. Although he sometimes met resistance, he was not easily derailed from his commitments. Voth also was a notable practitioner of a system of

itinerant ministry that early Mennonite Brethren used with great effectiveness. This system involved going into communities (mostly Mennonite) and finding opportunities to share the gospel in homes, schools or churches, always with the hope of leading people to a clear sense of forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ. Such itinerant



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ministry was a key to the growth of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and in America.

Voth first began his itinerant evangelism in Manitoba in the village of Hoffnungsfeld, on the edge of what is now Winkler. This community and the

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nearby village of Schanzenfeld were the seedbed for considerable dissension among the mostly conservative Mennonites who had come to Manitoba, and the changes that flowed from there affected several groups.

Here people were singing new songs, engaging in Bible studies and prayer meetings, and many of them supported a higher level of education than was true for the more conservative Mennonites. This created tensions that foreshadowed the crisis that eventually led thousands from these groups to abandon Canada in the 1920s for Mexico and Paraguay.

Voth's message of the joy of salvation and release from sin and guilt struck a nerve. He was welcomed by Johann Warkentin, who was a teacher in Hoffnungsfeld when Voth first visited the village. Some years later Warkentin became a much-loved leader of the Winkler Mennonite Brethren Church. Voth's accounts of the meetings in Manitoba convey both the positive response his ministry generated and the tension it sometimes created.

Voth was threatened physically by some of those who opposed his message. In one village he was refused shelter even though it was mid-winter. So he burrowed into a haystack and spent the night praying as he tried to stay warm and get some rest. At another meeting two community councilors decided they would seize Voth and send him home. Their plan was foiled when they were forced to sit on the platform behind the speaker. Later one of them told the other, "If what that man preached is true, we are all lost." Later he became a staunch believer.

Nonetheless, his ministry bore fruit. When the first two couples were baptized in May of 1886, it meant taking a position that families often misunderstood. Because rebaptism expressed a judgment on the first baptism, it created much pain

in the community. Jacob and Anna Banman and John Nickel and his wife (her name is lost) were the first to be rebaptized. Another baptism followed two weeks later. By the end of the year, a small nucleus of Mennonite Brethren had formed at Burwalde, just north of Winkler.

Although Voth was invited to move to Canada to continue the work, he urged a friend in Russia, Gerhard Wiebe, to move to Canada and assume leadership. Wiebe came, along with other Mennonite Brethren families, and in 1888, sixteen members formally chartered the first Mennonite Brethren church in Canada. Voth returned repeatedly to evangelize and to baptize. The group grew rapidly, and by 1905 it had 225 members.

Voth always remained close to the Canadian churches. During World War I his nonresistant convictions motivated him to move to Canada. He settled in Vanderhoof, B.C., and founded the first Mennonite Brethren church in that province. Voth died within months of settling there. His son, Henry S. Voth, later became leading minister of the Winkler Church and was a very effective conference leader. It was he who had his father's bones brought to Winkler, to be buried in the soil where he spent so much of his life's passion.

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