



Witness

July/August 2003, *Equipping*

*(Please share these stories with your summer program volunteers, DVBS leaders, or SS superintendent.)*

## Congregational Partnerships

**MC Canada WITNESS shares the experiences of congregations – as an inspiration to how we see God at work through the churches.**

As Mennonite Church Saskatchewan listens to its small rural churches, one of the exciting things that is becoming clear is that these congregations are being pushed, exactly by the adversity of their situation in shrinking rural communities, to become more missional. One group basically said that it was good to be small because now they couldn't afford and didn't have to tolerate 'pew-sitters'. Everybody has to be actively involved. And out of that common, intergenerational commitment grows new energy and vitality. One person said, "I guess it's work, but it sure feels like fun!" One of the areas where this is demonstrated is in their commitment to providing DVBS for their communities. Here are two examples:

**Mayfair Mennonite Church**, in a depopulating rural north-western Saskatchewan community, has a 'book' membership of 3, but in fact 15 active souls make this their faith community. Most of these active participants come from other denominational backgrounds and are not ready, after a lifetime of faithfulness, to abandon those roots to be counted as Mennonites. All, with the exception of one young woman, are of retirement age.

Last summer, this woman and one grandmother talked about having a DVBS program. Since there are only a few children in the church, and only a half-dozen or so in the immediate community, this represented a real challenge! The grandparents of the church got behind this idea with enthusiasm and energy, inviting their grandchildren from the city to come and spend the DVBS week visiting them and encouraged their retired neighbours to do likewise. Six grandmothers then rolled up their sleeves and helped the young woman to do a very successful DVBS program, with some 30 kids participating. The food, games and storytelling were highlights! What a courageous, empowering group!

**Emmaus Mennonite Church**, a rural congregation of 35 in Wymark in southern Saskatchewan, has always done VBS. In the late 60's it was a program that was run by Emmaus for Emmaus. Then things became more difficult and attempts were made to co-operate with three other Mennonite congregations in the area. It worked, after a fashion, but it was felt that our wishes and theological bent were being ignored and the co-operation fell apart. Emmaus was back on its own.

Enrollment declined and then we felt the Spirit of God pushing us to try something else. The direction: VBS for the community! Our people became enthused about the concept; things fell into place and the numbers of participants grew from year to year. We are a small community but there is the surrounding world including Regina, Saskatoon, Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg and other places. Attendance rose to the low 60's with an average attendance in the high 50's.

The program is planned by individuals from the congregation without pastoral involvement. All teachers are volunteers. Young people are drawn in as teacher aides and helpers in the area of music, drama and crafts. Children come from the local community and from many other places. Grandchildren come to spend the week with their grandparents. The program runs for five days from 1:00-3:30. This is done so the children will not associate VBS with regular school. The week ends with a barbecue to which the whole community is invited. This is a time where community ties and spirit are strengthened. After the barbecue the children are allowed to show what they have learned during the week and the drama troupe puts on the final skit. God gives encouragement and blessing and the excitement builds from year to year.

—Fred Heese & Eric Olfert (Eric Olfert works for MC Canada Witness as Missional Formation & Partnership Facilitator – Saskatchewan)

600 Shaftesbury Blvd  
Winnipeg MB R3P 0M4  
T: 204-888-6781  
F: 204-831-5675  
E: witness@mennonitechurch.ca  
W: www.mennonitechurch.ca  
Toll-free: 1-866-888-6785