

History of First Mennonite Church

The year 1959 marks the official organization of First Mennonite Church, with the 50th anniversary of this event celebrated on April 18th and 19th, 2009, but the congregation's roots extend another ten years through a decade of rapid and controversial transition for what had been primarily an agrarian people. The church was the product of the post-war migration of Mennonites to the cities - typically to attend university, but also to work - in a time of challenge to a centuries-old rural heritage.

The individual who is generally regarded as the "father" of the congregation, Dr. John Unrau, was at the forefront of this new generation of Mennonites. Born in Russia in 1916 and raised in rural Saskatchewan, he arrived in Edmonton with his wife Mary in 1949 to teach in the University of Alberta's plant science department. In two years he was appointed head of his department and during the 1950's he gained an international reputation for his research in genetics. He was also a committed Christian who is remembered for his strong character, engaging personality and special concern for Mennonite university students. Not long after arriving, he gathered a small group of students which met at the Unrau home approximately every other Sunday for lunch, fellowship and devotions.

While the Unrau home quickly became too small to serve as a place of worship for the growing group, it retained a central place in the lives of many young people who came to Edmonton in the next several years, and who found warmth and stimulating discussion there.

In the summer of 1950, the fledgling group was designated a mission church, and began to be served on a rotating basis by lay ministers from Tofield. The number of students in the group increased that fall, and two families also arrived, adding a certain stability. Regular Sunday morning services began in German that October in the downtown Labour Temple. A year later, the slowly expanding group moved to the McKernan Community League building nearer the university, and in 1954 purchased what had been the Avonmore United Church. Throughout this early period, the group consisted primarily of university students and, as a result, was characterized by a high degree of transience and an inability to support itself.

The predominant spirit of the decade prior to 1959, would seem to be not dissatisfaction, but rather united and enthusiastic participation in the building of a church. To a considerable degree, the young people's group was the church; individuals found themselves in positions which generally were filled by those of older generations in their home congregations, simply because there was no one else to fill them. When Jake Baergen became the first Sunday school superintendant in 1956, for example, he was in his early twenties. Spontaneous social work-days and monthly pot-luck suppers in the austere basement of the Avonmore church were held.

However successful the group was in integrating young newcomers to Edmonton into an active church body, it simultaneously acquired somewhat of a questionable reputation among many Alberta Mennonites. The fact that it was located within a city, was connected with the university, and made considerable use of English - although German remained the primarily language of worship until 1958 - meant that it was naturally suspect in some circles. Its atmosphere of questioning and innovation served largely to reinforce these suspicions. As late as 1959, Walter

Paetkau, then president of the local Mennonite student's association, acknowledged the need for better communication with home congregations and proposed a tour of Alberta churches to clear up apparent misunderstandings of university and church life in Edmonton among parents of potential students. At the same time, however, the group continued to receive strong support from the Tofield ministers who served Sunday mornings.

In 1958, Arthur Dick was hired as the first full-time seminary-trained minister in the Alberta Conference. Dick was almost as young as many in the group, but he inspired enough confidence that the question of organizing formally as a congregation became plausible.

On Sunday, April 19, 1959, the mission church formally became a congregation, incorporated as "First Mennonite Church" under the Alberta Societies Act. In a service conducted by Rev. H.H. Penner, chairman of the Canadian Conference Board of Missions, 24 persons were accepted into charter membership and four others into associate membership, a category designed particularly for students who were active in the church while living temporarily in Edmonton. That summer First Mennonite was welcomed as a member of both the Canadian and General Conferences. And that fall, Dick reported that the average Sunday morning attendance had risen to about 100 from about 70 the year before.