

West Abbotsford Mennonite Church, Post-War Growth

West Abbotsford Mennonite Church was formally organized on November 15, 1936. The next spring, a building committee was struck and by late fall, the first church building, measuring 24 X 40 feet was erected, although it was primarily only a shell at that point. A good amount of the lumber used came from the dismantled Mill Lake lumber mill and from a nearby, dismantled barn. That year's Christmas Eve program was held in the new sanctuary. One member wrote:

"You could see through the cracks in the wall, but it did keep out most of the wind." Of the \$271.70 contributed towards construction, \$128.00 came from donors in the U.S.A. and from Zoar Mennonite Church in Waldheim, Saskatchewan.



West Abbotsford's first decade was characterized by growth – in 1946, membership stood at 150. Maria Epp, wife of leader Peter P Epp, in an article submitted to *Der Bote*, wrote:

"Our church building which we erected in 1937 at the beginning of our sojourn here and which was viewed by some as being far too big, has long since not met the demands of our congregation."

Resulting from post-war immigration, the membership climbed to 257 by 1948, a 71% increase over two years. That did not account for total numbers, since children and non-member adults would not be included. As a result of this rapid growth, the congregation engaged in two separate building expansion programs. The first occurred in 1946, and the other in 1949. The second decision was passed by a margin of 47 to 19 (Congregational Minutes, 8/03/49). The concern was regarding the acquiring of additional debt while debt for construction on the first expansion still existed. The low turnout for the congregational raises questions in itself.

This time, a considerably larger addition was built, but by 1952, the sanctuary was filled to overflowing on Sunday mornings. It is estimated that during the mid-1950s, approximately 400 - 450 filled the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. The congregation's thoughts now turned to the formation of a daughter church. A lot on the corner of Clearbrook and Peardonville Roads was available, and in March of 1952, the congregation voted by a margin of 79 to 2 in favour of purchasing the lot (Congregational Minutes, 17/03/52).

The next month, it was resolved that a group of members would start a new church with the support of the West Abbotsford Church. West Abbotsford pledged financial assistance in the amount of \$2500.00. A building committee was struck, and two ministers consented to join the group, Rev. H.J. Neudorf and Rev. A. I. Loewen. Loewen was elected as leading minister.

All details related to construction went well, but one detail presented both parties with a sensitive and potentially, divisive issue. The practice at that time, with respect to church budgeting, was to assign each church member with an annual levy (“Steuer”), and it was expected that members leaving for the new church plant, would take care of their 1953 “Steuer”; some had not paid up for 1952. It was determined that a certificate of transfer for departing members good not be provided in good faith, until their financial responsibilities were taken care of. At a congregational meeting, it was recommended that outstanding debts be deducted from the church building fund committed to the new church plant.

By January of 1954, 110 members had left West Abbotsford, but not all joined the Clearbrook Mennonite Church.



Footnote: The Clearbrook Mennonite Church was dissolved January 2015. The BC Conference is prepared to sell the property, but proceeding thoughtfully and slowly.

Source: Living Stones, A History of West Abbotsford Mennonite Church, 1936-1986