

A CHURCH IS BORN
1978-2003

The Lethbridge Mennonite Church was conceived in the minds and hearts of a group of people in the Coaldale Mennonite Church with a seed in the form of a recommendation from a Church Planting team (Abe Neufeld and David Whitermore) and the Alberta Missions Committee. The gestation period included the normal joy of nurturing new life but also morning sickness. When on October 30, 1975 the Coaldale Church's Missions Committee recommended that a survey be conducted asking the question, "Would you favour beginning a daughter congregation in Lethbridge?" the majority said no (57/54). Dave Goertzen was one of those who voted against starting a new church in Lethbridge. But by early 1976 (March 29) some of those experiencing the excitement of pregnancy and anticipating a birth were appointed to the initial steering committee. They included Mel Epp, Doris Boehr, Henry Lepp, Anne Martens and Walter Falk. By now they were ready to start more regular services, but they needed helpers and money. The Coaldale church came through. On October 25, 1976 they decided to support their pregnant daughter. Dave and Louise who had moved to Lethbridge by this time decided to support the venture wholeheartedly. Louise said *"after that it never crossed our minds to discontinue."* Renting and moving repeatedly from place to place—the Civic Centre, the Alcoholics Anonymous building, and a Baptist Church on the north side--caused real morning sickness until a building was purchased on 11th Street South (1977) and dedicated January 28, 1979. A baby shower brought in gifts from Coaldale, the Alberta Conference, the Lethbridge group, and loans from the Canadian Conference.

In late 1977 Art and Charlotte Regier, a retired pastor and farmer started prenatal classes and assisted with the birth in February 26, 1978 along with all the paper-work. The original family consisted of: George Woelcke, Gertraut Woelcke, Abraham Fehr, Katherine Fehr, Louise Goertzen, David Goertzen, Katherine Epp, Melvern Epp, Henry

Siemens, Patricia Siemens, Irvin Martens, Anne Martens, Walter Falk, Elvera Falk, Alma Dyck, Elsbeth Moyer, James Moyer, Henry Lepp, Tina Lepp, Peter Letkemann, Katy Letkemann, Doris Boehr, and Bernard Boehr. The women in the new church lost no time organizing a Women's Fellowship April 10, 1978. It is a rare organization in that inflation seemed to pass it by. The original membership fee was \$2.00 and it still is the same.

With the formation of a new church came the need for leadership. A CMBC graduate, Nick Dyck, was chosen as the first pastor starting May 1978. He reached out to Mennonites and former Hutterites living in Lethbridge. By early 1979 it was clear that things were not working out. The *tensions, misunderstandings and different expectations* were serious enough that he resigned in June 1979.

Nick's leaving did not solve many of the problems that had arisen between members. Self-doubt, blaming, remorse and anger for what had happened had set in. Many of those (there were 40 members on the roll when Nick left) who had been attracted to church left over the leadership issue. The question spoken and unspoken was, *"Is it worth the time, money and effort to carry on?"* Most of the founding members, after a period of doubt, decided they could not abandon a new-born just because the baby was sick. They were going to do what was necessary to get it well.

In spite of the hurt feelings and discouragements, those who remained felt strongly that God had called them to start a church and be a witness in Lethbridge. Slowly relationships were rebuilt and the group started to function as a fellowship with love and trust in each other. Since then the church has had only three pastors: Ernie Sawatsky 1980-93, Fred Unruh 1993-1998, and Ruth Preston Schilk 1998 to the present.

In spite of differences the church met regularly and decided to renovate the building on 11th Street and started searching for another pastor. In September 1980 it hired Ernie Sawatsky, a widower with three children. By December the church had enough energy to write the government protesting abortion, consider sponsoring Boat

People and update the church directory. The General Conference issued their first **Provisional Statement on Homosexuality**. *"To the best of our understanding, God's Holy Spirit leads us to reject homosexuality as an option for Christians. However, we believe God's grace is for all."* The statement forced the issue into the open for constructive debate and reflection, but it also haunted the Conference of Mennonites in Alberta and the Lethbridge Church for the next twenty years.

At the annual meeting the chairman's report was optimistic. *"In 1980 our congregation continued to grow and mature. During the last year a healthy feeling of stability was attained in our congregation. We are no longer wondering whether the Lethbridge Mennonite Church will survive....The tasks for 1981 appear much easier than those that faced us in the beginning of 1980. With fewer internal problems facing us in 1981 we should be able to concentrate more on the problems of all those who attend the church and in serving the community outside of the church."* The pastor's report echoed this optimism, *"I see several healthy signs for which I am thankful and encouraged. Members who were involved in the church's formation have worked through many problems and continue with faithful support. A healthy youth group has been meeting with enthusiastic sponsors. There is a constant stream of visitors attending worship and a growing interest in finding our purpose and mission."*

Only three years after the original constitution was adopted changes were needed and made along with a new church directory. One of the difficulties the church faced was money. It could not meet its budget, relying heavily on subsidies from the Canadian Conference, the Alberta Conference and Coaldale.

In 1982 the Church Planning Committee made four suggestions to enrich its ministry and reach out:

1. *That a Youth Fellowship be established as soon as possible.*
2. *That Boys and Girls clubs be started with music and recreation as the main foci.*
3. *That we start monthly Family Nights.*

4. That we consider an outreach program specifically directed to persons of Hutterite and Mennonite backgrounds who live in Lethbridge but have no church affiliation.

All suggestions were tried with varying degrees of success.

Peter Letkemann emphasized peace starting with the film **If You Love This Planet** and encouraged the church to become involved in Project Ploughshares which was organizing a chapter in Lethbridge. In the following year this led to participation in a march protesting Cruise Missile testing. The congregational chairperson characterized 1982 as the year *"we experienced significant growth...not so much numerically, but more spiritually."*

One event late in 1983 which may not have seemed so significant at the time was a visit by Henry Enns as MCC Handicapped Services Resources Person. In a wheelchair himself, he opened our eyes to the needs and the possibilities of people with special needs. It was a significant step in preparing the church for a future ministry in this area.

The homeless and transients stopped in at the church a great deal because it was a part of a cluster of churches in the down-town area where they could make their rounds with some ease. After lengthy discussions with the other churches under the leadership of Saint Augustine's Anglican Church, a Soup Kitchen was opened starting in their facility. The purpose of the Soup Kitchen was, *"to provide a healthy dinner to transients every day of the week."* During 1984 the church baptized three youth, but five members transferred to Coaldale leaving a membership of 48.

In 1985 the church protested Sunday shopping by writing letters to the government. It could not stop the tide and Sunday store openings became the norm. Because of the large Sunday School, more class rooms were needed. There was no more room so the rooms were divided, becoming very small and the sanctuary was pressed into service. Financially it was a mixed year. Anna Redekop died leaving the church with money in her will, which made it possible to retire the Conference debt and

start a Building Fund. On the other hand, the church could not meet the budget. A special congregational meeting struggled with the issue and came up with four ideas:

1. *have a series of sermons on stewardship*
2. *hold a garage sale*
3. *youth pay for rug cleaning with their money*
4. *hold a chicken noodle soup supper.*

The church was considering joining the General Conference so it invited Suter and Frey who were heading up a program called **The Call To Kingdom Commitments** to visit. It was a call to spiritual renewal, to service and leadership, to kingdom goals, and to giving. This had a positive effect on the church. As a result of this meeting the church applied for and then joined the General Conference at the Triennial Sessions in Saskatoon. With membership came a feeling of being part of the larger church and its mission.

The next three years 1987, 1988, and 1989 were marked by enthusiasm and a lot of energy. In 1987 the Moyers returned from Tanzania bringing with them new stories and vigour, while the Martens left for Egypt. The first founding member Henry Lepp died. *"Discussions about the future of the church are still ongoing."* Membership increased. The Sunday School had 34 students plus an adult class. The church finally operated without subsidies and the building was paid off. The pastor, having been here nine years and things going well, thought it was time to leave. After an unsuccessful search for a new pastor, Ernie decided to stay for another three year term after a six month sabbatical. While hunting for a new pastor several questions resurfaced. *"What are our goals for the church?" " We want church growth but how do we achieve growth?"* One suggestion for church growth hinged on facilities. *"We need a better church building to improve our program and attract new members."*

The church started 1990 with a lot of enthusiasm. The building fund was now \$53,925.00. Pledges for a new building were solicited, and dreaming and hunting for a new building started. Dave Goertzen started looking into prices and possibilities for

expansion or new facilities. But enthusiasm waned as though the church had exhausted its energy for a while. Several families with a lot of children had moved away. Other families had decided to transfer to different churches. This had a devastating effect on the church's morale. The church chairman in his annual report reflected this discouragement, *"In 1991 several new members were accepted into our church; however, the joy we experienced from growth was overshadowed by the loss of members to other churches. These losses have caused us to question our church program and our commitment to God and the church and possibly even the viability of our small church."* The question was asked about whether the church needed a new church building if this one is not full. Sunday School enrollment was down to 18 with only 10 attending *"too small to be practical."* *"We need to invite children from around the block and have children invite friends."*

Several factors contributed to the gradual change of mood. David Braun introduced the **LIFE** program which spelled hope. The church baptized a rather large number of youth and some adults joined which brought the official membership to 72. The Martens returned from Egypt with renewed energy and commitment. A number of University students and workers from La Crete became a part of the church and participated at every level. Cheryl Bueckert headed up an active senior youth group which met regularly for study and fun. Dave Goertzen and many others pushed facility expansion possibilities.

In the beginning of 1993 the church decided to officially become a part of the **LIFE** program with process coordinators Walter and Ruth Franz and Carol Sawatsky. The Church sent a letter to Ken Kowalski asking him not to legalize gambling but to no avail. Ernie Sawatsky's final term ended. The search was on for a new pastor. It was successful when Fred Unruh was hired on June 15, 1993 and started work in October of 1993. In spite of contributing to the Building Fund (now \$102,675), the church increased its giving to the Conferences. With Dave Goertzen and many others pushing for a new building, Fred also caught the bug in a big way. His sermons and prayers

made the possibility real. In his first report he said he was excited about the possibility of a new church building. Fred also helped **LIFE** get into high gear with meetings and eatings, getting a vision, and inviting neighbours. With **LIFE** helping the church catch a vision of the possibilities for growth, the old church just would not do. The identified needs included *a bigger better place to eat, a larger pastor's office, a nursery and a larger sanctuary*. Nordbridge was seriously considered as a possibility but it did not work out. Action ideas proposed by **LIFE** included *support target groups, enhanced ushering, recreational activity for youth, emphases on our connection to MCC, getting more information from visitors so follow-up can be more meaningful, and more public advertising*. Several initiatives were started in 1994. The prayer chain was started. Habitat had its first build in Lethbridge involving the church, and the constitution was amended to bring it more in line with practice. By 1995 Fred was in full stride listing his priorities as: *plan biblically based worship, resource lay leadership, do more visiting, and work toward being an inclusive congregation*. He also wanted the church to look seriously at starting a Mennonite Voluntary Service unit. **LIFE** study resulted in a witness to the community with Laos Bombie project as well as free babysitting for parents with young children. Lethbridge Mennonite became a Habitat Covenant Church. With Fred's initiative the church started supporting annual Summer Interns with Wes Dueck 1995, Brenda Enns 1996, Amy Epp 1997, Julie Rempel 1998, Vivian Unger 1999, Shauna Friesen 2000, no one in 2001, and Eryn Enns 2002.

Finally, after spending a lot of time and energy, in prayer, planning, and considering endless sites, Fairview was chosen for a new facility. Lots were purchased and cleared. Fund-raising suppers were held. The building began with a sod turning ceremony April 13, 1997 and the church was finished the next year. Several gifted individuals and families from Coaldale joined the church March 23, 1997 bringing with them inspiration, dedication, and talents which was a tremendous boost. A Hispanic group wanted to start a fellowship and with the church's blessing used the old church for awhile. In September 1996 Joanne Moyer decided to go to Alaska with Service Adventure. She thought it was so good that she strongly recommended a unit be

started in Lethbridge which happened the following year. At the annual meeting in January 1997 the pastor could report, *"We have moved from dependency on our Coaldale parents for values and structures, and we have chosen our own. Rewriting the constitution, engaging in a major self-evaluation, purchasing and building our own home could be signs of coming-of-age. We've grown up. We appreciate our parents, but we are making our own decisions."* Construction issues were vigorously debated, but generally amicably resolved. 1997 was also the year the church accepted **The Confession of Faith From A Mennonite Perspective** which raised concerns in the area of married life and sexuality. By the end of the year a pastoral search committee was organized to find a replacement for Fred who was retiring. The new church was dedicated January 18, 1998. Ruth Preston Schilk was hired May 28, 1998.

After a joyous farewell and appreciation for Fred, Ruth started her duties in September. She brought to her ministry a gentle compassionate style of leadership. In 1999 a group from the church sponsored a refugee Albanian family from Kosovo.

With the new larger church facility came requests to host conferences--even Mennonite Church Canada assembly in 2000. Preparing to host MC Canada assembly together with the Coaldale Mennonite Church required a lot of preparation and work as well as the hosting itself. Yet it gave the church a lot of satisfaction to have accomplished it successfully. In 1998, for Coaldale Mennonite Church and especially for Conference of Mennonites in Alberta, homosexuality became a large issue affecting Camp Valaqua and also the relationship between the Lethbridge and Coaldale churches. For Coaldale the answer was to pull out of CMA in 2000 right after the MC Canada Assembly in Lethbridge. Lethbridge chose another route, learning to live with differences after discussion, study and prayer. After a flurry of hosting various conferences and assemblies and the homosexual controversy, the last two years (2001, 2002) have been much calmer. It has been a time to rebuild and reflect. Church membership is 85 with an average attendance of 66 adults and children.

In 1978 a church was born. Childhood was marked by energy and optimism. Adolescence had its ups and downs. As a young adult it is more settled and

responsible. Was it all worth it? To be an adult means to be a healthy individual contributing to the welfare of the whole community, in this case a member of and a builder of the Kingdom of God. In the last 25 years 146 persons have been or are members. Of those 38 made a new commitment to follow Christ and were baptized and children were dedicated. There have also been visitors and those who made this their church for a while without becoming members. For many the church has been a place to put down spiritual roots and draw the needed nourishment. It has been a place to raise one's children in a loving larger family. It is a community where each person has been challenged to live the Christian life more faithfully in the company of and with the help of others. The church has been home base for service in the community through the **Soup Kitchen**, **MCC** with its sales, **MCC Thrift Store**, **Ten Thousand Villages** and **Mennonite Disaster Service**, through **Habitat For Humanity**, through **Service Adventure** helping **HIV Connection**, **L'Arche**, **Rehoboth**, **Streets Alive**, through deacon's relief fund and through the **Prayer Chain**. Reviewing the last 25 years makes one realize that it is God by his spirit and power and not our own ingenuity and organization that has made us His people in this time and place.

Quotes are from conversations and the minutes of the Executive, Council and congregation.

Irvin Martens & Ernie Sawatsky