

CHAPTER III

BLACK CREEK DISTRICT: BERTIE, SHERKSTON,
NIAGARA FALLS, AND CLARENCE CENTER

The Black Creek District has the distinction of being the first organized district of the Brethren in Christ Church in Canada. The story of its development is interesting even though there is a paucity of information concerning the earlier period of its growth.

Bertie

Under the direct and capable leadership of John Winger the Bertie congregation¹ soon became one of the largest of the Brethren in Christ congregations in Canada, although this does not mean that at first the congregation was great in size. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century there had been a sufficient increase in the size of the congregation for A. B. Scherck to write that "in this section the Tunkers now have the controlling influence and are doing much to mould the sentiment of the community."² And even at the present time, after the growth of the various other Brethren in Christ congregations in Canada, the Bertie congregation can boast

1. This congregation obtained its name from its location in Bertie Township.

2. Scherck, op. cit., p. 64.

of the largest membership.³

Even after the death of John Winger, the Wingers continued to provide the leadership at Bertie for many years. Thus the position of overseer was given not only to John Winger's son, but to his grandson and great-grandson as well. These overseers beginning with John Winger's son were, in order, Peter Winger, Abram Winger, and Jonas Winger.

The Bertie congregation was led by ministers who are of interest. One of the early leaders, Martin Climenhaga, is said to have frequently preached bare-footed without any reaction from his audience.⁴ Abram Zimmerman resembled him in this respect. An aged member of the congregation informed the author that Abram Zimmerman likewise often preached in his barefeet and frequently in overalls. His speech was not always easy to follow but apparently he was not greatly concerned: he often preached on the perils of education.

Perhaps the strongest leader of the Bertie congregation, with the possible exception of John Winger, was Asa Pearss. His father was a Reformed Mennonite, while his mother was "the old type Quaker - plain, sincere, and spiritual."⁵ But as a young man he decided to

3. In 1953 this membership totalled 291. See the Church and Sunday School Statistical and Financial Report, 1953, General Conference Minutes (1954).

4. Climenhaga, op. cit., p. 109.

5. Alvin L. Winger, "Asa Bearss, the first Sunday School Superintendent, Forward, V. No. 3 (Spring, 1953), 2.

join the Tunkers; and while still in his younger years he was ordained as a minister in this Church, sometime in the 1860's. As a minister he performed over 100 marriages and officiated at nearly 315 funerals. These facts he recorded in a short account of his work which he wrote just before his death in 1921. In this little sketch, owned by Bishop Alvin Winger of Markham, he also reveals that he "spent hundreds of dollars as well as hundreds of days in Church work . . . and receiving but little in return by way of money." Evidence of his progressive ministry is seen in the Sunday School which he began in the Humberstone School House in 1863: this was the first Sunday School in the entire Brethren in Christ Church.⁶

After the retirement of Jonas Winger from the Bishopric, Bert Sherk was placed in that office. Now living in retirement, Bishop Sherk exerted a strong influence over his charge in his more active days; and his devotion to his work is widely known. Upon his retirement William Charlton was elected to the vacated office.

Other ministers who have served the Bertie congregation include Nicholas Michael, George Detweiler, Gervin Bearss, Albert Reigle, Alvin Winger, Jesse Winger, Warren Winger, Edward Nigh and James Sider, the last two mentioned being the present active ministers.

6. See p. 266.

An important step was taken by the Bertie congregation in 1875 when it erected a church building a few miles west of Stevensville on land donated by Bishop Abram Winger. Additions over the years have made the building into a commodious structure.

Sherkston

With the spread of settlement in Bertie Township and an increase in the size of the Bertie congregation members of the Church gradually became removed from the Black Creek area. Several members took up land near the present town of Ridgeway, while a few others settled somewhat further west along Lake Erie. As much as was possible these members attended the services at Bertie but because of the distance this was quite inconvenient. As a consequence, religious services, particularly prayer meetings, were frequently conducted in the homes of the Brethren in this area.

An opportunity for a more permanent type of religious service among the members came when the Mennonite Brethren in Christ constructed a church building at Shisler's Point in 1896. To meet the financial needs the Mennonites canvassed the community and offered the use of the Church building to those who contributed to the building fund provided such usage did not conflict with the Mennonite services. This offer was accepted by the Brethren in Christ so that in 1896 more regular services were commenced.

The members of the Church in this area eventually came into sole possession of the Church. The Mennonites had declined in membership to such an extent that it became impractical for them to either use or provide for the maintenance of the building, and they offered it to the Brethren in Christ. Adam Carver, a local member, bought the property and presented it to the Church in 1923.

Nicholas Michael served as pastor of the Sherkston congregation for many years. He was a man of great Christian character; his patience and kindness were well-known not only in the brotherhood but by those in the community as well. He once related, in a testimony, the following experience: he had just finished constructing a fence on some very difficult land near the lake when a group of rowdies from Buffalo, for some sport, tore it down in its entirety. Instead of summoning the police he decided to replace it quietly; and he said he felt "good in his soul" because he had taken this course.

Nicholas Michael was assisted and finally succeeded in the ministry by the ministers of the Bertie congregation. Among those who were active in this respect were Jesse Winger, Titus Sherk, and Walter O. Winger.

Partly because the membership at Sherkston was so small the main emphasis was upon Sunday School work. There was ample opportunity for this type of activity since the surrounding area contained many foreigners, particularly Hungarians.

Although the Sunday School was of importance the work at Sherkston never prospered either in members or finances. For this reason it was thought that a change in location might prove profitable. Thus at a special District Council held in the Sherkston Church in 1930 it was decided that the old church property should be sold for \$700. This money was to be used towards the purchase of the old Mennonite church near the village of Sherkston.⁷

The change in location however did not bring about the expected growth in membership. Perhaps the main reason for this was the indifference of Bertie, the mother congregation. The Black Creek District Council Minutes of 1931 indicate that this may have been the case:

As there has been a sense of feeling that Sherkston has been neglected, and not reckoned on an equal basis, be it therefore resolved that the matter be committed into the care of the Black Creek officials to formulate a programme whereby equality is effected.⁸

But such resolutions were not effective and the decline continued. At one time it was even considered that the work of the Brethren in Christ in this area would have to be discontinued.

7. Black Creek District Special Council Minutes (November, 1930), Article 2.

8. Black Creek District Minutes (1931), Article 16.

However, in recent years a reversal of form has been experienced. This may be largely attributed to the efforts of the Rev. Roy Sider who was ordained as a minister to the congregation in 1948. Under his supervision the Sunday School has increased to the present enrollment of 148, and there is now a membership of 52.⁹

One of the most recent developments at Sherkston is the plan for remodeling and enlarging the present church plant. The estimated cost of this project is \$20,000.

The progressive programme of the Sherkston congregation is seen in that it is the first congregation in the Canadian districts, other than the mission stations, to use a musical instrument in its religious services. An organ was purchased and dedicated in 1954.

Niagara Falls

Since May, 1950, some members of the Bertie congregation have been conducting religious services at Niagara Falls, Ontario.

In seeking to do extension work of some sort the Young People's Society of the Bertie congregation accepted the suggestion of Bishop William Charlton to develop a Sunday School at Niagara Falls. The War-time Housing Community on the outskirts of the city was chosen as the location for this work with services being conducted in the Community Centre Hall. This building was purchased by the Bertie congregation in the Spring of 1952.

9. Church and Sunday School Statistical and Financial Report, 1953, op. cit.

In May 1955 the construction of a new church building was commenced in the same community. Again, it is the Bertie congregation which is sponsoring this project. The results of their efforts will be a brick building measuring 31' x 36'; the estimated cost is \$15,000.

The ministerial responsibilities at Niagara Falls are assumed by Ross Nigh. Although at present there are no members other than the actual workers, it is reported that the prospects for future members are good. In addition, there is a flourishing Sunday School with an enrollment in 1953 of 147 scholars.¹⁰

Clarence Center

For a number of years the Brethren in Christ congregation at Clarence Center, New York, formed a part of the Black Creek District. Thus even though it is not, strictly speaking, a Canadian congregation it requires some consideration in a history of the Brethren in Christ in Canada.

The first Brethren in Christ came to Clarence Center in 1826. In that year a few families moved from Pennsylvania and settled on farms in the vicinity. Peter Rhodes, one of the first officials, was overseer of the congregation until his death in 1901.¹¹ Soon afterwards the congregation came into the Black Creek District.

10. Ibid.

11. Climenhaga, op. cit., p. 110.

Anthony Rhodes, Henry Rhodes and Daniel V. Heise were among the former ministers of the congregation. D. V. Heise, a Canadian, gave almost fifty years of service at this place. He was succeeded by another Canadian, Thomas Doner. Others who have served in a ministerial capacity include John Hostetter, the present editor of the Evangelical Visitor, and Paul Hostetler, the present minister.

Recent developments have resulted in the transfer of the Clarence Center congregation from the Black Creek District to the New York District. Delegates from the congregation, however, continue to sit at Ontario Joint Council.