

Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church

A History by Ed Schmidt
for the 100th Anniversary of the Church in 2010

There is a plot of ground in Waldheim, Saskatchewan, on which some people dedicated themselves to agree that this was a small place of refuge, ZOAR, where together they could discern the meaning of their lives in the presence of God. Some very broad strokes of generalization will be engaged to look backwards. From a current perspective at the Centennial Celebration in 2010 it is highly unlikely that anyone will compile a comprehensive history of pictures and stories to memorialize the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church. The intent of this document is to stimulate personal memories.

Two thousand years ago a Christian faith was born in the “West” of Europe. The Apostle Paul summarizes the movement of Gospel out of its ancestral Jewishness in the last portion of Second Thessalonians; the two books ascribed to the Apostle Peter were the encouragement for this new group. Much of what Paul wrote was written before most of what is in the four gospels was written. Many migrations over the next one and a half millennia experienced little beginnings of this freeing from the core bindings of nationalizing tradition when they were able to identify with these seeds of Gospel.

A new era of expressed desire for those freedoms was birthed in what is broadly called the Reformation. A young priest in Holland, in leading his congregation toward a shared new community of Christ-centered relationships, ended up contributing his name to a movement that has spanned the last five centuries as Mennonites. Palmer Becker summarizes this Anabaptist understanding for the twenty-first century:

- Jesus is the center of our faith.
- Community is the center of our lives.
- Reconciliation is the center of our work

The compilation of these few pages represent personal observations about the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church; these are extracted from reviewing previous histories done by several people as school assignments, presentations at anniversaries that included solicited memories of people with related pictures, reviewing books that included data or other organizational membership notes, compilations of congregational meetings, a reconstructed church register and more than ten thousand pages of weekly bulletins and inserts from the last fifty years. Internal and external affiliation models have been significantly influenced by various member histories as well as the political-environments that have regulated registration and privileges of non-governmental congregating in assembly for nurture and observance of mutually acceptable ordinances of the Christian faith.

The Zoar at the congregational level has always reflected the initiative to know more intimately both the wider organizational mission and leadership of multi-voiced, multi-faced partners; it has given opportunity for institutional leaders to make a more

compelling case for discerned common causes. The church has not existed to prop up personal wants, rather, it required partnering members to collapse in the costly joy of dying to self and living alongside others who are not always easy to love, because Christ died for us—and them—and is risen from the dead! The Zoar has been a window into what ‘can be’ when people spend themselves in forgiveness, reconciliation and mission together precisely because the grace they received was lavishly expensive. The church extracts a cost many may have never fully embraced: The church as discerned by Becker and others is not easy! It has and is the source of removing fear by engaging God’s love.

An era of Mennonite history of the last 150 years starts with the 1860 formation of new groups such as the pietistic and missions (with Baptists in India) oriented Mennonite Brethren in Russia. In the same year, 1860, the missions and education congregational oriented North American General Conference of Mennonite Churches (NAGCMC) began. From 1860 to 1910, while there were developments of a philosophy of modernism, Dwight L. Moody influenced evangelism; these influenced people who moved through Mountain Lake, Minnesota with concepts of mission. The first fifty years in terms of the North American General Conference of Mennonite Church’s presence saw the reactions generated by fundamentalism and two World Wars. The NAGCMC were not defined by these while at the same time they participated with Churches and Mission organizations that agreed to reach the whole world with the option of the Christian faith; this reflected the beginnings of evangelicalism.

The fifty years that began about 1910 could be identified by the Zoar’s relationship to what in broad terms was the bonding that resulted from the Home Missions arm that provided ministerial credentials for the NAGCMC. The Western District Conference (with its central offices in Kansas) of NAGCMC from 1910 to 1918 had a colonization committee which was to ‘prevent the dispersion of the members leaving the settlements which already exist or to gather congregations in new settlements’. Waldheim, Saskatchewan, was named in a list of those new communities; the 1981 book *Waldheim Remembers the Past* and related articles in December 2006, April 2007, and April 2010 *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian* give a few more details.

A linear time-line that continues from this latter article is chosen as a framework for what follows; the focus will be on a thread of familial connections in leadership. From 1860 to 1960 the Baer, Voth, Buller, and Dirks intermarriages form a North American thread starting with the formation of the General Conference of Mennonites. The movement of the Nickel families to Saskatchewan included Helen Nickel an early missionary to India. Other threads could have been chosen; a more basic root might be the Neufeld families that originated in the community of Waldheim, Molotschna, that was established in 1835 (a large mounted sign is located at that site). This was passed on to name Waldheim, Saskatchewan after 1893; as most of the others, the Neufelds transited through Mountain Lake, Minnesota and across the North American Great Plains – this can be expanded in many directions by the “Mennonite Game” of relationships.

The last fifty years started with the 1959 formation of the Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan (CoMoS); this shifted the primary credentialing organization bond from North American to the Saskatchewan Provincial area. In the first decade of the 21st century COMOS now has become Mennonite Church Saskatchewan (MCSask) which is one of five geographic constituencies that form Mennonite Church Canada (MCCan); the former North American General Conference of Mennonites (NAGCMC), Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) and Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan (CoMoS) were all dissolved. The end of this document will be used for a few observations that reflect these latest transitions.

Early Arrivals

During the first two decades of Homestead settlement in Saskatchewan numerous individuals and families emigrated from South Dakota, Minnesota, Kansas and Oklahoma as well as some from other Provinces and Europe to settle in the area of Waldheim. Assembling for reasons of spiritual care-giving and discernment took place in the public school buildings that provided a kind of neutral territory most frequently nurtured by teachers or their assistants. In Waldheim, Saskatchewan, the presence of the first settlers started with the presence of a former Mennonite Ministering family that had joined the Seventh Day Adventists and moved through the Dakotas'. In 1910 they built the first House of Worship in the north end of Waldheim, Saskatchewan.

In 1909 The General Conference Home Mission Committee sent Nicolai J, Toews to work in the forming of gathered communities and schools that stretched from Langham to Waldheim along the North Saskatchewan River areas. John C. Peters formerly ordained as an itinerant Elder from the Deer Creek, Oklahoma church had come to teach at Hague around 1905; he also assisted in Carson and Schmidtsburg. The ethnologist mission worker Heinrich R. Voth spread his work base north from Oklahoma; his oversight had become focused on the Cheyenne Lakota related language areas that stretched north on the Great Plains. His church work now included relating with his former Oklahoma colleagues John C. Peters and Nicolai F. Toews to the gathering points along the North Saskatchewan River.

At the same time that south of Waldheim events were taking place Sunday school services together with a forming congregation had been meeting in the Heinrich A Dyck town residence till 1911. Those meeting in town had expanded into the local school facilities that were meeting in one of the under-utilized hotels on Waldheim's Main Street. In 1911 this Sunday school relocated to a newly constructed Waldheim school under the leadership of John C. Peters who had relocated his residence to Waldheim to teach. J. C. Peters together with Nicolai Toews became the bridging leadership.

Early affiliations in this form of mission outreach sets a precedent where establishing common grounds for assembly are challenged by various histories. In Waldheim this involved modes of baptism, shades of pietism with attendant statements of censure, the role of instruction or catechism and affirmation of pre-commitment conversion or nurture from birth experiences. Over the past century of the Zoar Mennonite Church in

Waldheim these challenges have never been resolved to the satisfaction of every attendee. Consequently, there have always been several characterizations such as members resident and non-resident as well as adherent that joined or departed with consequent fragmentation. If a family is not mentioned in the chosen leadership thread, the unnamed families are likely no less significant; those histories also are important.

First Baptisms and First Meeting Places

The first area baptism relating to what would become the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite congregation was on the Heinrich Schmidt yard south west of Waldheim; Heinrich R. Voth officiated at the baptism of 9 candidates in the spring of 1910. These were included in the November 1910 meeting called by Elder Nicolai Toews at Langham to start a membership register for a Zoar Mennonite Church. The second baptism was performed in the spring of 1912 in the Waldheim school with Elder Nicolai Toews officiating.

Subsequently this original town new school building was moved to the East across the Municipal Road in the early summer of 1912; a new house of prayer was erected on this original site for the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church at a cost of \$2,000. It was dedicated December 14, 1912 by Elder Peter Regier who came from the Tiefengrund Rosenorter Gemeinde. The building was so full that it was feared the balcony would collapse. From available records the Zoar and its related internal organizations from the beginning used both English and German; the predominance of which language being used depended on new immigrants as they arrived. Minutes were recorded in both the English and German languages.

Original Formation of the Zoar Mennonite Church

Nicolai Toews came from Langham for the original local formation of the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church. In the German minutes recorded by Henry A Dyck as secretary on July 10, 1913 there were 58 original members present. Rev. John C. Peters' new wife, a niece of Nicolai Toews had joined him in Waldheim; she was American educated in English and started the local ladies aid with a missions support focus.

At the July 10, 1913 meeting, John A. Funk was elected as a minister for two years and Heinrich A Dyck was elected for one year; Joshua D. Buller was given the responsibility for the Sunday school transitions. The Trustees that had been responsible for the construction of the new Zoar house of prayer were reappointed: Heinrich Schmidt (3 years), Heinrich A. Dirks (2 years) and Theodore Nickel Sr (1 year). Maria (who became Mrs. John Buhr) Neufeldt was baptized with a dozen other candidates June 7, 1914; the Zoar membership is now recorded as 66 members. The minute book and related pictures would confirm that women were always present in the organization from the formation of the congregation. Maria was the first community telephone switchboard operator and available to be the keeper of the English church record book which was lost in the 1919 fire.

In the July 27, 1915 German minutes it is noted that Joshua D Buller had accepted the lead minister role in the Zoar. David Toews presence when major leadership transitions

were taking place in the Zoar resulted from his being the Northern (i.e. Canadian) representation on the North American General Conference of Mennonites (NAGCMC) Western District Home Missions executive. David Toews acceptance of the Eldership role with the Rosenorter at the Rosthern United Mennonite Church did not affect his status as Home Missions representative with the NAGCMC. The Zoar was never a member of the Rosenorter Gemeinde because of its German and English speaking membership. Rev. John C Peters was now re-commissioned as Reiseprediger Elder for the NAGCMC for the Western Canadian Provinces to continue to be at home in Waldheim, Saskatchewan.

Rev. J. D. Buller called a special meeting on February 22, 1917; there were now 98 members in Waldheim and 58 members in a related point of meeting at Great Deer. Rev. John M. Franz, resident at Great Deer had led in effective evangelistic services in 1915 that were certainly influenced by World War I and the subsequent major flu epidemic.

Elder David Toews

Elder John C Peters on May 3, 1916 resigned from the Waldheim Zoar to move to North Dakota with his wife; about the same time Elder Nicolai Toews from Langham also returned to the States. The Zoar congregational meeting of June 22, 1917 confirmed J. D. Buller, H. A. Dyck and J. A. Funk as representatives to attend the Mennonite Canadian Conference in Langham where Zoar Langham formally joined. The Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church that same year was recognized as continuing under the oversight of Home Missions of NAGCMC. Elder David Toews assumed significant leadership at the Waldheim Zoar Congregational meetings for the next three years. Historically it would appear that Zoar under the influence of David Toews actively became involved in sponsoring and resettlement of refugees from Eastern Europe over the next dozen years.

Across the street from the Zoar a new four-room brick school house was completed in 1918. And, just north of the school the Mennonite Brethren constructed their first Church in Waldheim which meant that people from that persuasion that had fellowship in the Zoar now formed a new congregation. In appreciation of the bi-lingual services in 1925 the local merchant Isaac E Penner donated a Bell that was added to the south side of the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church; Rev. I. P. Friesen came for the dedication.

At a congregational meeting on October 11, 1920 it was agreed to invite Rev. Gerhard Buhler and in 1922 he made the move from Herbert, Saskatchewan. He was ordained as an Elder in the Zoar Mennonite Church, Waldheim, Saskatchewan under the NAGCMC. In all of his places of residence he served in multiple locations as an itinerant Elder. John L. Zacharias and Henry Koop were now assisting ministers.

Eva, the oldest of the Buller siblings, had married Tobias Ratzlaff in South Dakota in 1890. Tobias and Eva moved to a difficult farming situation at Waldheim in 1902. They then resided in California from 1907 till they returned to Waldheim and joined the Zoar in 1926. Their sons Edward and Thomas (Tom) became significant to the Zoar a decade

later. On February 24, 1930 the membership was 168 with attendees listed as 238. There were 110 students in 8 classes of Sunday school.

Gerhard Buhler left Waldheim in 1932 responding to the call to be Elder in Herbert, Saskatchewan where he died suddenly in 1935. George Buhler Jr., the son of Gerhard, had gone for further training in ministry. On his return to Waldheim, George married Anna Dyck, the daughter of Heinrich A. Dyck who had established a long term service relationship to the Zoar. George Buhler Jr. was ordained as a minister and evangelist by the NAGCMC and in that capacity joined the ministering team in the Waldheim Zoar. He is remembered as the Evangelist traveling with his children, the Buhler Trio; shortly they moved to Pennsylvania to continue in ministry.

Rev. J. R. Schmidt was a minister who had emigrated to Carnduff, Saskatchewan from Buhler, Kansas with a group of 42 people in 1914; their oldest three children were born in Kansas. Part of the family network extends as Maria Voth, the wife J. R. was a once removed second cousin of Heinrich R. Voth who baptized the first Zoar members. Her immediate ancestry came from Waldheim, Molotschna Colony in Russia; the historic community from which the original Neufeld family had come to Waldheim, Saskatchewan via the Dakotas. Maria remained a significant person in Sunday school and Ladies Aids till shortly before her death in 1967. The J. R. Schmidt family had moved to Waldheim, Saskatchewan in 1922. J. R. Schmidt and John L. Zacharias were elected to ministry in 1929; at this time there were 179 members. Gerhard Buhler Sr. baptized, among others, the children of J.R. Schmidt. J.R. Schmidt was ordained as Elder in 1932 and served faithfully till his death in Kansas in 1936 where he had gone for the winter for health reasons.

Rev. John L. Zacharias had been elected as a minister and ordained in the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite in 1932; he continued in this as the lead lay-minister till 1957 when his family moved to British Columbia taking on a new assignment. During these twenty five years, with the exception of J. R. Schmidt till 1936, there was no resident Elder on the ministry teams of the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church. John L. Zacharias never had any formal training for ministry but had other leadership training; he was always active in the Zoar in Sunday school and in leading the Choir for many years.

The ministerial support of the NAGCMC by this time had terminated. Various NAGCMC records note that the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church continued with a format of starting with Sunday school on Sunday morning followed by an English worship service; this format is confirmed in the recorded Sunday offerings that had an English Service offering and later a German Service offering every Sunday morning. The choir under the Leadership of John L. Zacharias would close the English service with a rehearsed number from sheet music which he ordered. A German Choir number would then begin the German worship service which usually ended at about 12 noon. It appears this was unique among the NAGCMC congregations.

In the front of the book where H. A. Dyck kept track of the minutes in the German language there is a 1932 calculation. Since the beginning there had been 275 baptized and an additional 113 members accepted; with a current membership of 249 of whom 232 were resident; it meant that 197 names had been removed either by death or withdrawal (transfer out). In the midst of the dirty-thirties, in 1934 Evangelist I. P. Friesen again visited the community with some seventy persons responding at meetings. The membership appears to have peaked at 254 in 1935 just prior to the death Elder Jacob R. Schmidt. In 1936 the basement of the church was enlarged to accommodate the larger Sunday school. In 1936 there were 247 members with an average attendance of over 300.

Transitions from J. C. Schmidt to include Isaac Epp and John A. Block

Rev. J. C. Schmidt, son of J. R., married Lydia Buhler, the daughter of Elder Gerhard Buhler Sr., in 1934. Isaac Epp was ordained as Evangelist to assist in the Zoar. J.C. Schmidt addressed the NAGCMC triennial session in Saskatoon on July 31, 1939, as one of two bi-national youth leaders. Jacob C. Schmidt was ordained as minister in the Zoar Mennonite Church in 1943 as he moved to new responsibilities at the newly purchased Rosthern Mennonite Youth Farm. In 1944 the former J. R. Schmidt farm south of Waldheim on which J.C. had remained was sold to the Gerhard G. Hiebert family. G. G. Hiebert had been and continued to be engaged in money collection with David Toews to retire the “reiseschult” debts. J.C. Schmidt used the resources from these transactions to make payments for the Youth Farm which had become due. In 1947 the J. C. Schmidt family moved into what had been the administrator’s house on the Youth Farm.

J. C. Schmidt was active in both the Bible School that operated in Rosthern and the Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth organization. His activity between 1941 and the purchase of the Government Experimental farm in 1943 envisioned that the Canadian Conference of Mennonites would establish a Mennonite related agriculture based post secondary educational institution at Rosthern. The subtle dynamics of interpersonal conflict behind leadership in the Canadian Conference of Mennonites was likely the reason it did not succeed with this vision. With the death of David Toews in 1947, major transitions were bound to take place similar to those that occurred in Manitoba when H. H. Ewert died in 1934. The Canadian Mennonite Conference resolution in 1945 to establish a school in Rosthern, Saskatchewan was never voided but a new Conference resolution in 1947 was made. Rev. J. J. Thiessen of Saskatoon endorsed the beginning of studies in the basement of Benjamin Ewert’s Bethel Mennonite Church basement. This became the Canadian Mennonite Bible College as it opened in Winnipeg; a half century later CMBC has been merged into what became Canadian Mennonite University. Locating the school in Winnipeg marked the beginning of a shift of the Conference ‘centre’ from Saskatchewan to Manitoba for that which now transitioned between 1949 and 1952 into the Canadian Conference of Mennonites in Canada.

Meanwhile, the Waldheim Zoar in addition to Rev. J.C. Schmidt, Rev. John Block was ordained as a minister in 1943. Isaac Epp had joined internal to the church family connections when in 1938 he married Gladys Dirks the daughter of Benjamin A Dirks and Helena Buller, the sister of Joshua Buller. Isaac Janzen, the father of missionary Dr.

Homer Janzen had married Nettie Dirks who was a sister and ten years older than Gladys. Helen Dirks was just younger than Nettie and married Silas Dyck the son of Henry A Dyck.

The roots of family history shaped early Zoar polity. To add a little, Helena Dircks married Heinrich Bartel, grandparents of John Bartel who served in leadership during the Zoar congregational changes a half century later. Benjamin A. Dircks, mentioned above, during a short period in Rosthern was influential in the development of the Evangelical Church (later a member of the EUB denomination.) Another of the Dircks brothers was also present in Rosthern and Waldheim. These connections could be extended back historically to where some of the Dircks family had inter-married with the descendents of Gerhard Buhler's cousin. Justina Augusta Dircks and Josua (Joshua) D Buller, after homesteading near where Waldheim developed, as a young couple moved to Rosthern where he had a little shop. They joined the Evangelical Church where Joshua served as Sunday School Superintendent and trustee. Again, a short time later he moved to Waldheim where he worked at the Janzen store, later the Janzen-Nickel & Son store. He was ordained as a minister in 1915 in the Zoar Mennonite Church.

Isaac Epp was ordained as Evangelist in 1943 and recognized by the wider community of Mennonites. As the decade moved forward Isaac became engaged with the outreach to establish a church in Prince Albert. It also included a regular Radio Broadcast carried on the Prince Albert Radio Station, CKBI.

Numerous Sunday school teachers' names appear during this era when there were twenty Sunday school classes. Mr. Abe Richert, a long term teacher in the Waldheim School served for many years in various capacities, most significantly was that of treasurer during the years that the Zoar had a large Sunday school. There were dividing curtains through-out the church and also for the many classes that met in the basement. The maintaining of membership records during the period from 1938 to 1945 did not accommodate the large transition of the Waldheim area population. As the numerous people who had been engaged in various forms of service during the Second World War began to return numerous evangelistic services were conducted in the Saskatoon area in 1947. Over the next decade there were several other lay-ministers that served but lacked being elected into leadership. Ed Ratzlaff had accepted the challenge to work with youth and had assembled a large class of boys; Ed faithfully served as Sunday school teacher for 17 years including as superintendent for 14 continuous years.

Inter-provincial Connections

There had never been a Saskatchewan Mennonite Conference as such. That had not been necessary since the predominant correspondence and files had remained in the care of David Toews' office in Rosthern till the new organizational structure of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada moved the centre to Winnipeg around 1950 where it served as a bridge to Newton, Kansas. This move left a major vacuum that brought about major reorganization and Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church now adopted a "Blue" book of ordinances that was needed to maintain its registration with the Provincial and Canadian

Governments. In 1948 a spontaneous revival swept the whole community. A large baptismal service was held in a large tent north of the Zoar Church with Elder Jacob Nickel from Langham officiating.

In Waldheim, John L. Zacharias, always engaged in the public life of the Town, acted as the secretary and treasurer for the Waldheim Hospital that opened on July 2, 1949; it remained open till 1959 which was another major transition time.

There are numerous notes in minutes that reflect the retention of the Bell in the 1950 renovation. It was also important to retain what was called Mrs. Falk's coffee caldron in the basement and who could use the kitchen and its dishes. Memories of the sugar cubes span the decades. There was this period of about two decades that framed 1950 when young people's groups often numbered fifty to seventy youth. Through 1953 the baptismal classes using the traditional catechism were always multi-age and large.

The Start of the Waldheim Missions Conference

While Conference leadership and College training shifted to Winnipeg, many of the youth from Waldheim and the surrounding communities were making choices to attend numerous other colleges and Bible schools. During the years of 1952 - 53 Herb Heppner and Oswald Smith, the hymn writer from Toronto's People's Church came to the community to start a unique annual event that has become known as the Waldheim Missions Conference which in 2010 met for its 58th sessions. It became an officially registered organization that could fill in the gaps left by other major denominational moves. It has remained an organization that is operated by a Board that represents area business people rather than church sponsorship. Ed Ratzlaff was active in this organization for eighteen years till his sudden death in 1960. Mr. Henry Friesen, followed by his son Reginald, from the Zoar spanned five decades in participation on the Waldheim Missions Conference Board.

Paid Ministers, Jacob Mierau and Irvin Schmidt

Rev. H. A. Dyck died in June 1954. The following five years had many twists and turns. In 1955 the wish to find educated paid full-time ministerial leadership began to surface. At the December 28, 1955 annual meeting it was decided to call for the ordination of two new ministers, Jacob Mierau and Irvin Schmidt while this at the same time eliminated numerous others who had also served with the lay ministry team. Over a period of nine months during the winter of 1956-57, I, Ed Schmidt, frequently sat in the home of Rev. John L. Zacharias; in the fall he shared that he had received an invitation to candidate at a church in British Columbia. While the local people assumed he wanted to retire to British Columbia he actually moved there in the summer of 1957 to take on an office of Senior Pastor. An additional personal memory was that it was requested I take considerable responsibility for the children and youth participation in the 1956 Christmas Eve program. Seating was rearranged on the east side of the church to accommodate more than 100 children to do some group singing in presentation. The Sunday school was overcrowded and at the January 2, 1957 annual meeting it was decided to move forward with building plans.

Growing Pains

A few months later Rev. John D. Friesen came to lead in meetings of spiritual renewal in the early months of 1957; these meetings extended into several weeks with 115 people seeking counsel in making decisions. The Zoar Mennonite church building had been renovated in 1950 to increase the lobby size while enlarging the basement and expanding to the north. The last large Zoar baptism and receptions of new members was in 1957; at that time the last of the horse barns south of the Zoar were being sold and dismantled. Some of the first cabins that were moved to Pike Lake Bible Camp were constructed on this site. In the previous ten years transportation and agriculture had changed irreversibly. Now the activity at Zoar had become such that numerous activities had to be booked around regular services and choir practices.

Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan

For ministry training Mennonite Biblical Seminary moved from Chicago to Elkhart, Indiana. There had been no discerned need to form a Saskatchewan Conference, but with the many other transitions taking place the formation of developing a constitution for the formation of the Conference of Mennonites of Saskatchewan was taking place (CoMoS); it would become the accrediting body for ordination and leadership. The whole south area of the church had a major renovation in 1958 and now there were 10 additional Sunday school rooms.

John A. Block

From the time that Rev. John A. Block was asked to assume increased leadership at the age of 48 in 1956 he had decided that he could not give up his farming operation with a young family; there were five children and an additional three were born from that year onward. His first commitment was to his family. At the December 29, 1958 annual meeting John A Block left the chair and Jacob Letkeman took over the discussion about leadership. The name of RJC teacher Henry H Funk, who had come from Carmen, Manitoba, informally surfaced at this time. A vote on January 28, 1959 confirmed by 82 yes and 32 no, that John A. Block be hired as a full-time leader and a paid minister. Terms of length of service were to be worked out by the Trustees. At the December 28, 1959 it was agreed that membership fees be extended for one more year in order to support CMBC. At the continuation of this meeting on December 29 it was moved and accepted that Rev. John A. Block continue his services through 1960. An additional motion was made to invite various ministers to come to speak and that the executive would then report back at the next annual meeting. In 2010 this would be considered a more normal procedure of annual mutual reaffirmation of congregational leadership.

Leadership Votes

At a special meeting on November 10, 1960 Rev. John A. Block was chair. The 1958 motion to hire a full-time, salaried pastor, preferably a trained man, was reaffirmed by a vote of 48 yes and 28 no. A motion to take a vote on calling Henry H. Funk at this meeting was defeated. Apparently unrecorded events that followed had a result so that at the next meeting on December 2, 1960 it was decided that a 2/3rd majority vote to call

Henry H. Funk was not needed. Of the 93 members present, the vote was 66 – yes, 19 – no and 3 blank and five members had left before the vote. The next motion was to proceed to buy a parsonage – a house close to the church. The annual membership meeting with only 53 members present was then held on December 28, 1960. It had become obvious that Zoar harmony about leadership would not be achieved.

A special membership meeting was held on March 24, 1961 with 52 members present and John Bartel as chairman. A letter from Henry Funk was read that at this time his answer to the call was ‘no’. He would like to complete further studies before he would accept a full-time position. On May 5, 1961 at the next special meeting a motion was passed that Rev. John Block and Rev. David Dyck be invited to continue serving as ministers “till we have a full-time pastor;” there would be several days given for a response which seems to have been ‘no’. Rev. Henry H. Penner came from Drake to be the interim Pastor till Henry H. Funk could assume leadership of the Zoar in the summer of 1962. Membership at this time was recorded as 175 with 63 of them non-resident.

At the annual membership meeting on December 29, 1961 a motion was made to draw up a “new” constitution by a committee which would include the Zoar executive, Rev. H. H. Penner and H. H. Funk and several members at large. Rev. H. H. Penner reported that 60 Zoar members withdrew their membership. Most of them had moved out to form the Grace Mennonite Mission Church. Frank Sawatzky, Eldred Fast and David Dyck had been called to minister there. Only later did Rev. John A. Block respond to their call.

Other events were taking place that would have community impact. The vision of The Menno Homes of Waldheim started in 1961 as part of the abandoned Hospital was renovated. Later people such as Bill Ginter and Jacob Klassen related to this Home as well as being present to the Zoar.

Henry H. Funk

Henry H. Funk began assuming duties in 1962 but was granted a year of leave to complete additional studies at CMBC; a younger John Zacharias from Eigenheim was employed in 1964 as interim pastor. There were now 199 members of whom 41 were considered as inactive and non-resident. Sunday school enrollment had dropped to about 200 students.

Members in Missions

In this time Rev. Dick Thiessen had assumed responsibility at the Great Deer Bethel Mennonite Church. Other Waldheim Zoar members in ministry at this time were Miss Ella Heppner in Children’s ministry in Big River (1950ff), Mrs. Martha Giesbrecht (George) Janzen, (1952ff GC) in Japan, Rev. Jake Giesbrecht (1952ff GC) in India, Miss Elma Epp, (1954ff Northern Canada Evangelical Mission), Rev. Richard Regier (1955ff with TEAM in Southern Rhodesia), Dr. Homer Janzen (1960ff with GC Overseas Missions in India), Rev. Norman and Mary Giesbrecht Bartel (1960ff in Oklahoma), Rev. Mervin and Myrl Neufeld Driedger (1963ff in Southern Rhodesia with TEAM).

At the semi-annual Zoar congregational meeting June 22, 1964 a motion confirmed the commissioning to missions of Ed and Waldtraut Schmidt, who had completed studies at Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. They were officially ordained as ministers of the NAGCMC on July 5, 1964 in the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church. Rev. Menno Wiebe, a Seminary friend, now from Manitoba, related to various ministries provided suitable music. Rev. Henry H. Funk represented the Zoar, Rev. George Groening represented the Canadian Mennonite Conference and the GC Mission Board, Dr. Walter Gering who had been the Schmidt's pastor in Elkhart, Indiana represented the credentialing body - NAGCMC and Dr. Erland Waltner, Seminary President, performed the ordination. The Canadian Mennonite Conference was meeting July 2 – 5 in nearby Rosthern. On Sunday July 5, the afternoon of the Conference sessions, the Schmidt's were commissioned to serve with the Overseas Mission arm of the General Conference of Mennonites in India; they arrived in India at the beginning of September 1964.

Ed and Wally had done major research in numerous archives across America and used local resources to prepare a history of the Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church for historian C. J. Dyck during their time at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. They returned from India in 1969 to live in Waldheim while future plans developed; they were able to assist John Bartel in preparing for the 50th Zoar anniversary celebrated October 18, 1970; both a rough hand-written copy, as well as the printed copies have been retained. Dorothy Adrian had been able to gather personal stories from aging members of the Zoar and compiled a paper for a class in 1973 at CMBC in Winnipeg.

Henry H. Funk in accepting his last contract had stipulated he would not remain after that term expired in 1971; a farewell for them took place on July 7. Rev. Abe Neufeld came to the Zoar for the installation of Jake Krause on September 5, 1971. At the end of 1972 the following figures were used -188 members with 55 identified as non-residents. During this time the Men's Brotherhood appears to have remained active. The new Brown Mennonite Hymnals were ordered. Many of the men participated in the "Male Melodies" which involved participation from many communities. During this time Park Valley was served from the Zoar. There were many major changes in the Zoar. Jake Krauses visited more than 200 homes in 1974. In 1974 a new carpet was laid in the Zoar. Considerable attention at the national level was placed on Jubilee living. The Zoar membership at the end of 1975 had 127 resident and 61 non-residents.

Jake Krause resigned effective August 31, 1975 and Missionary George Janzen was invited to serve as an interim pastor for six months after December 21, 1975. The annual membership meeting on November 29, 1977 confirmed that Gerald and Doreen Klassen from Burns Lake, British Columbia were being called to minister in the Zoar. A vote was taken after the service on April 25, 1976. The Klassen's began on August 1 and Henry H. Funk came for the installation on September 12, 1976.

During this time the Mennonite Disaster Service was becoming significant as local members participated. In later decades the Klassens would become long term project directors in reconstruction projects. Local members had become significantly engaged in

Person (two) Person prison visitation. Christmas bundles and after New Year's blanket making for MCC had become significant. During this time the Waldheim Housing Authority was forming and it resulted in the construction of the Westview Lodge that had rental facilities for income-adjusted residents. Over the decades there had been significant Zoar membership involvement in the three CoMoS related Camping programs with significant discussions engaged as a move from Pike Lake Bible Camp was being made to what became Shekinah Retreat Centre (May 1979) on the former Art and Ruby Adrian North Saskatchewan River property. Alongside that dialogue in the minutes appears the need to renovate and rebuild the church for which undertaking a new fund was begun.

At the beginning of 1977 membership was listed as 187 of whom 54 were considered non-residents. Pew attendance at most services was well over two hundred. Darcy and Evelyn Driedger with family were serving in Mexico at this time. On May 29, 1977 there were 9 baptismal candidates and an additional 3 transfers into membership. In fall a Barry Moore crusade was held in the School Auditorium. There were ten students from the Zoar in post secondary education in the fall of 1977.

As a result of a meeting hosted by the Waldheim Helping Hands at the club house a transition began that resulted in its dissolution as the community was included in the new Provincial organized Country Valley Home Care District. The gathering of materials for the '*Waldheim Remembers the Past*' history had been engaged for more than a decade and now under the initiative of Bill Ratzlaff, who at this time was managing Mennonite Trust, became a significant community focus over the next four years.

Sponsoring Boat People

At the beginning of 1978 there were 189 members with 63 considered as non-residents. In fall there were 16 students listed as attending schools outside of Waldheim. On March 11, 1979 members were asked to remain after the morning service for new developments related to Pastoral Leadership; this was followed by a March 29 Pastoral Committee meeting. On June 10, 1979 there was a special congregational meeting to consider accepting some of the Boat People as refugees in fall. On July 8, 1979 Gerald Klassen was listed as Pastor for the last time. Benno Klassen for the first time served in the pulpit on August 28, 1979. A vote to call Benno as interim for up to one year was taken on September 29, 1979. A special meeting was held on March 31, 1980 to change this to a three year call to Benno and Francis Klassen. Henry V. Friesen officiated at Benno's ordination on the evening of September 21, 1980. The membership at this time is given as 187 members. Very little is recorded about the coming of the Rattanovang family and then Mrs. Keo with other extended family members. They lived in the parsonage and to cover rent they did the janitor job. Three years later Peter Giesbrechts purchased the parsonage and also assumed the church custodial duties for the next fifteen years.

The Zoar church treasury was used for processing significant donations from parents to supplement the Provincial Government Youth Employment Services. Youth were engaged locally, at Camps and in provincial programs of vacation Bible schools. One project engaged youth to interview seniors about the church and community history.

There were 14 active Sunday school classes. Considering the Bulletins of the previous decades there was an abrupt reduction of missions' presentation in the regular morning and evening services in the church; this likely reflected the wider organizational shifts. By the end of 1981 a building committee was touring other new church buildings for ideas. The church had been damaged in the attic as a result of a fire following a lightning strike.

On March 29, 1982 it was voted to close the street on the west side of the church and some additional property at a price of \$38,000 was purchased from Pete Petkau. A significant loss was experienced when Albert Wiebe died.

Music Nights

On Sept 12, 1982 the Zoar participated in the Family Music Fest at the regional park. Music nights had replaced the Sunday evening youth endeavor meetings. Special seasonal Cantatas were performed by the Choir. Benno and Francis Klassen accepted the recall extended after a vote on March 28, 1983. Concerns were expressed of how to deal with the issue of membership participation and attendance as well as regular communication with non-resident members; new congregants were not being integrated for growth into the established membership. There was significant membership transfers-out of people who had in the previous decade assumed leadership in offices.

The New Church Building

The foundation footing for a new church were poured in the fall of 1982; the final rafter on the new Zoar building was mounted by 3 pm on April 30, 1983 and a 6 pm windstorm collapsed part of the church and all the rafters under construction. A lot of community assistance was experienced and by July new rafters had arrived. This was a slab floor building with a central two level portion that incorporated the entrance, offices, bathrooms, sound room, heating, air-conditioning and a second level available for youth and a balcony with an overflow under a part of it. The dedication of the new building December 16, 1984 was the first service on site. At this time members from the Zoar were also engaged to winterize the outdoor kitchen at Shekinah Retreat Centre.

Benno and Francis took some holiday time starting after the dedication in December 1984 and by January 4, 1985 were engaged in short-term pastoral studies at AMBS in Elkhart, Indiana. There was a \$58,000 debt at twelve and half percent interest on the new Church when from February 17 to 24, 1985 the old Church was dismantled so that the entrance for the new Church could be completed. On September 22, 1985 there was an adult baptism and 11 adults joined by membership transfer-in. These would become significant participants in congregational leadership. The 75th Anniversary was celebrated on October 20, 1985 at the official opening of the completed Zoar Mennonite Church. All outstanding debts had been retired.

In the congregational response to a questionnaire numerous issues arose in early 1986. With the new Fellowship Hall facilities eating together became a core Zoar congregational activity. One observation was made that the Zoar has become a place to

“observe passages” with a gift of being “audience.” Many members were giving leadership to numerous outside organizations while it was a challenge to find Deacons. A big shift to “talking peace” from “walking peace” had taken place over the past decade. In 1986 Benno and Frances received a confidence vote to continue in leadership for another three years. The Godoy family of refugees was assisted to settle in Saskatoon.

The year 1987 was a major transition year within the engagement of Zoar membership with youth becoming a part of a tri-church organization that included Laird and Tiefengrund. In 1988 Benno Klassen was elected Chair of CoMoS for two years. There was a change of administration at the Waldheim School that did not seem to reflect in positive ways for students from Zoar. In 1989 there were at least 15 post-secondary students. Lorne and Evangeline Petkau had moved to Shekinah and were youth leaders in the Zoar. Anna Rehan was becoming significant in her leadership role of youth with CoMoS. In 1990 there was a shortage of Sunday school teachers at Zoar. Refugees Wencislao Demos, Nea Orlana Francissca Urbina-Valladores, Levidia, Nelquioedat and Gerson were welcomed to the Zoar on May 27, 1990. That fall a major effort to buy a new organ took place. A part-time secretary was employed to manage the office for Zoar. Both the purchase of the blue Chorus Book and the introduction of the new (red-brown) Mennonite Worship Hymnal took place in 1991. Contemporary music instruments were sometimes used and no clear acceptance followed. Over the next year a number of members stopped attending the Zoar as youth shifted to the other churches in town and parents began to follow. There were still 13 Sunday school classes, 6 of these related to young and older adults.

Benno and Francis took their holiday break to go to Kansas between October 12 and December 13, 1992. Grace Mission Church was closing and some members now joined the Zoar. In March 1994 Benno began a 12 session series on “What we Believe.” April 8 and 9 there was a Church Council and Spouse retreat. On December 25 it was announced that there was a \$22,000 budget shortfall. In 1995 Ukraine guests, Lili and Natalija Deminski were baptized and received membership in the Zoar. On March 12, 1995 it was decided to extend Benno’s term of leadership for another year. In April a Japanese Choir came to sing and give thanks for those who had served in their country. The L-I-F-E, living in faithful evangelism sessions was pursued. On September 29, 1995 Zoar attended the Franklin Graham Crusade in Saskatoon; it was the first time Billy Graham had participated in his son’s ministry. At the end of 1995 the Zoar membership was listed as 188 with 49 non-residents. The term “Pastor Benno” disappeared from the church bulletins by January 22, 1996. Rev. George and Dora Hoepfner were invited to candidate as interim leaders; they arrived before the end of August. On September 8, 1996 George was installed as Pastor by Rev. Verner Friesen. At the beginning of 1997 the Zoar had 189 members with 50 listed as non-residents.

On March 6, 1997 the Revised Waldheim Zoar Mennonite Church Constitution was adopted. A call was given and on May 18, 1997 Barry and Judy Lesser came to candidate. In July the Urbina family returned to Waldheim and now became the custodians at the Zoar. July 25, 1997 there was a farewell for George and Dora as they

moved to Abbotsford, British Columbia. In August the Zoar participated in hosting some of the China Educational Exchange Teachers.

On August 31, 1997 Barry and July Lesser were installed as the Zoar Pastoral couple by Rev. Rudy Froese. This was the year that formational talks to establish Canadian Mennonite University were initiated. This was concurrent with changes taking place at the Canadian Conference of Mennonites in Canada as the American boundary was becoming an organizational issue; the General Conference of Mennonites was beginning to merge with the (Old) Mennonite Conference. In the years from 1999 to 2001 there was a transition from being the Conference of Mennonites in Canada to an independent national Mennonite Church Canada. The result was that new organizational structures with provincial conferences needed to begin. In subtle ways the Zoar needed to make new choices that would have implications for its own organization and definitely would influence a decline in membership over the long-term.

At the 1999 December 24th evening Sunday school program there were 36 youth and young adults that participated. An observation took the form of a question; “has the decision been made to be a small congregation when programs are listing all the participants and excluding all others who participated by attending?” Lavida Urbina died in an accident in Atlanta on May 28, 1998. A Ladies Choir had been organized the previous winter and the issue of photo-copying music arose. Community funds were being raised for the construction of the Timber Lodge at Shekinah as well as for the Waldheim Arena (Rec-centre) project. At the beginning of 1999 – 110 members out of 182 were considered resident attendees. Ladies now began what had become an annual event of blanket making early in January 1999. This was a year of numerous funerals; at the end of January there were several funerals; two of these involved the Arnold Neufeldt family on January 30 (Nell) and January 31 (Audrey Andres who died accidentally).

In April 2000, Barry and Judy Lesser received a call to serve for another 3 year term beginning at the end of August; they celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in August. During the year various “Gift discernment” exercises were engaged. On December 17, 2000 Barry’s ‘Church Assessment Questionnaire’ was announced; there were 41 forms returned and evaluated but in 2001 there never was a complete reporting at the congregational level. There now was an every-home subscription plan for the Canadian Mennonite. This was the year that Sam Wendland received a “New Heart.” At the end of 2001 there was a membership of 163 of whom about 60 were characterized as non-resident. A comment that arose was that there seemed to be a lack of “visitation that listens.” The impact of the transition from CoMoS to MCSask made a subtle impact at congregational levels as more congregations chose to become independent.

The Yamaha G2 Studio Grand (1982 model) piano was introduced to the platform on April 21, 2002. In April Maria and Amilcor Rhodas with 2 children arrived from Honduras and were settled into Saskatoon. On October 13 there was a litany of blessing for Pastor Barry Lesser to go on the Learning Tour to Colombia. In February 2003 it is first noted that Lorne Friesen accompanied RJC students to Guatemala; this was a

repeated engagement several more times in the following years. The Zoar was the site of the Sask Valley Music Festival in March 2003. On April 13, 2003 a 3 year recall was given to Pastor Barry Lesser. Rev. Ken Bechtel began appearing as a representative to develop a Covenant for MCSask. On February 1, 2004 a fertilizer fire caused an emergency scenario in town and the Zoar quickly responded as an emergency site to host people who were temporarily displaced.

On June 5, 2004 the Zoar Church Council appointed a “Visioning Team for Zoar.” The issue of portable membership was increasingly an issue as membership and attendance were increasingly out of step. A study of “From Anabaptist Seed” was done in the Sunday school hour in August 2004. The Zoar was used on January 15, 2005 to celebrate the 100th birthday of Mr. Jake Letkeman. A Pastor/Congregation relations committee was established in 2005. One of the results was that Council extended Barry’s term from September 1, 2006 for another six months. At the end of 2006 the Zoar membership list stood at 146 members of whom 59 were considered non-resident. Over the past few years many books had been culled from the Zoar library and dispersed locally; the remnants of what had not been otherwise passed on were taken to the Riverbend Hutterite Colony by mutual agreement.

Colombians sponsored by Zoar in 2006

In 2006 two refugee related events happened. In February a grandmother and a granddaughter from Columbia arrived: Julia Fierro and Luisa; they left quite abruptly in mid-summer. With further planning, the family of Wilson and Martha Gomez and their six children from Colombia arrived in a cold snowstorm at the beginning of November. About fifteen months later the Refugee Committee was changed to the Waldheim Immigrant Resettlement Committee which would be accountable to the Zoar Missions and Service Committee. Five additional families from Colombia have been invited to settle in Waldheim through the Saskatchewan Immigration Nomination Program (SINP).

On November 1, 2006 Pastor Barry distributed his Ministry Vision document. Barry was serving on the MCSask Pastoral Leadership Commission. On December 3, 2006 it was announced that Barry and Judy would not be recalled but they would complete the agreed-on 6 month extension till March 4, 2007; there was a farewell supper for them on that date. ‘Jack’ Suderman was in the Zoar for a very timely MCCan listening session on March 22, 2007. There was a major shift in the community with a farewell on June 21 for Mayor Kelly Block as she had moved from Waldheim to Saskatoon; Barb Schultz has been Mayor since then. The Zoar has been privileged to have a good relationship with the Waldheim Town Administration over the past century.

Zoar leadership transition team 2007 to 2009

At beginning of 2007 Rev. Henry Block began taking some responsibilities. Ken Bechtel took leadership of developing a transition team for the Zoar; from about mid-year Ken was available in the Zoar Office on Wednesday mornings; to assist there was the transition team of Darcy and Evelyn Driedger, Jim Bergen, Mindy Neufeldt and Sherri Williams; in a 12 month span they met 16 times. Ken Bechtel used the models from the

book 'The Congregational Renewal Journey' by Mary Huycke and Dan Smith to engage congregational interaction. Ken Bechtel made 40 home visits arranged by the Zoar office secretaries. On January 6, 2008 the Zoar by vote confirmed that till current commitments were fulfilled: Rev. Ed Olfert would serve two Sundays a month; Rev. Henry Block one Sunday a month and Rev. Ken Bechtel one Sunday a month. For seven weeks, beginning February 23, 2008, Ed Olfert and Greg Baerwald led in men's breakfast times. February 6 to 10 were days of transition team listening.

Rev. Jerry Buhler, the MCSask Conference minister came to install Rev. Henry Block and Rev. Ken Bechtel as ministers for the Zoar; affirmations of continuing that call were made on June 22 and November 2, 2008 and they continued till May 31, 2009. A pastor search committee of Liz Baerwald, Jordon Bergen, Don Friesen, Edna Friesen and Mindy Neufeld met as new developments were taking place. Thirty members from the Zoar joined Rev. Ken Bechtel and the transition team at Shekinah on November 8, 2008 where they created a person they named Harriet Leslie John to assist in searching for future Zoar leadership. Member ship was given as 128 members.

With the assistance of Conference Pastor Jerry Buhler, Henry and Erna Funk who live on a farm about twenty minutes south-east of town were invited to speak in June 2009. The congregational vote to accept Henry and Erna Funk as Co-Pastors was made on July 5, 2009. They began their services in August to set new directions for the Zoar Mennonite Church.

Views in retrospect of a century of changes:

The Zoar has been a part of a century of change. Leadership, at the institutional level, appears to now have shifted from the force of personalities to the force of the corporate model—from the strong voices of a few to the multi-voices of many with specific gifts and expertise. The ease of using global transportation together with the boundary ignoring global media of interpersonal communication present new challenges to unite churches in harmony. Organizations and agencies are no less dedicated than their high-profile predecessors, but now become much more low-profile. This doesn't mean that our mission and identity has changed substantially. It does mean that congregants, thinking there is the absence of a personal dynamic, find it harder to make personal connections to local congregations; the last several years have reflected this as congregants don't reach into their pockets with spontaneous giving nor extend personal identification with the greater mission reflected at Provincial and National denominational levels.

In this unofficial document I have not asked permission of any person to use their name. There could have been many more names used of those who have faithfully engaged themselves in the life of the Zoar Congregation. The chosen format has been to use a more or less linear time line of time-related sentences to stir memories of a plot of ground where many hundreds of people have had spiritual experiences they have taken with them. Each of these people could or can record their own experiences but it is hoped they will have experienced the freedom from fear that Jesus the Christ came to offer.