

## Book Review

Lyle Baer. *The Light at Evening: A History of the Northwest Fellowship Churches*. Two Hills, AB: Lyle Baer/Watrous Publications, 2023. 360 pp.<sup>1</sup>

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In 1959, three Mennonite families from Ohio and Pennsylvania, responding to advertisements by the Canadian National Railway for cheap land along its route, moved to British Columbia. As participants in the newly formed Conservative Mennonite Fellowship, they were also interested in planting churches in northwest Canada. Sixty years later, this small beginning has grown to fifteen congregations with 750 members organized as the Northwest Fellowship Churches. Most of these congregations are located in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan, but also included are a congregation each in northern California and Nova Scotia. The Northwest Fellowship also sponsors mission work in the Philippines.

The Northwest Fellowship has its roots in the 1950s “nonconference” movement among conservatively minded congregations and individuals from the Conservative Mennonite Conference, the Western Ontario Amish-Mennonite Conference, and several conferences in the (Old) Mennonite Church, who objected to the assimilation that was occurring in those groups. Finding that the formal structures of the conferences muted their minority voices, they withdrew and opted for an ecclesiology of self-governing yet cooperating congregations, which they thought would be more responsive to members’ concerns. In 1957, they formed the Conservative Mennonite Fellowship. By the 1970s, the congregational polity approach had resulted in variations among the congregations in their applications of nonconformity. The Conservative Mennonite Fellowship disintegrated. Clusters of congregations organized new fellowships whose congregations had compatible standards. The largest of these new fellowships was the Nationwide Fellowship Churches. It is one of the most conservative Plain car-driving Mennonite groups. The Northwest Fellowship Churches is one of four regional networks in the United States and Canada that make up the Nationwide Fellowship.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of the book can be ordered from Lyle Baer, Box 1081, Two Hills, AB, T0B 4K0 Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Scott, *An Introduction to Old Order and Conservative Mennonite Groups* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1996), 164–169; *Mennonite Church Directory, 2023* (Harrisonburg, VA: Christian Light



One of the “nonconference” or “fellowship” movement’s critique of the assimilating Mennonite conferences was how the latter did missions. The Fellowship Mennonites view them as largely copying from Protestant mission models, with professionally trained and supported missionaries. Instead, the Fellowship Mennonites advocated “‘evangelization by colonization,’ which simply meant moving a group of people into a given area where they would live and work, thereby demonstrating the gospel in daily living” (23). This was the model that the first families in the Northwest implemented and followed throughout the ensuing decades.

Notable was the readiness of Fellowship Mennonites to move into the Northwest from other places in the United States and Canada. One can sense in the first decade a sense of adventure combined with a zeal to evangelize. However, on occasion neither was sufficient to overcome a poor local economy and lack of converts. This was true of the first outreach at Crescent Spur/Loos, British Columbia, which, after several years of growth, declined until it closed in 1970. However, other immigrating Fellowship Mennonites had started a congregation at McBride, British Columbia, in 1959. Two brothers, Mervin and Harry Baer, both of whom had large families including married children, gave the congregation the critical mass it needed to flourish. The economic situation was also better. Mervin was a minister and, shortly after his arrival, he was ordained a bishop. His brother Harry was ordained a deacon. As the pioneer bishop, Mervin Baer was a strong leader. Reading between the lines, one gets the sense that he could at times be authoritarian. Yet, he oversaw, directed, and inspired the expansion of the Fellowship in northwest Canada, with McBride as the base for the outreach. In 1963, eight families from the Duchess (AB) Mennonite Church, a congregation in the Alberta-Saskatchewan Conference, withdrew over nonconformity issues. They reached out to the church at McBride for oversight. At the same time, the Stirling (AB) Mennonite Church left the Alberta-Saskatchewan Conference and affiliated with Northwest Fellowship.

Like other Nationwide Fellowship churches, the Northwest Fellowship was intentional about starting new congregations. The Fellowship mindset was to keep congregations small. Once a congregation reached approximately 75 members, it began to look for another place to start a church. Between 1973 and 1986, McBride and Duchess established five new congregations. The first was Lake Centre in Manitoba in the midst of a Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite community. The Fellowship Mennonites had been invited there by persons who were troubled by assimilation in their community. Mervin Baer, who had come to the “persuasion that the initiation of revival among apostate Mennonites was the greatest mission in North America for the true church” (95), was eager to help. A similar dynamic played out in LaCrete, Alberta, among the Sommerfelder Mennonites and in Warman, Saskatchewan, among the Bergthaler Mennonites. The “colonization” model of church planting ensured that these congregations had a mixture of persons from conservative American Mennonite background and Russian Mennonite background. However, the Russian Mennonites had to adapt to conservative American Mennonites’ beliefs and practices. While this was not without its difficulties, members of Russian Mennonite background were

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Publications, 2023), 115–134, lists 142 congregations with 6,745 members in the Nationwide Fellowship churches.

frequently chosen for leadership, and the two cultures blended as younger generations intermarried. Eight new congregations were established between 1992 and 2004. Nine of the current 15 congregations in the Western Fellowship are located in Russian Mennonite communities.

*The Light at Evening* is an insider history and, as such, reflects the interests of its primary readership, conservative Mennonites. It is descriptive, with chapters on each congregation, organized chronologically by founding date. Individual moves in and out of communities, ordinations, the reception of converts, the building of church houses and schools, weddings, and deaths flesh out the narrative. Conflicts, of which there were plenty, are briefly covered, and what details are provided indicate that they were largely due to disagreements over applications of nonconformity standards combined with different styles of leadership. What analysis exists follows formulaic tropes of apostasy and faithfulness.

Each chapter ends with a brief reflection by the author on the spiritual significance of the congregation's history. As Baer's thoughts on McBride indicate, for these Fellowship Mennonites, the history of God's people is full of meaning and lessons to be learned, calling forth gratitude to an all-wise Providence:

Considering the expansion of the work with such humble beginnings at McBride in the early 1960s and the extension of the church across western Canada and beyond, one is amazed at the ways God works and how He uses many committed individuals to spread the Gospel and build his kingdom, labouring together in the unity of the Spirit. (219)