Mennonite Missions Among the Oklahoma Indians

By Edmund G. Kaufman*

The General Conference Mennonite Church has always been interested in missions. In fact, this, along with education and publication, was one of the reasons for the organization of the Conference in 1860. The Dutch Mennonite mission work, carried on in Java and Sumatra since 1951, had long been of great interest to some Mennonites in America. Early the General Conference established mission treasures to receive and transmit funds for those missionary efforts.

BEGINNINGS

In 1871 a promising young man, Samuel S. Haury, graduated from the Mennonite Seminary at Wadsworth, Ohio. Because of the general interest in the Java and Sumatra work, he applied for service there under the Mennonite Mission Society of Amsterdam, Holland. This greatly increased the mission interest among General Conference Mennonites in America and helped bring about the setting up of their own Mission board in 1872. They at once contacted young Haury asking him to become their mission worker and withdraw his application from the Dutch Mennonite board. After much urging Haury agreed to do this. He continued his education in Germany, supported by the General Conference until 1875, when he was officially ordained as their first missionary.

After his ordination, Haury was asked to visit Mennonite churches of North America to stimulate interest in the missionary program. At the same time he was to look for a possible mission field among the Indians and elsewhere. He did this, visiting the tribes of the Osages, Pawnees, Sac, and Fox.

In 1877 Haury visited the Cheyenne tribe which had recently been transferred from the North to Indian Territory. He stayed with them two months, visiting and studying them.

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It was during this time that he made some contact with the Arapahoes and upon his return he reported to the Board: 2

Next spring, perhaps in April, God willing, I shall again return to the Indians there to settle among the Arapahoes. First . . . erect a small building . . . then endeavor to learn the language. . . . By fall of 1878 the Lord will show us how to carry the work further . . . (The reasons for selecting the Arapahoes) are thus: more preliminary work has been done among the Arapahoes; they seem more willing to receive a missionary . . . The Indian agent here has advised me to begin my work with the Arapahoes. But above all, I feel myself drawn more to this tribe.

However, due to serious eye trouble, it was impossible for Haury to return to the Arapahoes until September, 1878, and he found that during the delay the Quakers had started work there. So for the time being this field seemed out of the question. This, again, was a disappointment to the Mennonite churches. The next two years Haury spent touring extensively in Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, looking for a possible opening there.

Upon his return from the Alaska tour, Haury received a letter from the Indian Agent Miles (a Quaker) stationed at Darlington, Oklahoma, which stated that his denomination planned to work only among the Cheyennes, leaving the Arapahoes open to the Mennonites if they wished to begin work there. In April, 1880, three Board members made a tour of investigation and it was decided to begin work immediately.

WITH THE ARAPAHO INDIANS (1880)

On May 18, 1880, Haury and his wife left Halstead, Kansas, for Darlington, Oklahoma. There they stayed with Mr. Miles and his wife until they could get settled in an empty government house.

The news of this work was gladly received by the General Conference Mennonite churches. After twenty years of organization for a mission purpose, mission work was at last a reality. Old Daniel Krehbiel, a leader in the Conference, had this to say about beginning work among the Indians: 3

My heart is so full of joy it can find no adequate words to express the innermost feelings. As a river hurst itself against an unbreakable dam, so my emotions in vain seek to express themselves in words. Yes, the everlasting true and all-governing God and Father has at last brought it to pass that the banner of the Cross shall also be erected by Mennonites among the Indians who are so often unjustly dealt with . . . .

After the expectation and rejoicing over the beginning of the work among the Arapaho Indians, the enthusiasm of the

2 Quoted by H. P. Krehbiel, History of the Mennonite General Conference, pp. 238ff.
3 Bundesbote Kalender, 1891, p. 21; translated by Krehbiel, op. cit
Conference as well as of the first missionaries was soon to be tested by many difficulties.

Building operations were begun. A number of volunteers helped to erect the necessary buildings for a school. The large structure, at a cost of about $4,000, was completed and the school had a promising beginning. However, on February 19, 1882, fire broke out, destroyed the building and four small children, one of them Haury's infant son, Carl. This horrifying experience served as a stimulus to renewed activity. Women of the churches gathered clothing and other materials which were rushed to the missionaries, some of whom had lost everything.

At a special session of the Board in March, the decision to rebuild at once was made. The new building was to be of brick and cost about $4,500. The Board appealed to the churches for funds and within a few months the Board had a total of $5,000. By fall of the same year a new and larger building, which housed and cared for fifty children, was completed and ready for use.

During the construction of this building, Agent Miles called attention to the fact that Fort Cantonment, sixty miles northwest of Darlington, would be abandoned by the government and that the vacated buildings could be used free of charge by the Mission. Because of financial difficulties the Board hesitated, but when through Miles' request the government appropriated $5,000 toward the new building at Darlington, reserving government ownership in it to that extent, the Board decided to start work at Cantonment also. In December, 1882, the Government transferred all of its buildings, except one, at Cantonment to the Mission. This friendliness on the part of the Government further encouraged the congregations in the new undertaking. By Christmas, 1882, there were a total of fourteen workers on the field. The Haurys were transferred to Cantonment and the Reverend and Mrs. H. R. Voth were sent by the Board to carry on the work at Darlington. In the fall of 1883 schools were open at both stations with an enrollment of 28 at Darlington and 23 at Cantonment.

Besides education other phases of activity among the Arapahoes were carried on. A hospital for Indians was arranged at Cantonment under the supervision of A. E. Funk. Haury was also interested in colonizing the Indians and teaching them cattle raising. In 1888, the first convert was baptized. New stations at Shelly and Red Hills (present Geary) were opened.

In 1892, the Government ordered that the Indians should hold their land in severality, a quarter section being allotted to each man, woman, and child, and the rest thrown open to white homesteaders. The readjustment meant considerable confusion.
The Indians had to become more settled. The impact of the white civilization was felt more and more due to the nearness of the white man from now on. What was known as the "Messiah Craze" accompanied with swooning and visions, developed among the Indians. This fostered the expectation that the coming Messiah would drive out all the whites and again restore the Indian to his glory and right. In 1893, the new school building erected two years previously at Cantonment also burned to the ground. This being the year of the "panic" it was only with much sacrifice that another $5,000 building was erected here.

In 1896, due to the Indians’ moving away and the new requirement that all children of school age in the United States attend government schools, the Darlington station was abandoned. Gradually the Arapahoes from both Darlington and Cantonment centered around Canton, a railroad town seven miles from Cantonment. The Mission followed the Indians, and today the only Arapahoe station is at Canton where Ralph Littleraven is the Indian pastor. At present there are no missionaries officially stationed on this field, but August and Esther Schmidt, who were there previously, help with Sunday morning services.

**WITH THE CHEYENNES (1884)**

Shortly before the Mennonites began work among the Arapahoes some Cheyennes were transferred to Oklahoma territory where they were kept under strict supervision. This made them rebellious and bitter against everything originating with the white man. When the Mennonites began their work with the Arapahoes at Cantonment, the Friends were doing work at the same place among the Cheyennes. In 1884 the Friends transferred their work among this tribe to the Mennonites. In following years some Cheyenne children attended the Mennonite mission school along with Arapahoe children.

In 1894, a Chapel for Cheyennes was built in Cantonment. In 1897, one member of the tribe was baptized and the following year a congregation was organized with five Christians. In 1894, a new station was opened at Haoenaom (now Clinton) with M. M. Horsch in charge. In 1898 a third station, with H. J. Kliewer in charge, was established at Hammon. In 1907 work at Fonda was begun.

The Cheyennes often talked to the missionaries about their brethren in the North. Hence the missionaries visited the Cheyennes in Montana. Since the language was the same, it was decided to begin work there also. In 1904 G. A. Linscheid and wife, and later Rev. and Mrs. Petter transferred from Oklahoma to Montana. In 1893 Rev. and Mrs. H. R. Voth transferred to the Hopi Indians in Arizona.4

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4 For more details see Kaufman, op. cit., p. 144.
In the beginning of the work among the Indians much stress was put on education. For many years, the schools at both Darlington and Cantonment had as many students as they could accommodate. In 1882, a new venture in education was begun. This plan involved placing Indian youths in Mennonite homes in Kansas where they were well cared for and attended school, as well as receiving first-hand farm experience and training at the same time. In 1885, an industrial Indian school was arranged for in connection with the Mennonite Seminary at Halstead, Kansas. The purpose was to give the Indian students an industrial and Christian training where they could not get in touch so easily with the rest of their people whose influence was thought to be detrimental.

Two years later, the industrial school was moved to the Christian Krehbiel farm, one mile southeast of Halstead. Here the school was conducted on a large family basis, the boys helping with the outside chores, the girls doing the housework. During the winter they received more formal training by a teacher hired for that particular purpose.

The Board felt that this method of educating the Indians for future leadership in their native churches would be very effective. However, in 1896, the government withdrew its support from all privately sponsored schools and set up government schools in which to educate the Indians. Since then, the teaching area of missions has been restricted to teaching religion in government schools and released-time classes.

Until 1887 most of the work among the Indians was with the children, when the Board decided that more emphasis should be put on work with adults. The resolution on this matter reads thus:

The Board is decidedly of the opinion that in the future we should not confine ourselves to the training of children only but that our workers realize it as their first duty to labor for the saving of souls of the grown people. The training of children should also receive due attention and should not be discontinued. But it is an illusion to expect that without labor upon the parents, these are to be won for Christ, through the children.

As early as 1883, definite work with adults was undertaken in that it was planned to establish an Indian colony in Cantonment by settling as many Indian families there as could be induced to do so. Besides spiritual work, industrial training was also to be emphasized. Money was appropriated for the purchase of a herd of cattle in the interest of the Mission as the region was too dry for agriculture. This herd of cattle was not only to

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5 Quoted by Krehbiel, op. cit., p. 309.
help support the work but also to afford a means of training the Indians. This undertaking never grew to large proportions, and was later abandoned.

Two of the stations which were established with adult work especially in mind later developed into independent congregations composed of both whites and Indians—Shelly and Red Hills. The white members were recent Mennonite settlers after Oklahoma was opened to homesteaders. These mixed congregations further stimulated missionary interest in the Conference as they furnished an avenue for first-hand contact with the work.

Medical work among the Indians has never been very prominent. However, it was considered helpful for missionaries to have some knowledge of the care of the sick. The compassion shown in ministry of this kind has done much to win confidence. Professional medical work has never been necessary as the Indians have always had free medical care, and a hospital has usually been available on the reservation. Though elementary, the medical work that was done has been of much value to the cause of the mission and to the Indian people.

When in 1891, Rudolphe Petter and his wife arrived in Oklahoma to work with the Cheyennes, the pioneer work had already been done so he devoted himself more exclusively to language study. Before this the Cheyennes had no written language. Through his efforts they now have a complete translation of the Scriptures, a grammar, and a dictionary, as well as a few other books in their own language. This work with the Cheyenne language has made Dr. Petter internationally famous as a philologist. His works can be found in the leading libraries of the world. James Mooney in a Smithsonian publication of 1907 speaks of Dr. Petter as follows: 6

The Rev. Rudolphe Petter, our best authority on the Cheyenne language, is a native of the same country which gave Gallatin and Gatchet to American philology. . . . By diligent application to the study of this most difficult language he soon learned to use it exclusively in his daily work and contact with the Indians. In addition to his scholarly training by which he is able to preach with almost equal fluency in French, German, English, and Cheyenne, it may safely be asserted that no other white man who ever came to the Cheyenne commanded more of their respect and affection.

The reflex influence of these efforts on the Mennonite church has been significant. It is estimated that approximately fifty persons have served in some capacity in the Mennonite mission among the Indians in Oklahoma. Many of these after some years there returned to serve the Mennonite Church as

6 Quoted, Mennonite Year Book and Almanac, 1927, pp. 35 ff. For a brief sketch of Rodolph Petter’s life and work, see Appendix in this article.
teachers and other community leaders. Two became presidents of Mennonite colleges, namely: C. H. Wedel, former president of Bethel College, Newton, Kansas; and S. K. Mosiman, former president of Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Mention should also be made that besides the General Conference Mennonite work, the Mennonite Brethren, another branch of the Mennonite church, in 1894 with Rev. H. Kohfeld in charge began work with the Comanche tribe in what is now Oklahoma. In 1909, a congregation of twelve members was organized which by 1919 had increased to fifty. Some of them, however, were Mexicans who lived in the neighborhood of the mission station at Indiahoma, Oklahoma. This work never grew to large proportions although it is still in existence.

At present General Conference Mennonites have seven active mission stations among the Indians in Oklahoma: one among the Arapahoes (Canton) and six among the Cheyennes: Clinton, Fonda, Hammon, Longdale, Thomas, and Seiling. Besides these, Sunday morning services are conducted at Concho, and religious instruction is given in the Concho government school.

Since the beginning of the work in 1880 until 1957, over 1,000 persons were added to the church. At present, approximately 500 Indians are church members.7

The emphasis in the work carried on has been largely evangelistic. Each station has its own church where it meets every Sunday for Sunday School and worship service. In some places the worship service is still conducted in the native tongue but more and more the Indians are moving away from their own languages to speak only English. In some stations where it is possible to do so, courses in Bible and religious instruction are held in the government schools. Almost every station has its Daily Vacation Bible School sessions in summer. Weekly prayer meetings are held regularly. Audio-visual materials, such as films and slides, are used wherever possible. On some mission stations, an annual week of evangelistic services is held with some other person than the mission workers as the speaker.

In 1958 twenty-one persons were received by baptism into the church at Canton. Summer Bible schools were well attended, and jail and hospital visitation were an important part of the work. In 1949, the first Mennonite Indian Young People's Retreat was held at Longdale; in 1958, fifty-eight young people attended the retreat held at the Roman Nose State Park.

In 1950, a new church building was erected for the Arapahoes at Canton; in 1951, a building was set up for the Cheyenne congregation at Clinton; in 1955 a new station was opened at Seiling; and in 1958 the new building for the Cheyennes at Hammon was dedicated.

Movement toward an indigenous church is making progress but it is difficult. The Indians, after generations of support by the government have developed a lack of initiative and responsibility. Some have joined the church for what they could get out of it. The Indians have only limited resources with which to finance the work so they are inclined to rely on missions for this. Despite these factors, however, progress is being made toward the establishment of an independent Indian church. The hope and goal is that in the not too distant future most of the work of teachers and preachers can be delegated to the Indians. At Clinton, Ralph Littleraven is pastor, at Clinton and Thomas, Guy and John Heap-of-Birds serve the pastorates, and the Indian pastor at Hammon is Homer Hart.

The Mennonite missionary efforts among the Indians in Oklahoma have been more than worthwhile. The results go beyond statistics. There have been periods of discouragement, but there is also the satisfaction of seeing congregations come into being and individuals develop into Christian and creative personalities of joy and usefulness.

APPENDIX

RODOLPH PETTER: MISSIONARY AND LINGUIST

One of the rare, valuable volumes in the Library collections of the Oklahoma Historical Society is the English-Cheyenne Dictionary by the Reverend Rodolph Petter, Missionary to the Cheyenne Indians, who began his work at Cantonment, Oklahoma, in 1891. The book was published entirely in the interest of the Mennonite Mission among the Cheyenne Indians of Oklahoma and Montana, at Kettle Falls, Washington, in September, 1913, to July, 1915. The author's "Introduction" giving some of the history and the problems in producing this scholarly volume states in part:

"The present book is the result of twenty-four years of labor. Excepting almost three years, all of this time was spent among the Cheyenne Indians in Oklahoma. When I first came to this people only a very few understood English. I soon saw that to reach the Indian's heart a thorough command of their heretofore unwritten language was the sine qua non of our mission work. By living in close contact with the Cheyenne I had a rare opportunity to listen to them and become thoroughly acquainted with their ways of thinking. In course of time, a great amount of linguistic material was collected and the whole classified and systematized in lexical and grammatical form.

"This Dictionary is the first of its kind in print and is not without mistakes and imperfections. The printing was not done by a printer but in our home. This will account for the typographical errors and the sometimes arbitrary dividing of the words at the end of a line."
In early editions of the Bible, Psalm 119:161 was made to read: 'Printers have persecuted me without cause' instead of 'Princes'! In an other edition of the Bible (1832) the word 'not' was omitted from the seventh commandment! In the Oxford edition (1717) of the same book the heading of Luke 20 reads: 'Parable of the Vineager' instead of 'Vineyard'! Such blunders do not excuse ours but they comfort us to some extent.—The printing was done by my son on the Multigraph; The Oliver Printype (from page 311 on) was not available for the first part of the book.

"The working out of this Dictionary was done almost page for page ahead of its printing, leaving no time for uniform correction and review 'd ensemble.' In spite of the limited time, experience and means for its printing, the present book offers to students of the Cheyenne a linguistic material which would be very hard and to some extent impossible to gather at the present time.

"The English had to be adapted to give as close a literal meaning of the Cheyenne as possible. Thus the second person in Cheyenne in order to avoid confusion with the plural form of the same person.

"The Cheyenne nouns, for the most part, are verbal substantives. . . . Therefore many verbal substantives are not given in this Dictionary; they being only a form of the verb easily constructed.

"New words or expressions coined recently by the younger generation are not recorded in this book, for they reason that most of them are still in the embryo state and very unsettled. I have endeavored to give the correct terms and not what young school boys and girls have coined of late under the influence of the English language."

The English–Cheyenne Dictionary has 1,126 pages, size 8 x 12 inches. The English form of the word is followed by the Cheyenne and a number of combinations of the word with others, giving related meanings, in many instances with additional notes on the origin of the words as well as notes on tribal customs, social usages and traditions learned firsthand by Dr. Petter from Cheyenne informants. Some words listed with their different forms and meanings and additional notes cover as much as a page and a half of text.

For example, to illustrate that the Dictionary is more than a listing of the English word with its corresponding term in the native language, is the name Cheyenne followed by the Cheyenne "Zezestasso" and many combinations of the latter to form other names and words such as "ezesenisz" meaning "he who speaks Cheyenne." Also, the real origin of the name Cheyenne is shown to be from the Sioux "Shaliyena" (or "Shal-ena" or "Shaila") meaning 'people of alien speech,' referring to James Mooney's interpretation of this term. Then come a number of origin myths and legends told Dr. Petter by some of the old tribesmen, one stating that the Cheyenne migrated from a distant country in the North; another, that this land was discovered by a man "borne on an eagle's back across a wide body of water, the flight taking four or five days." One intelligent old Cheyenne woman told a story of her own grandmother who knew songs "praising the olden times when they lived on fishes and fowls and did not have to eat 'this nauseating buffalo meat.'" Another story tells about the "great magicians" who lived in mounds or stone habitations "which were beautiful inside, with lions and bears watching the entrance." There are also references given to other works on the Cheyenne Indians that make this one term Cheyenne given in Dr. Petter's Dictionary a valuable source for any study of the ethno-history of the tribe.
In his "Preface" to his translation of the New Testament in Cheyenne, Dr. Petter writing from Lame Dear, Montana, June 30, 1934, speaks of the problems involved in the work of translation, and states in part:

"The Cheyenne New Testament, translated and printed for the first time in its entirety, is the consummation of forty years of mission work among the Cheyenne Indians of Oklahoma and Montana, making possible an accurate translation of the New Covenant of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. . . .

"The Cheyenne of Oklahoma and Montana speaks the same language but with some dialectic difference; the Montana part of the tribe being prone to contract vowels by aphaeresis, syncopation and apocopation, even of consonants. . . .

"The Cheyenne who gave valuable linguistic and other information, helping towards the translation of God's Word into their language are, Harvey Whiteshield and Robert Sandhill of Oklahoma. Here in Montana, Chief Standingelk, Frank Littlewolf, Ernest King, Milton Whiteman, Anna Wolfname and Susie Woundedeyes. . . ."

The Reverend Rodolphe Petter was a native of Vevey on Lake Geneva, Switzerland, and completed his studies at Basel University. He visited the Jura Mountain Mennonites, and here knew Samuel Gerber, whose sister, Marie, he married. After visiting the Mennonite congregations in France, he joined this church, and was later appointed as missionary to the Indians by the General Conference of Mennonites in America. Mr. and Mrs. Petter came to New York in 1890, and spent a year at Oberlin College in Ohio. They began their work at Cantonment, Oklahoma, in 1891. Marie Gerber Petter died in Oklahoma in 1916, after a long illness. In 1916, after his marriage to Bertha Kinsinger, a missionary teacher to the Cheyennes, Mr. and Mrs. Petter moved to Lame Dear, Montana, and continued his work until his death on January 6, 1947. The story of this pioneer missionary to the Cheyenne in The Mennonite for June 14, 1960, pays him this tribute: "Missionary Petter was a devoted Christian, a student of the word of God, a great missionary, a scholar, an outstanding linguist and ethnologist. . . . During his fifty-four years of missionary service, Petter enjoyed an intimacy with the Cheyennes such as few white men have known."—Editor (M.H.W.)