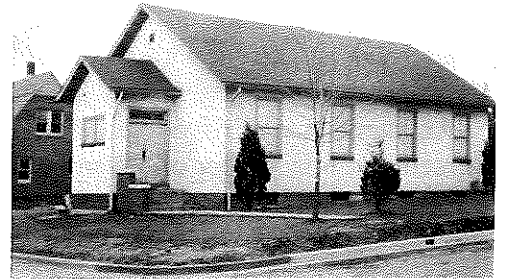




# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian



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## **VERA'S JOURNEY** **TOUR**

Vera Heatwole's life will be featured in a tour sponsored by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians on Friday, September 24, 9:30 – 3:00. Willard Heatwole and three other children of Vera and Ralph will be our guides and storytellers for the day. Vera's life was featured in the Autumn 2009 issue of the *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*. Glendon Blosser will also be along to add Virginia Middle District history. See the enclosed tour registration sheet or call Jim Rush for details. 540-434-0792;



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## **Chicago Avenue Mission Becomes Harrisonburg Mennonite Church**

By Moses Slabaugh

*By conjoint effort of Virginia Mennonites and the YPCA of Eastern Mennonite School (it was not called a college yet), attempts were made to begin missions in Harrisonburg. Interest had begun to appear as early as 1920 or earlier, near the same time that Eastern Mennonite School began. The following article appeared in Missionary Light, October 1941, Vol. I, #4. Ed.*

### **Early Years**

A hall had been rented on the corner of Gay and Federal Streets. Services were to open the following Lord's Day. As a sign was being painted, the suggestion was offered that we leave the name Mennonite off, so that in case of failure we would not be a laughingstock. The suggestion did not carry and neither was the work a failure. God's work never is a failure.

This was the first definite step taken to open a mission in Harrisonburg. According to records on file, the first meeting was on May 24, 1936 with an attendance of twenty-nine white people in the morning and fifty colored people in the

afternoon.<sup>1</sup> The proportion soon changed, the white attendance growing faster than the colored. An attendance of fifty-four white folks is recorded by October of the same year.

## Not Really the First Attempt

But these were not the first beginnings of the mission in Harrisonburg. Fifteen or twenty years earlier a very poor sister in this city would occasionally donate a dollar toward a mission here. Also students of Eastern Mennonite School prospected the possibilities on Depot Hill but were never successful.

About 1934 and 1935 it appeared the door was opening and that we were getting the North Main Street Mission a building then owned and operated by the City Council of Churches. Workers from evangelical churches used to have a lively Sunday-school hour at the North End Mission as it was called.

For some reason the enthusiasm died and the Council of Churches hired a worker. This did not work satisfactorily. The door appeared open for some time and we felt hopeful, but several on the City Council were not so favorably disposed towards the Mennonites and the place was finally turned over to the Salvation Army.

Thus the door was closed and no definite work was done except home prayer meetings.

## Back to 1935-36

In the spring of 1935 the Sunday school was started and the writer served as

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<sup>1</sup>Remember this was in the days of severe segregation between whites and blacks. This was a daring move by Virginia Mennonites. Notice that the audience from the beginning was not mixed. Separate sessions were held for the two races.

superintendent of both colored and white until the fall of 1936 at which time Bro. [E. G.] Gehman took over the work. His service extended until April, 1937 when the writer [Moses Slabaugh] again returned to Harrisonburg and took over the work. In the fall of 1936 the colored and white work was further divided<sup>2</sup> and a building was rented on Chicago Avenue for services for white people.

This building was formerly the United Brethren church. A new superintendent was appointed for the colored and he took up his responsibilities on September 18, 1938. Since then the two missions were entirely separate. (*Remember this was written in 1941.*)

The work has prospered and grown with a present Sunday-school enrollment of eighty-eight at the Chicago Avenue Mennonite Mission. The present membership of active and faithful members numbers approximately twenty.

In the fall of 1940 Sister Edith Showalter<sup>2</sup> was appointed a part-time worker and in the spring of 1941 Sister Mary Keener was added to the corps of workers.

Sister Showalter has recently left to enter the nursing profession and Sister Keener is devoting more time to the work. We hope the work will continue to prosper and grow so that in the future we will need to buy the vacant lot adjoining the church building in order to enlarge the present building. Pray for the work and visit the Chicago Avenue Mennonite Mission some time.

*Moses Slabaugh*

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<sup>2</sup>Moses Slabaugh later became associate pastor at Lindale Mennonite Church and Edith Showalter became a member at Lindale also.

## **Chicago Avenue Mennonite Mission Becomes a Congregation / Church**

*By Ken Weaver, HMC Historian, using significant material from the 1986 Fiftieth Anniversary pamphlet*

[As noted earlier] the VA Mennonite Mission Board (VMBM) early on became involved with the EMS Young People's Christian Association (YPCA) and took the initiative to find and rent the empty church on the corner of Chicago Ave. and Green Streets.

John R. Mumaw, EMS instructor and minister of VA Conference, preached the first sermon in the new location on November 15, 1936. John L. Stauffer, teacher at EMS and minister/newly ordained bishop of VMC, brought the evening message and Sadie Hartzler, librarian at EMS, held the children's meeting.

In July 1937, VMBM appointed Moses Slabaugh as Superintendent of the Mission. Moses arranged for "good preachers" for every Sunday. (Ohio native Moses Slabaugh was not a minister yet; he was ordained in 1938). Revival meetings and summer bible schools were significant in reaching the community.

**From 1937 to 1946 a congregation of over 100 people emerged from the Chicago Avenue Mission, sometimes referred to as the Harrisonburg Mission. The building was bought in 1939 for \$3,000. In 1942 the empty lot on the north side was purchased to expand the building.**

During the 1940's, home visitation was carried on vigorously. The employment of part-time persons for the work continued. In 1941 a car was bought for the workers to use in their visitation. Moses Slabaugh was ordained without

the use of the lot, the first in VA Conference. At that time he served only in the Chicago Avenue Mission rather than on a rotating basis as was done for the established churches in the surrounding districts.

**A deep seated conviction among the churches for evangelism in Harrisonburg led Slabaugh to also identify the need for a mission in the southeast area of the city. In 1945 VMBM and Chicago Ave. Mission bought two lots in the Red Hill area on Reservoir and Hawkins Street. This became Ridgeway Mennonite Church in 1948.**

Most of the student leaders were from Northern District churches, while many members who had joined the effort had membership in the Middle District. In 1947 there was controversy about which District would include this new Congregation. At Conference time in 1948 the Northern District withdrew its claims and a decision was made for it to become part of the Middle District.

Middle District bishops Samuel H. Rhodes and Daniel Lehman began to supply preachers. They asked Harold Eshleman, who was ordained in 1945 and was frequently preaching at Zion Hill Mennonite, to preach several times at the new **Chicago Ave. Mennonite Church**. Harold also wished to preach there regularly, not be on a rotating schedule.

A compromise was reached, allowing him to preach there three Sundays a month—another early pattern for Conference. Harold, a full-time schoolteacher, provided leadership and vision, serving on a part-time volunteer basis. After some time the congregation paid him \$1,000 per year. He served the congregation for 19 years.

By 1950 the congregation outgrew the building. A new auditorium was built on the north side and the old building converted to a mother's room, a small office, and cloakrooms. Adding more congregational components moved the congregation farther from District supervision. A church council was formed. Membership records, which had been held by districts for all congregations, were transferred to the congregation. The Sunday school superintendent, who formerly had been appointed by district leadership was taken over by congregational leadership.

**In 1953 Chicago Ave. members, led by Harold Eshleman, began visitation in what is now the Mt. Vernon Mennonite Church area north of Grottoes. They bought, with support from the Middle District, a vacant church building just east of Route 340. Chicago Ave. members repaired the building and became involved in the ministry. Hubert Pellman was appointed pastor. Eugene and Alice Souder moved to the area to be part of this new church effort.**

At the same time Chicago Ave. continued to grow and in 1959 bought a house and empty lot to the east of the church. This provided additional SS classrooms and parking space. By the fall of 1963 space became a problem again. A Church Expansion Committee was appointed to study growth options, space needs and leadership. There was agreement that further expansion on the present location was not feasible.

Agreement emerged that expanded pastoral leadership was needed for the next steps. B. Charles Hostetter joined Harold for part-time pastoral work in 1964. Two years later when the Hostetters went to Philadelphia for graduate study, Harold was asked to become full-time pastor. He declined and encouraged the

congregation to search for another full-time person. A decision was made to seek a full-time pastor prior to working on the space/facility need.

Samuel Janzen became pastor in September 1967, the first full-time salaried pastor in a VMC congregation. The church was ready for another phase of growth in ministry and membership. Serious discussion emerged over whether to divide into two congregations and half the people move to a new location or move the entire congregation of about 250 members.

Discussion concentrated on the belief that a congregation of about 200 was the best size. The decision was to build a building for 400-500 members and when we reach that size we would divide. To divide two groups of 100 plus members in the early 1970's would not allow each to continue activities such as the youth and music ministries. The architect was told of this plan and did not design the new facility on South High Street for expansion of the auditorium, fellowship hall, and SS classrooms.

In September 1972, the church moved to the new location on South High and changed its name to Harrisonburg Mennonite Church.

**Now the congregation "stood poised to move into the future with the same ingredients that brought the church to this point: able leadership, a sense of rootedness in the traditions of the faith, a willingness to be innovative in following God's call, and a vision for touching even more lives with the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."**

March 2011 will mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this congregation, which began in a very large measure by EMS/C YPCA student evangelism workers in Harrisonburg. Watch for information on a celebration and an updated history booklet.

## “We Went to Hear Billy Graham”

*Northern District Pastoral Letter # 242 had this piece, written by Moses Slabaugh, minister at Lindale and writer for VA Conference. The time was the spring of 1956. Moses reflects on the meaning of some 800 Mennonites traveling from the Shenandoah Valley to Richmond to hear Billy Graham. Slabaugh's original article underwent a bit of editing. (Ed.)*

Many from our community could say they went to hear Billy Graham. An estimated 30 carloads and twenty bus loads went from the Shenandoah Valley to hear Billy Graham in the City of Richmond at the open air stadium. The weather was cool and it rained quite frequently in the two-week period from April 29 to May 20. Estimating a cost per person for travel (eats and snacks not included) of \$2.50 would be a modest figure. This would make a total of \$2,000 spent by Mennonites of the Shenandoah Valley.

Time was quite an item too. Some lost time from work as well as loss of sleep as most folks returned after the meeting. Let's estimate two hours going, two hours at the meeting and two hours coming home. Let's say a total of 4,800 hours of Mennonite time was spent. The distance could also make interesting figures.

Why did we go to hear Billy Graham? No one was compelled to go nor paid to go. What prompted this sudden stampede? It wasn't pleasure since the weather was threatening much of the time. Blankets and umbrellas had to be taken along. There were no luxury seats at the stadium. The bus ride was sort of a novelty to youngsters, but not to those who ride buses often. Would we have gone if Graham had been sick and some other preacher substituted? Was it spiritual hunger that impelled us to go?

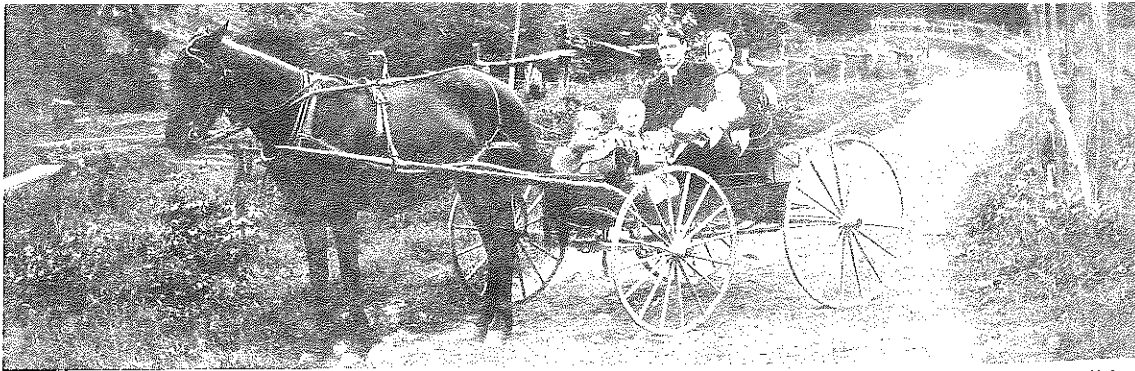
Are we safe in saying that a large percentage went out of curiosity. There has been so much publicity, popularity and fanfare about Billy Graham that we wanted to see him.

Another question, since it is over, “Was it worthwhile?” Would we go again? Have there been any conversions? These questions take us into the realm where mortals cannot judge. However, as we look for an impact of spiritual fervor and evangelistic outreach, we wonder whether the dew of Heaven was as great as the natural rain many encountered.

Especially is this true when you would add to Mennonite dollars and time, the total of Baptist, Methodist, Brethren and other denominations and delegations who went from the Valley. Can we rightly expect some results? Again we cannot judge and God only knows of decisions and commitments made for His glory.

What were the impressions? They are many and varied. I was impressed with the simplicity of the platform structure. Nothing elegant or elaborate. There was some humor and entertainment but not to excess. The Graham team seemed humble and sincere, especially George Beverly Shea, the soloist. The message was simple and Christ was lifted up as the Savior of men. The cost of discipleship, however, was not stressed as we believe it should be. A sincere person could have been saved by the message. To us Mennonites the choir did not impress, with the cut hair and jewelry so much in evidence. They surely needed the song they sang, “Jesus, Jesus How I Trust Him.”

It all makes you think of John the Baptist. “What went ye out for to see? A reed . . . , a prophet . . . ?” Surely God has the answer. Ours is not the task of judging. My own conclusion is that we are not much better nor worse for the venture. We leave it to God whether time and money was wasted. My suggestion? Put that amount of money that was spent going to Richmond and the money you put into their offerings, and put it into the Ministerial Aid fund. Tell your pastor about your availability in the work of Christ's kingdom at home.



Keener Family, ca. 1911. H. B. was ordained 1908 for the WV field. Later he became a Music and Bible teacher at Eastern Mennonite School, 1918-34. Left to right: Katherine Mumaw, Mary Schaefer, Oliver.

## Developments Leading to a Mission Home at Job, WV

*Condensed here is Henry B. Keener's article in Missionary Light, April 1941. He reflects the long-held view how VA Mennonites years ago "backed their way into WV" to leave a witness then form churches. H. B. Keener (1882-1946) and wife Bettie (1878-1967) could be considered pioneers of a sort. His article, however, does not include Martin Burkholder's trips to Greenbrier Co. to preach before the Civil War. (Ed.)*

Henry says - Missionary activities began in WV during the Civil War when John Heatwole, a layperson, fled as a refugee from Virginia westward and northward. While pursuers were within shooting distance, but obscured by forest and hills, he misled them by walking backwards in the snow. Thus he escaped to the hospitable homes of Pendleton County, WV. While there he taught them from the Bible and the Confession of Faith.

After the Civil War, ministers began occasionally to ride horseback to visit the new sections that had been touched by Heatwole. Eventually, as interest grew, monthly evangelistic and pastoral trips were made during the summer months, as two brethren made horseback or buggy trips, sometimes staying as long as a month. Meetings were held in homes and schoolhouses.

By 1890 the work had extended across three or four mountains, even across the Allegheny Mountains into the Job, WV area. The Miller meetinghouse was built in 1885 on the North Fork of the Potomac River near the mouth of Seneca Creek (see Brunk, v. II, 209-11.)

To provide a better witness it became advantageous for a mission couple to reside in this extreme western boundary of mission interest for the summer. By the early 1900's A. B. Burkholder, Christian Good, E. C. Shank and Jos. F. Heatwole and their wives lived there for a summer each.

Pastoral work was done in Randolph, Tucker and western Pendleton counties. Regular appointment from the Job center became so numerous that no place had services more frequently than once a month. Sunday schools had not yet come. By 1908 a meetinghouse and a mission home were built near Job.

That same summer H. B. and Bettie Keener were appointed to work for an indefinite time period. At this point Sunday school work was begun with the help of native talent. Eventually, it became possible from this location to conduct three Sunday schools and by 1941 four Sunday schools "in the Job district." Additional help came as two to four "young sisters" helped with visitation work, Bible school, and Sunday school work.

*H. B. Keener/J. O. Lehman*

*Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*

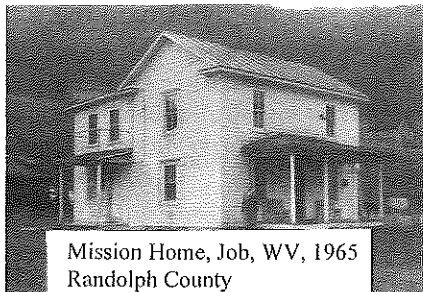
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