

Mennonite Historical Society of Canada

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting

Sat. Jan. 21, 2023, 9 a.m.

Shekinah Retreat Centre, Waldheim, Sask.

Present: 20

Dick Braun, guest

Jake Buhler, Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan

Leonard Doell, guest

Barb Draper, MHSC secretary

Gary Dyck, Mennonite Heritage Village

Aileen Friesen, Plett Foundation

Brian Froese, Canadian Mennonite University

Bruce Guenther, Mennonite Historical Society of Canada exec member

Katie Harder, Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

Laureen Harder-Gissing, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada

Jon Isaak, Canadian Mennonite Brethren Studies

Linda Klassen, Mennonite Historical Society of B.C.

Dave Neufeldt, Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, Chair of Mennonite Studies, U of Winnipeg

Henry Paetkau, Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario

John Reddekopp, Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan

Alf Redekopp, Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario

Graham Schellenberg, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society

Conrad Stoesz, Mennonite Church Canada

Jeremy Wiebe, Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, treasurer

1. Jake Buhler welcomed us to the Shekinah Retreat Centre, giving us some history of the facility and encouraging us to find God's presence here.
2. Devotional: Henry Paetkau reflected on John 10:22 which includes, "...It was winter and Jesus was walking in the temple." This was more than a weather report. John is reflecting on the meaning of light and Jesus' words, "I am the light of the world." Henry encouraged us as historians to pay attention to all the words, including the weather reports in diaries, because they have meaning and value. Henry led in prayer.
3. Barb reviewed the MHSC annual general meeting minutes of Jan. 15, 2022.

Motion/S/Carried (Barb Draper, Graham Schellenberg): To accept the MHSC minutes of Jan. 15, 2022 with the following corrections:

- i) Item 6, referring to the Amish should be reworded to say: "Laureen pointed out that the 200th anniversary of the Amish coming to Canada is coming up and could be celebrated in either 2022 or 2023." ii) 14c should be 2025.

4. Ratification of board committees for 2023.

Motion/S/Carried (Jeremy Wiebe, Ben Nobbs-Thiessen) To ratify the MHSC committee chairs and committee members as reviewed at the board meeting.

5. **President's report:** Conrad commented on how good it is to be together. In the last year we have lost an early member of MHSC in Lawrence Klippenstein. The society has been involved in two commemorative projects, the movement to Mexico and from Ukraine. These activities help people to care about this.

The war in Ukraine is destroying libraries, museums and archives. Conrad reminded us to take heart and take courage that we are doing matters. Thank you for your work.

6. Provincial society reports:

- a. There was no representative from Quebec. The big project was Richard Lougheed's book on Mennonite mission work in Quebec.
- b. Ontario held an Indigenous-Mennonite Encounters conference in the spring. The Amish Bicentennial celebrations had strong participation and well received. Challenges involve trying to increase participation and membership in the society.
The Amish bicentennial was celebrated in 2022 to align with the sesquicentennial celebrated in 1972.
- c. Manitoba had a good year with the EastMenn committee adopting the Peace Trail project and unveiling the Shantz cairn. The WestMenn group continues to work on the Post Road trail. Challenges involve time, energy and volunteers.
The Manitoba historical society works as an umbrella organization, meeting once a year while projects are carried by committees or organizations. Integrating these groups is challenging; board members identify with their organization, not the historical society. Perhaps strong institutions are both a blessing and a curse.
- d. Saskatchewan is still interviewing seniors with funding from a heritage grant. They have an agreement with Youth Farm which prints the *Historian* periodical at no charge in exchange for a back page ad. The biggest challenge is that archival space at Bethany Manor has been severely reduced. Another challenge is that the provincial archives in Regina are holding tapes of interviews of our people made in the 1970s and 80s and make it very difficult to access them.
Jake commented that he had letters transliterated into Latin script, but his translator could not translate the specialized or antiquated theological terms. Alf had a suggestion of someone to try.
Laureen suggested that requesting a loan (ex. 10 years) sometimes works better to get access to material held by another archive.
- e. Alberta has a small Mennonite population spread across a large area. The online showing of the film Volendam was well attended. The fall conference was held in a Holdeman church with good attendance and new memberships. Alberta is glad for the encouragement of the MHSC because they struggle with lack of funds and lack of volunteers. Irene Klassen, a founding member of the board, died in early January.
- f. B.C. has been working on digitization and almost all of the *Rundschau* is now online. GRANDMA has started putting links to pdf copies of the pages which is very helpful. Bruce and others have been working on a book project on the history of Mennonites in B.C. It has been a challenge that the library and genealogies are not yet open to the public.

Having the museum facility for events is very helpful in B.C.

6. Award of Excellence: Conrad read the citation for Leonard Doell and presented the Award of Excellence. Leonard's deep love of Mennonite history and Indigenous people was mentioned. He also has written several books and articles as well as being a genealogist and community historian. He has been called an "Elder of the Tribe of Menno." To add to the award citation, John Reddekopp part of what Leonard said when he was 25 years old, addressing hearings regarding a potential uranium refinery

In response, Leonard said he was humbled and honoured to receive the award. He thanked the MHSC for its work in preserving Mennonite history and making it relevant to today.

Coffee break

7. Committee reports:

- a. **Canadian Mennonite Emigration Centenary:** The major project was an exhibit at the Mennonite Heritage Village where tens of thousands of people attended. The travelling exhibit (2023-2024) is now under development, the crates are under construction and the schedule is close to ready for publication. It will go to Winnipeg, then Saskatchewan in May and June. After a time at Waldheim it will go to Alberta before a longer stay at Abbotsford. The 2024 schedule is not finalized.

Many thanks to Andrea Klassen and the work she did on this project, including learning a new computer program. Could this model of a travelling exhibit be used again? It is a lot of work, and this exhibit was designed with the travel component in mind. It also had a lot of funding so that the cost to hosting locations is low.

- b. **A People of Diversity:** Brian and Laureen are continuing their work on this book project. Indigenous Relations has become a full chapter.

Will MHSC be involved in a reading committee? Presumably but that has not yet been determined.

- c. **Archives:** Because the MAID database partner group budget goes through MHSC, an important task of this committee is to approve the MAID financial plan. Otherwise, the work is informal and anyone is welcome to attend our meetings. We have been focusing on digitization.

- d. **Divergent Voices of Canadian Mennonites:** A grant from MCC supported the MCC at 100 conference and the Indigenous Encounters conference. In Winnipeg in 2024, the conference will be Mennonites, policing, prisons and aspects of justice reform. The call for papers will go out soon.

Are there future conferences planned? Not yet, but DVCM is always looking for ideas.

- e. **Genealogy:** We do not have a representative here, but we have received a report. The major work has been connecting primary sources to GRANDMA. We assume the plan for a new web platform is now off the table as work on it seems to have stopped, but we need more clarity on this. Conrad will follow up with this committee to determine the future of the website (mennonitegenealogy.com) and how the funds used for website development will be raised.

- f. **MAID management:** This has been a quieter year. There were 606 items ordered online and 73,000 images in the database. Some are descriptions without the image. The Metadata committee has been looking at how to standardize the material. Half the partners are in Canada, half outside Canada.
- There were many accolades for MAID, but searching is problematic, especially as the database grows and becomes more complex. The metadata committee was encouraged to think about how these concerns might be addressed.
- g. **GAMEO:** Lauren serves as the rep to the GAMEO management board. Aileen also sits on the board as the Plett Foundation representative. Local congregations and groups have never really taken ownership of their entries. Does it need to become more institutionally based? Aileen reported that the Plett Foundation has approved a 3-year part-time position to support work on updating entries that fall within the Plett Foundation mandate.
- John Roth has been replaced by Elizabeth Miller (Institute for Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies, Goshen College) as general editor, but her role is not clear. An agreement between GAMEO and the Plett Foundation has been reached that incorrect information can be removed, not just updated.
- h. **Russlaender Centenary:** Plans are coming along well and the target for each leg of the train journey was increased from 40 to 60. About 90 percent of those seats are now filled. An initiative to support young adults to go on the trip has been well supported with over \$200,000 in donations. This will allow about 30 young adults and some presenters to be sponsored. The challenge now is the program details. Our tours in Saskatchewan yesterday were a good dry run to see what logistics need to be refined.
- How will reporting on the trip be done? John Longhurst has been invited to join the first two legs of the trip to report. Tourmagination also has a practice of having participants journaling. There is presently no one found to do video.
- i. **Website:** The website is up and running; thanks to Selenna and it is promoting the Russlaender tour and the migration centenary exhibit. If anyone would like to post items to the website, send it to someone on the committee.
- Perhaps our website could be a place to highlight genealogy resources.

Break for lunch

8. Institutional reports:
- a. **Centre for MB Studies:** Jon Isaak reported that he continues to upload images to MAID and has helped complete the *Rundschau* scans to make them accessible online. He was able to solve the problem of having broadsheets too big for his scanner. The biggest challenge is that the denominational leaders are not persuaded that Anabaptist things are worthwhile.
- b. **Mennonite Heritage Archives:** Conrad Stoesz reported that he continues to digitize items. A new web platform allows large file sizes such as periodicals to be uploaded. One challenge was that by the time funds were available to hire a student, no good candidates were available.

- c. **Mennonite Archives of Ontario:** Laureen Harder-Gissing reported that an oral history project from many years ago are now in process of being digitized. Laureen is also working on providing Russlaender resources, including family register sheets with lots of information. She has also worked on identifying Indigenous archival material.
 Will the digitized tapes be available? There are summaries posted online, but Laureen hopes to also get the sound files online. Perhaps when the University gets its new website up and running.
 - d. **Chair in Mennonite Studies:** Ben Nobbs-Thiessen reported on the recent conference hosted by the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies which had a good turnout. The recent issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* was delayed, but just came out a few days ago.
 - e. **Plett Foundation:** Aileen Friesen reported that the foundation continues to support many programs and encouraged people to think about projects that could be funded. It is a partner with Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies. The upcoming fall issue of *Preservings* will feature when the Russlaender met the Kanadier. The 50th issue is coming up soon, which is quite a legacy.
 - f. **Canadian Mennonite University:** Brian Froese reported that the Friesen lectures with Rob Zacharias were well attended. Brian has been working on the Mennonites since 1970 book. A challenge is that CMU has only one history course.
 - g. **Mennonite Museum Society:** Linda Klassen reported that the museum is ready to open its housebarn. The many events have been popular, and the café helps to bring people in the door. It now offers borscht five days a week. The museum has several acres of blueberries and tries to be self-sufficient with fruit.
 - h. **Mennonite Heritage Village:** Gary Dyck reported that the Village has been working at being more relevant to more people with activities like “winter in the village.” A tepee will be coming in April, something that happened through social media. We are back up to 40,000 visitors a year, but it was 50,000 before Covid.
 What is the main attraction? The windmill, the only working windmill in Canada, is a flagship, but people come for traditional food at the restaurant.
 - i. **Institute of Anabaptist Mennonite Studies:** Laureen Harder-Gissing reported, but not officially. David Neufeld is the new chair. There were two Bechtel lectures, including Mark Loudon, a linguist who is an expert on Pennsylvania Dutch (German).
9. **Future possibilities:** Laureen Harder-Gissing chaired this part of the meeting, asking if there are ideas for future directions that we should pursue.
- a. Bruce Guenther identified some things that caught his attention in our discussions:
 - i. The possibility of creative and shared travelling exhibits.
 - ii. DVCN: What would new collaboration look like?
 - iii. Possibilities for expanding genealogical tools.
 - iv. Strengthening connections with denominational leaders.
 - v. Discussions around GAMEO renewal and expansion,

- b. When will the Russlaender and Emigration committee work end? The nationwide Russlaender initiative will conclude with the train tour; an Ontario sub-committee is considering activity in 2024 when the first group settled there.
The travelling emigration exhibit will terminate in 2024. The materials will go to the Mennonite Heritage Village.
- c. MHSC is an umbrella organization that supports special projects. What about compiling resources regarding Indigenous relations? Could resources of Mennonite-Indigenous relations be connected to the MHSC website?
- d. Perhaps we could invite denominational leaders to our meetings next year. Laureen reported that Grebel is revising an agreement with MCEC regarding relationships.
- e. The 500th anniversary of Anabaptism is coming up. Is there a way to tell a story visually? Andrew Wall has expressed interest in doing a Russlaender film. The Plett Foundation cannot fund this, and films need large budgets. Perhaps if a committee brought a proposal that was a collaboration of various institutions a Canada Heritage grant application would be successful.

Motion/S/Carried: (Aileen Friesen, Conrad Stoesz) That Mennonite Historical Society of Canada initiate a committee to explore the creation of a commemoration film about the Russlaender experience in Canada and to explore fundraising in consultation with the executive committee.

Motion/S/Carried: (Henry Paetkau, Dave Neufeldt) to ratify that Aileen Friesen, Conrad Stoesz, Richard Thiessen and Jeremy Wiebe serve on this committee.

(This committee should also have someone who lives east of Winnipeg.)

Coffee break

10. Financial statements:

- a. Treasurer Jeremy Wiebe sent the statements and bank statements to Hans Werner for review. He is on vacation but when he gets back, he will let the executive know if he has any concerns.
- b. Last year MHSC decided to give the Russlaender tour committee \$5,000 for promotion. Only a little over \$1,000 has been billed to this fund. They have used other funds for promotion so would like to have the remaining approximately \$4,000 used for other expenses (such as printed bulletins on the train, etc.). MHSC agreed to that.
- c. Regarding APOD funding, Jeremy reported that \$5,000 from APOD had to be okayed by MCC which happened after the year end so it does not show as transferred. \$14,000 was specified in the 2020 AGM but we did not have those funds in our bank account. DVCM now has the funds and we can make that transfer. There is also another \$2,000 going to APOD next year.

Motion/S/Carried (Jeremy Wiebe, Aileen Friesen) to accept the financial statements for the year ending Oct. 31, 2022 as presented.

11. Budget for 2023

- a. The donations line should read \$38,000 instead of \$5,000. This includes the \$8,000 scheduled annual donation from MCC to DVCM and \$30,000 in expected donations to the Russlaender tour.

- b. Under expenses, GAMEO support should be \$600. In 2022 we were billed \$300 but it was not paid before year end and \$300 is the bill for next year.
- c. The Russlaender tour expenses should be \$226,701.02 to include \$30,000 expected donations.
- d. Under interfund transfers, it should be \$19,000 from DVCM to the APOD book project.
- e. This budget shows a deficit of \$206,574 in large part due to the expenditure of \$226,701 on the Russlaender 100 tour, most of which comes from donations collected for this purpose in the last fiscal year. Separating out the Russlaender donations and expenditures from the budget, there is still a deficit of \$9,873, owing in part to the MAID project spending more than it is taking in, drawing on monies it has saved over the past years. The other part of the budget deficit is that the costs of this meeting will be higher than normal. While it is a deficit budget, Jeremy is not concerned. We have over \$21,000 in unrestricted funds.

Motion/S/Carried (Jeremy Wiebe, Aileen Friesen) to accept the MHSC 2023 budget as presented with the noted revisions.

Motion/S/Carried (Jeremy Wiebe, Jake Buhler) to appoint Hans Werner as the reviewer for our financial statements.

12. Nominating committee report

- a. The slate for the coming year as proposed by Jon Isaak and Richard Thiessen:
 - i. President: Conrad Stoesz
 - ii. Vice-President: Laureen Harder-Gissing
 - iii. Treasurer: Jeremy Wiebe\
 - iv. Recording secretary: Linda Klassen
 - v. Fifth member: Bruce Guenther

Motion/S/Carried (Jon Isaak, Conrad Stoesz) to thank Barb for her work in recording our minutes for the past four years and for writing news releases.

Motion/S/Carried (Jake Buhler, John Reddekopp) to say thank you to Conrad Stoesz for his work as president of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.

Motion/S/Carried (Jon Isaak, Aileen Friesen) that nominations cease.

13. Next meeting schedule:

Although we had planned to meet in Ontario then Manitoba, there has been a request for a change with the agreement of the provincial societies. We usually meet in the second or third week in January.

Motion/S/Carried (Aileen Friesen, Brian Froese) to have the MHSC meet in Manitoba in 2024 and in Ontario in 2025.

14. Henry Paetkau closed our meeting with a prayer.

15. Adjourned

Minutes by Barb Draper