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VALLEY BRETHREN MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTER A Progress Report

The VBMHC has begun its second year of existence. At its first meeting of the year held at Lindale Church, on February 9, three new members were elected to the board—Anne Brower, Virginia Weaver, and Jane Wenger to bring the membership to 6, evenly divided between Brethren and Mennonites. The name Valley Brethren Mennonite Heritage Center was officially adopted. An official mailing address was designated—1675-D Virginia Ave., Harrisonburg, VA, 22802. Other business included discussion regarding employing a development coordinator to spearhead the developments.

At the March 9 board meeting a considerable part of the evening was spent in discussing three questions: Where do we want to be in 5 years? What do we need to do in the year 2000? and What other questions or concerns should the board be discussing? The responses to these issues will contribute considerably to focusing the next steps. The site selection issue is among the most urgent, yet difficult, decision facing the board. There are indications that consensus on this issue is coming closer.

The board instructed the executive committee, Anne Brower, treasurer; Nate Yoder, secretary; Paul Roth, vice president, and Calvin Redekop, president, to initiate procedures for the employment of a development coordinator who will expedite the program and the board subcommittees in the areas of

funding, publicity, program and site/facilities. One of the first goals will be to apply for start-up grants to underwrite publicity, fund raising, membership drives, etc.

--Calvin Redekop

A Century of Deaconesses in the Middle District of Virginia Conference

By Ruth Krady Lehman

From the early 1860s until 1962 deaconesses were ordained in the Middle District of the Virginia Mennonite Conference. It is unsure where Bishop Samuel Coffman, who lived from 1822 to 1894, got the idea to call women to help in the deacon tasks of the church. Obviously, he did not follow the lead of the Pennsylvania Mennonite conferences, whom he had communication with, for they had no deaconesses at that time. Nor did he get the idea from the western Mennonite deaconess orders; they were set up for a different purpose. He may have borrowed the idea from neighboring church denominations, who frequently shared meetinghouses with the Mennonites in Virginia prior to the Civil War.

Virginia church historian, Harry A. Brunk, in his book History of the Mennonites in Virginia, 1727-1900, Vol. I, gave only limited space to the ordination of deaconesses, their work seemingly of less historical importance than that of the ordained

men. Brunk did, however, make several minor references to deaconesses in his book. He wrote:

"The wife of Preacher David Rhodes (Magdalena Rhodes) was referred to as a deaconess." She was ordained by Samuel Coffman sometime before the Civil War. Brunk also wrote, "In 1882, votes were taken for two deaconesses at Weavers Church and Sisters Annie and Susanna Brunk were chosen and ordained at that time." There was an additional reference from 1889, "Betsy Showalter and Sarah Sharpes were chosen by majority and ordained."¹

Most of Brunk's research about this period came from the diaries and papers of L.J. Heatwole, who used the word "ordain" whenever he wrote about the installation of deaconesses.

Eleven deaconesses were chosen during the Samuel Coffman years (1861-1894): Elizabeth Rhodes, Magdalena Rhodes, Rebecca Burkholder, Elizabeth Hartman, Annie Brunk, Susanna Hartman Brunk, Elizabeth Showalter, Sarah Sharpes, Magdalene Rhodes, Frances Heatwole and Sarah Coffman.

Susanna Brunk was one of the most influential deaconesses of this era. Although her husband, Samuel Brunk, was a layman, she was chosen and ordained on her own merit. She served as deaconess because she was a faithful member whose ability and integrity were unquestioned. She was a deaconess from 1882-1913, and was well regarded by her peers.

Susanna Brunk saw that women in the Midwest during that time were serving the church in an organized way. She proposed to L.J. Heatwole that the women of the Middle District be allowed to start a Sewing Circle. Heatwole liked the idea, but other men of the Ministerial Council felt that the women would not be able to manage such a project. Eventually, however, the plan was approved by him, and on March 21, 1908, the first meeting was held. Susanna Brunk served as manager of the Weavers Sewing Circle, which was held in her home for many years. This Virginia women's organization continues strong to this day.

Bishop L.J. Heatwole, who lived from 1852 to 1932, had been ordained in Missouri, moved to Virginia, and was accepted as bishop in Virginia in 1893. He wrote in an obituary for Susanna Brunk in the October, 1913, Gospel Herald:

"On March 19, 1889, Susanna Brunk was called to the office of deaconess by her home congregation (Weavers), and from the date of the organization of the Sister's Aid Society on March 21, 1908, she became its director as well as one of its most active members. In her work as deaconess she was active and faithful in visiting the sick and relieving the distressed and needy of her own sex."²

L.J. Heatwole wrote in his Church Record Book that "two sisters were chosen by voice of the church to serve as deaconess, viz., Lizzie (Elizabeth) Brunk (of Elias), and Marietta Detweiler (of David). Their ordination was set for Sunday, June 25, 1905."³ Elizabeth Heatwole Brunk was mother of Harry A. Brunk, historian, who remembers his mother as a quiet woman who fulfilled her deaconess duties in an unassuming manner.

Six women were ordained as deaconesses during the L.J. Heatwole years (1893-1932): Marietta Detweiler, Elizabeth Heatwole Brunk, Emma Showalter, Mary Blosser, Rebecca Hartman and Mollie Grace Coffman Heatwole.

The Ordination Process

Deaconesses were publicly ordained. Names were suggested by the congregation to the bishop in a public council meeting. The women were chosen according to the majority of votes they received and one, two or three were ordained according to the number of places that needed to be filled; the names and the date for the ordination were announced at the public meeting. At the later public ordination service, the lot was not used. The candidates were seated on the front bench. At the end of the service they were told to stand and were asked several questions by the bishop about their willingness to serve. They were given the charge while on their knees, followed by prayer. There is no record that the ordination service included the "laying on of hands."⁴

This same ritual was not always used. The ordination of Mollie Grace Heatwole, on October 14, 1921, is recorded. Elizabeth Heatwole Grove, daughter of L.J. Heatwole, wrote this account to Joseph Heatwole concerning the ordination of his mother:

"When Papa (L.J. Heatwole) announced that your mother had been chosen, he came down off the pulpit and asked her (she was sitting on one of the front benches) if she would accept the charge. This seemed to be such a shock that she sat still. He asked her two or three times before she responded and was duly ordained. I don't know if they ever did that way before or since, but it seems that at most other times the women were notified first and ordained at a later date."⁵

S.H. Rhodes, who lived from 1880 to 1957, was ordained bishop in 1932. He appointed five women as deaconesses during the years he served: Lydia Shank, Sophia Brubaker, Bettie Keener, Pearl Suter and Ada Neff Lehman. All were wives of ministers.

On July 26, 1928 Bettie Keener and Pearl Suter were selected by the ministerial committee and were ordained as deaconesses by Bishop S.H. Rhodes. The process again was a bit different than described above. One of the Suter children remembers that the preachers were standing around the two women so that their mothers could not be seen easily. Another remembers that the women were called to stand at the end of the service and that their husbands stood with them during the ordination, that the women knelt forward as the bishop prayed, and that the bishop did not "lay hands" on them during the prayer. Another of the family remembers that no congregational vote was taken publicly; the names were chosen by the Ministerial Council and the time of the ordination announced to the congregation for a later date.⁶ This procedure for the selection of deaconesses marked the beginning of the women being chosen by the ordained men alone and not by the congregation.

In 1947, Daniel W. Lehman, who lived from 1893 to 1972 and a long-time teacher at Eastern Mennonite College, was ordained bishop to help S.H. Rhodes. Bishop Lehman's wife, Ada Neff Lehman, served with him, doing the work of deaconess, even though she was not officially recognized at first. A notation was found in the minutes of the Middle District Ministerial Quarterly Meeting, held on May 9, 1952: "Passed that Sister Ada Lehman (Mrs. D.W.) be recognized as a deaconess."⁷ Ada Neff Lehman was the last deaconess to be publicly ordained in the Middle District. She served until D.W. Lehman retired as bishop in 1963.

The Role of the Deaconess

Elizabeth Heatwole Grove described the role of the deaconesses in Virginia Conference:

"The work of the deaconess was to visit the women and girls, members of the church who were out of line in dress, morals and conduct in general, and who needed instruction and help; to assist at communion and baptizing services; and to assist in the footwashing services by supervising the procedure for the women."⁸

Illustration of how this role emerged can be found. In May, 1894, a question came before Conference concerning the noise inside and outside the churches during communion services made by those who did not commune. This action was taken: "Resolved that it would be the duty of our deacons and deaconesses to suppress all disorder at our communion services and public worship."⁹ And again in May, 1902, Conference took another action: "Resolved that the deacons and deaconesses in charge see that this ordinance (footwashing) be observed in as orderly a way as possible."¹⁰ In 1903 an action by Conference ruled that it was proper for the covering to be "removed from the head of the woman applicant by the deaconess" before baptism. This custom was later discontinued.¹¹

One granddaughter remembered that her deaconess grandmother, Elizabeth Heatwole Brunk, baked the communion bread, made the communion grape juice, and laundered the footwashing towels. She also remembered that her grandmother went to visit a woman who needed counseling before the communion service.¹²

The deaconesses also had charge of the food served at Conference time; they decided and announced what food should be served, even though they were not Conference members. The tasks assigned to deaconesses included whatever the ordained brethren thought "pertained to women's work."¹³

By the 1920s the ordained men preached at a circuit of congregations, according to a calendar method. The deaconess women served with their husbands as they went their ministerial rounds, including churches in the mountains of Virginia and West Virginia.

Changes in the Deaconess Role

The role of the deaconess changed through the years. In the early years women were chosen for their abilities and their faithfulness to the church. In later years it seemed that one needed to be the wife of an ordained man in order to be chosen as a deaconess.

In the early years deaconesses were used often and their advice sought whenever it was necessary to admonish or advise women members of the church. In later years the duties of the deaconess were becoming onerous, as the rules in the church were changing. The deaconess was expected to hold the line on the rules of dress for women at times of baptism and communion. They were often asked to make coverings and plain dresses for the applicants, if these persons could not provide their own.

The End of the Deaconess Era

Exactly 100 years after the ordination of the first deaconess, the system of ordaining women came to an end. In a ministerial prayer meeting held at the home of Bishop Daniel W. Lehman on July 10, 1961, he proposed the appointment of Pauline Blosser and Alice Horst as deaconesses. As bishops' wives, they were doing deaconess duties just as Ada Neff Lehman had done before she was ordained; some felt that they should also be officially recognized. The group of ordained men that evening decided that a study should be made of the history, the need and the purpose of the office of deaconess in the Middle District. Joseph Heatwole was chosen to do this study and one month later he gave his report.

It was not until January 15, 1962, at a ministerial prayer meeting at the Daniel W. Lehman home, that the following recommendations were made by the three bishops, Daniel W. Lehman, Mahlon Blosser and Lloyd Horst:

1. That we discontinue calling and appointing deaconesses to serve the district at large.
2. That we recognize every bishop's, pastor's and deacon's wife as being called to serve in the office of deaconess and shall perform such duties as:
 - a. Extend the hand of fellowship and kiss of charity at baptisms at the request of the officiating officials.
 - b. Assist in the preparation of communion.

- c. Direct the feetwashing (sic) of sisters.
- d. Assist her husband in visitation and assist him in her sphere of his duties.
- e. Attend to any assignment that may be given them by the officials of the congregation."¹⁴

The bishops' recommendations were adopted, and in 1962 the ordination of deaconesses in the Middle District of the Virginia Conference came to an end. The work of the ordained deaconesses, who took their calling seriously and felt they were an integral part of the work of the church, was taken over by the spouses of the ordained men by virtue of their husband's position in the church. No longer would the function of deaconess be recognized in its own right by ordination. The work of women in the church was now limited to those who were the wives of ordained men, "to assist him in her sphere of his duties."¹⁵

The Virginia Mennonite congregations were becoming more autonomous and the oversight of the Conference at large was less viable. The district leaders (bishops, ministers, and deacons) were being replaced by pastors, elders and council members within each congregation. The rules of each congregation differed, so it was no longer necessary that the dress of women be monitored before baptism and communion. By this time the difference in the roles of men and women in the church and in society were diminishing. Since the 1990s the leadership of women in the church has largely been accepted in the Middle District of Virginia Mennonite Conference.

It is, however, important to remember that there was an era in Virginia Mennonite history when honest and worthy women were chosen by the church to the office of deaconess and ordained. They had a special work in the church which they performed with dignity and honor.

¹ Brunk, Harry A. History of the Mennonites in Virginia, 1727-1900, Volume 1, Chapter IX (Verona, VA: McClure Printing Company, Inc., 1959)(346)

² Heatwole, Lewis J. Obituary for the Gospel Herald, October, 1913, 479.

³ Heatwole, Lewis J. Church Record Book, 356, Eastern Mennonite College, Menno Simons Historical Library and Archives.

⁴ Interview with Mary Suter and Grace Grove, August 23, 1986.

⁵ Grove, Elizabeth Heatwole. Paper written to Joseph Heatwole for a report on Deaconesses to Middle District Council (handwritten), 2. Eastern Mennonite College, Menno Simons Historical Library and Archives.

⁶ Interviews with Margaret Brunk, Frances Harman, and Daniel Suter, March 30, 1989.

⁷ Minutes of Middle District Ministerial Quarterly Meeting, May 9, 1952.

⁸ Grove, *op.cit.*, 3.

⁹ Heatwole, L.J., C.H. Brunk, and Christian, *A History of the Mennonite Conference of Virginia and its Work: With a Brief Biographical Sketch of its Founders and Organizers* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1910), 42-43.

¹⁰ Heatwole, *op.cit.*, 63

¹¹ Heatwole, 65.

¹² Interview with Maude Good Heatwole, March 30, 1989.

¹³ Grove, *op.cit.*, 2

¹⁴ Minutes of Middle District Ministerial Prayer Meeting, January 15, 1962, 165-166.

¹⁵ Minutes, *op.cit.*, 166.

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The Weather

The late Elmer L. Smith with Professor John Stewart, both from James Madison University, reported their research in a series known as Shenandoah Valley Stories. This article is #6 and is used by permission.

The rural folk of the Shenandoah Valley were comparable with many other agrarian people in America. They too had a deep interest in the weather and often it had a direct relationship with their standard of living.

In the earlier years a large proportion of the farm population of the Valley was almost entirely dependent upon nature for their survival. Households sought self-sufficiency and the fields and forests supplied not only food for the family, but also the fuel, plant medicines, and much of their clothing.

The farm family sought adequate methods for predicting the weather, not only to regulate daily work activities but also to prepare efficiently for an entire season. For example, if one were able to know in advance that the winter would be severe, with heavy snow and continued low temperatures, a greater amount of effort would be expended to assure a large wood pile for the pot belly stove.

If an early winter was assured, butchering and all the related activities such as making sausage and ponhaus could be set ahead and all the other preparations could be made. To prepare for winter, apple butter was boiled, apples were pressed into cider, chestnuts and English walnuts were gathered, cabbage, pumpkin and squash were stored in the earthen pit, kraut was in the barrel, and hams were smoked and hung ready for use. The typical family was large, thus in seeking self-sufficiency, vast amounts of canned and dried foods were necessary, involving a considerable amount of domestic activity.

An early frost meant the end of many of the fresh vegetables enjoyed during the summer season and the beginning of dependence upon preserved foods. If the start of the growing season was delayed by a late frost and ended by an early fall frost, the period of dependence upon canned and dried foods was extended often creating anxiety and fear of possible hunger. It is little wonder that the weather was a primary concern.

The main source of weather information was found in the almanac. Some people placed great faith in the printed words found in these publications. A Pendleton County farmer told the writers how his father once started on a trip to town with his family. The horse-and-wagon had traveled nearly ten miles before the head of the household realized he had failed to consult the almanac for the weather forecast. Stopping at a nearby farmhouse he asked to examine their almanac only to find that rain was predicted for that very day. Although the sky was clear and the sun was shining brightly, he announced to his family, "It's no use, we'll have to turn around and return home and make the trip when the weather is better."

A 92-year-old miller said he watches the almanac for a "Dutch H" now called a double Hershell which means cold weather; another informant explained how she watches for the moon signs because "when the horns point downward it meant that all the water was out and it couldn't rain." A West Virginian observed that "whatever the weather when Virgo leaves she comes back in opposite form." She kept an eye on the almanac for the last day of Virgo, for if it was raining, then she was confident that it would be clear and dry when Virgo returned.

In addition to weather lore found in almanacs, the residents of the Valley had various notions, beliefs, and verses on the subject that have been handed down verbally over the generations.

(To be continued)

Memory and history are closely related, but they are not the same. History tells us what happened; memory tells us who we are. Good history can be done by an insider or an outsider; memory belongs to the group alone.

Individuals can study history; memory is always relational and can never be the solo project of any one person. Memory may not always be accurate, but it is always true—that is, it is always concerned with truth.

- Steve Nolt, Mennonite Historical Bulletin

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"The telling of historical tales is less an attempt to preserve the past, than to locate oneself in the present. The stories we select, the version of events we pass among ourselves, reveal much about who we think we are. To deprive a people of their history is to deny them the raw material of self-definition."

- unknown

"History has a way of becoming history."

-Ed Silverberg

"Take heed... lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and... teach them to your children and to your children's children."

-Deuteronomy 4:9

Membership:

To become a member of Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians and to receive future copies of this newsletter, send name and address and 2000 dues (\$10 per couple, \$6 per single) to:

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