

History moment #6 June 4, Gifts of the Charter Members

On the wall in front of you stands a cross. This cross has accompanied our church for nearly its entire 50 year history. This cross stands as a symbol of the faith that began and sustains this congregation. It was simply hewn of oak by John Warkentin, one of Faith Mennonite's charter members. Modest and without ornamentation, its design is a bit odd—that shortened top piece was the idea of first full-time pastor and also charter member John Esau; he had seen a similar design somewhere, liked it, and requested John Warkentin to construct it in that way.

Today we celebrate the 24 persons who 50 years ago signed the charter to begin Faith Mennonite church.

The 24 people who met to sign the charter were a varied group—college professors, laborers, engineers, nurses and teachers. From all parts of the metro area, suburbs and inner city. Philosophically, they spanned from conservative to liberal, John Birch to nearly anarchist; members were somewhat of a ragtag group. But all were Mennonites seeking a new urban life. At the time, many Mennonites who were leaving their rural communities felt a bit like refugees, not just moving towards the city, but also away from their roots. Some were reacting to rigidity, some to ethnocentrism, some to conservatism, some to a lack of engagement with the broader world. Victor Dirks chronicled twelve separate reasons he was told of why ethnic Mennonites in the city were disillusioned with the Mennonite church. I therefore find it remarkable that here was a committed small group of people who put aside the practicality, put aside the impossibility, put aside the folly-- of starting a city church from scratch.

Who were these 24? I will briefly run through them—you can imagine what their hopes and dreams were:

John Esau was the new pastor and his wife Bernice moved at the end of the summer. He had been plucked from the middle of his studies at Elkhart Seminary at age 24, new to city living, and new to pastoral leadership, and very soon to be new parents. They were excited about the possibilities of ministry in an urban setting.

Jim Neufeld and Carl Schroeder were working to establish themselves in the business world; they gave countless hours as trustees of the new church building and provided steady leadership in managing the finances of the new congregation.

Velma Neufeld, an RN and young mother, organized the first Mission and Service projects and started the first women's group. Her and Jim's daughter Debbie was one of three children present at the very first church service.

Vel Teichrow, a junior high phy ed teacher had many of the church youth in her health and gym classes at Richfield Junior high school; she developed the church library.

Victor Dirks was a university agronomist with a love for debating Mennonite history and practice, and a gift of visionary leadership. His Lutheran wife Fran had a passion for

music and mod clothing. I understand that often she recorded the piano accompaniment ahead of time, and then sang in church to this taped accompaniment.

Volatile Vern and Bonnie Ratzlaff created Christmas displays each year, provided housing for the new pastor John and Berniece, and later moved on to teach on Indian reservations.

Joe and Susie Dick and their daughter Darlene faithfully drove 30 miles each Sunday from Hastings—which was quite a bit closer than their previous address in Warroad Minnesota.

Frank Epp and his wife Helen who organized and provided leadership to the developing church while attending graduate school at the university of Minnesota. Frank went on to edit the “Canadian Mennonite” and write a number of books, particularly about the Palestinian conflict.

There were others—established career women Marie Kliewer and Adina Hofer

Young adults testing out careers in the city: Elizabeth Fuller (Phil Fuller’s aunt), Connie and Myrna Goertzen.

Helen Merrit and her daughter Della, who was the first baptism on the day of the charter service.

And then, John and Hilda Warkentin, the grandparents of Faith Mennonite Church. In a small group of mostly young people, the Warkentins had no children of their own and so chose the role of parents and grandparents to others.

John was by trade an electrical engineer and by avocation a woodworker. Hilda was a shopworker, and a knitter—while able, she knitted countless pairs of mittens for the children of Faith Mennonite, and gave them as gifts on the birth of new babies.

They hosted the first church service. They were the patriarchs. Over the last couple of months I have had the privilege to talk with a number of the charter members. Words they have used to describe John and Hilda: Steady, sensible. Quiet. Good head. A rock. Faithful. Models of growing old gracefully.

John had established a good business in Mountain Lake. In 1946 at the end of WWII, he sold the business to John Janzen – Jerry Janzen’s father – and moved to the twin cities to start another career in mid life. For a number of years he worked for the state of Minnesota, and then joined an architecture firm as electrical design engineer. When they retired, they could have returned to their beloved Mountain Lake, but decided instead to stay here. When John died in 1981, Victor Dirks wrote: “on a lovely Saturday afternoon last fall, I had a telephone call from Myron Shrag, pastor of FMC. He wanted to tell me that John Warkentin had gone to be with the Lord. How is the church doing, I asked. Can you believe it, he replied. We are full on Sundays, membership is growing,

and there is a new feeling of confidence. How good it was that John lived to see this happen!”

Victor went on, “John was the first deacon of the congregation. His faithfulness to that commitment is one of the reasons that congregation is doing well now. I am sure that as John Warkentin, leaning on his cane, struggled up the church steps a year ago, he felt it had all been worthwhile...he and I had long since set aside our disagreements about national loyalties and accepted each other as brothers in Christ; common citizens of the better country of the book of Hebrews. John has been rewarded for his endurance; kept alive to see with his eyes the day of God sharing His glory with His people. “

Hilda, hostess, knitter, faithful to the end. Although she lost her eyesight, she reached her hundredth birthday, but died in December of 1999, failing to hang on for that extra two weeks that would have enabled her to live in three centuries.

John and Hilda, more than anything else, had a gift of tolerance, openness, and generosity. They were representatives of stability. They were the kind of people who could bridge and embrace members of highly divergent viewpoints. And so, they helped to knit together the church that has now spanned 50 years.

I started with the cross; it was the gift of John Warkentin. But there are other tangible reminders of the legacy of those early Faithful members. The grand piano was a gift from Victor and Fran Dirks. The elevator project was made possible by money from Hilda Warkentin’s memorial. And the communion service was donated by Walter and Vera Nace, who although not charter members were early vocal advocates for starting the church.

But the real gift that these 24 people gave us is not the cross, the elevator, the piano, the communion cups. It is here: Faith. All around you. We are here as witnesses to their faithfulness and God’s faithfulness.

Our next hymn was a favorite of John Warkentin’s and many who shared his General Conference Mennonite background: “Take Thou my hand Oh Father. “