

Exploring the Timbre of Mennonite Radio in Manitoba: A Case Study of *The Gospel Light Hour* and *The Abundant Life*

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On February 11, 1923, the Sunday service of Carmichael Presbyterian Church hit the airwaves in Regina, Saskatchewan over local radio station CKCK.¹ This first documented Sunday radio service in Canada heralded a remarkable era of religious radio broadcasting from the 1920s into the 1960s. Into the myriad religious programs filling the airwaves in those decades would come the Mennonite voice, not to be left silent in the din of proclamations and music. The earliest known Mennonite radio broadcasts in Canada aired in 1940. Harold Scheidel and his Nightingale Chorus in Kitchener, Ontario offered up mostly musical renditions, while H.S. Rempel in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan produced *Morning Devotions*, a fifteen-minute program that first aired on station CFQC in October 1940. Rempel's program was a project of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) city mission.²

In this essay I explore the timbre of an emerging Mennonite voice through two English-language radio programs that originated in Manitoba: *The Gospel Light Hour*, sponsored by the MB community, and *The Abundant Life*, produced by the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba (CMM).³ My analysis focuses on the early years of these programs and the leadership of their respective producers, John M. Schmidt and Frank H. Epp. From the 1940s to the 1960s, many local Mennonite-connected radio projects were developed across Canada. The July 1952 issue of *Mennonite Life* cites no fewer than nine Mennonite radio programs airing across western

¹ Mark G. McGowan, "Air Wars: Radio Regulation, Sectarianism and Religious Broadcasting in Canada, 1922–1938," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (2008): 8.

² Ted D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970: A People Transformed*, vol. 3 (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1996), 352–53.

³ I use the denominational title current during the era I am investigating. CMM was largely, though not entirely, made up of General Conference Mennonite Church congregations; see Gerhardt Ens and Sam Steiner, "Mennonite Church Manitoba," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* [hereafter *GAMEO*], 2010, gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Church_Manitoba, accessed May 25, 2018.

Canada.⁴ The 1955 *Konferenz-Jugendblatt* of the MB community identifies ten denominationally connected programs spanning every province from British Columbia to Ontario.⁵ But the two Manitoba programs were uniquely endorsed on several denominational levels and distributed nationally, signaling their particular significance in the Mennonite radio landscape in Canada.

Ample historical accounts document the presence of *The Gospel Light Hour* and *The Abundant Life*,⁶ but few, if any, have investigated them from a rhetorical perspective.⁷ Using a qualitative textual content analysis, I want to listen in on a particular moment in Mennonite broadcasting history in order to discern the “intentions, attitudes and emotions” of each program’s producer.⁸ In her analysis of Mennonite communication during World War I Susan Schultz Huxman observes that rhetorical choice “cannot be accurately evaluated by critics without taking into account the ideological commitments

⁴ J.G. Rempel, “Mennonites on the Air in Western Canada,” *Mennonite Life* 7, no. 3 (July 1952): 125-27, ml.bethelks.edu/store/ml/files/1952jul.pdf, accessed May 1, 2016.

⁵ John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1975), 320. See also a listing of radio activity across Canada in Peter Penner, *No Longer at Arm’s Length: Mennonite Brethren Church Planting in Canada* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1987), 47.

⁶ Anna Epp Ens, *In Search of Unity: Story of the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1996), 101-2, 141-46; Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace: A Global Mennonite History* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2012), 277-82; William Neufeld, *From Faith to Faith: The History of the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Church* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1989), 143-47; Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 320-22.

⁷ Rhetorical analysis is defined in Niranjala Weerakkody, *Research Methods for Media and Communication*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 146, 272; see also Ellen Hijmans, “The Logic of Qualitative Media Content Analysis: A Typology,” *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* 21, no. 1 (1996): 93-95. A robust exemplar of this type of analysis is found in Susan Schultz Huxman, “Mennonite Rhetoric in World War I: A Case Study in the Conflict between Ideological Commitments and Rhetorical Choices,” *Journal of Communication & Religion* 16, no. 1 (March 1993): 41-53; Hubert R. Pellman, *Mennonite Broadcasts, the First 25 Years* (Harrisonburg, VA: Mennonite Broadcasts Inc., 1979) offers a rhetorical analysis of the Virginia-based *Mennonite Hour* but does not include Canadian programming.

⁸ This approach is explained in Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 122.

of its rhetors.”⁹ My own approach to contextualizing the Mennonite radio programs falls within the investigative semiotic inquiry tradition.¹⁰ As with Paul Saurette and Shane Gunster’s analysis of talk radio, my intent is “*not* to develop a comprehensive taxonomy of every aspect of the program[s]” but rather to “identify a number of core rhetorical elements in the discourse.”¹¹

In conducting this study, I explore the underlying dispositions guiding the producers’ decisions. What can be discerned about the timbre—the character and tone—of the Mennonite voice emerging through radio? I argue that the two programs shared a rhetoric of conversion but diverged in their emphasis on social transformation. In April 1952 John Thiessen, then Executive Secretary of the US General Conference Board of Missions and Charities, editorialized about the burgeoning radio activity across the US and eastern Canada: “[W]e are now waking up, and realize that we can speak; and that we ought to speak.”¹² While oriented to the US, Thiessen’s comments also capture the sentiments of at least two Manitoba program producers in the 1950s and ’60s.

Beginnings of Two National Radio Programs

On February 23, 1947, two Mennonite Brethren Bible College students, Henry Brucks and Henry Poetker, along with musicians, introduced a half-hour program called *The Light and Life Hour* on Winnipeg radio station CKRC.¹³ The program was soon renamed *The Gospel Light Hour* and in 1954 officially became part of the work of the Manitoba MB Conference.

⁹ Schultz Huxman, “Mennonite Rhetoric in World War I,” 42.

¹⁰ Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 23.

¹¹ Paul Saurette and Shane Gunster, “Ears Wide Shut: Epistemological Populism, Argutainment and Canadian Conservative Talk Radio,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 44, no. 1 (2011): 199.

¹² John Thiessen, “What of Mennonite Broadcasting?” *Mennonite Life* 7, no. 3 (July 1952): 128.

¹³ Neufeld, *From Faith to Faith*, 144–45; “The Gospel Light Hour History,” n.d., Vol. 276, File 1 BC260.1, History of MB Communications, Square One World Media (formerly Family Life Network, Mennonite Brethren Communications, and Gospel Light Hour) Series. Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies [hereafter CMBS], Winnipeg. Henry Brucks explains the name change in the *Gospel Light Hour 15th Anniversary Broadcast, 1962*, CD, Gospel Light Hour. Square One World Media Archives, Winnipeg. For a detailed history of beginnings, see John M. Schmidt, *The Lord’s Donkey: The Autobiography of John M. Schmidt* (Winnipeg: Windflower Communications, 2001).

John M. Schmidt was the producer from 1950 to 1963. The program aired continuously from 1947 to 1976, eventually expanding to stations across Manitoba into western Canada and globally through shortwave on HCJB based in Quito, Ecuador.¹⁴

By 1955 “there were radio programs in every province with a Mennonite Brethren presence”¹⁵ but only *The Gospel Light Hour* achieved a leading role on a national level. Schmidt’s personal correspondence attests to this status. On November 13, 1960 John Thiessen wrote from Coaldale, Alberta: “Having heard about your program and the success thereof, I have been advised to ask you about various hints, helps and aids that might add to the work of our radio ministry. I have been asked to take over the directory work and I feel rather lost in this field.”¹⁶ Another letter in that year came from producers in Yarrow, British Columbia, who asked for recommendations about recording equipment.¹⁷ Schmidt responded to both inquiries with gracious and ample suggestions. The national scope of *Gospel Light Hour* is further evidenced by a 1966 recommendation made by the MB Canadian Conference to integrate it as a “Canada-wide program.”¹⁸ Although this recommendation was not formally adopted, it nonetheless substantiates the program’s prominence.

Ten years after the Mennonite Brethren launched a radio ministry, the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba entered the field. On January 2, 1957 the CMM Executive and Radio committees met to deliberate extending a half-time position to Frank H. Epp to be director of their radio interests.¹⁹

¹⁴ The program began airing on CFAM in 1957; see Neufeld, *From Faith to Faith*, 145; see also Harold S. Bender and Diane Zimmerman Umble, “Broadcasting, Radio and Television,” *GAMEO*, February 2012, gameo.org/index.php?title=Broadcasting,_Radio_and_Television, accessed April 3, 2018.

¹⁵ Wally Kroeker, “Mennonite Brethren Broadcasting,” in *For Everything a Season: Mennonite Brethren in North America, 1874–2002: An Informal History*, ed. Paul Toews and Kevin Enns-Rempel (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2002), 92.

¹⁶ Personal letter from John Thiessen to John M. Schmidt, November 13, 1960, Vol. 277, File 15 BC260.2.2 Director’s Correspondence and Reports 1960-1962. Square One World Media Series, CMBS, Winnipeg.

¹⁷ Personal letter from H.P. Neufeldt to John M. Schmidt, November 3, 1960, Vol. 277, File 15 BC260.2.2 Director’s Correspondence and Reports 1960-1962, *ibid*.

¹⁸ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren*, 321.

¹⁹ “Joint meeting of the Conference Executive and the Radio Committee, January 2, 1957, CMBC, Tuxedo,” Vol. 1596, File 1 Radio committee minutes, correspondence. 1957–

Two weeks later Epp accepted—and inaugurated an unprecedented era of radio production in this segment of the Mennonite community.²⁰ Within his first year he developed three programs, one of which was the half-hour *Abundant Life*. While initially offered a one-year appointment, he would stay on as director until 1959 and as primary speaker through 1963.²¹ The program began airing on CFAM Altona, Manitoba in March 1957.²² By 1961 *Abundant Life* was airing in all four western provinces.²³ Helen L. Epp's analysis of letters received from listeners in British Columbia to Ontario records "3,108 pieces of mail having been received during this time [1958-1963]; 2,617 from Mennonites and 1,491 from non-Mennonites."²⁴ A November 1961 report from an "unbiased firm" indicates a listenership across Canada of 15,200 homes tuning in to six stations.²⁵ In January 1962 the Canadian Board of Missions of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada approved a motion that *Abundant Life* become a national weekly radio outreach.²⁶ Thus *Gospel Light Hour* and *Abundant Life*, both originating

1960, Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba-Mennonite Radio Mission/Faith and Life Communications Series [hereafter CMM-MRM/FLC Series], Mennonite Heritage Archives [hereafter MHA], Winnipeg.

²⁰ Letter from Frank H. Epp in German to Reverend David Schulz, Vorsitzender, Manitobaer Mennoniten Konferenz, January 19, 1957, Vol. 1596, File 1 Radio committee minutes, correspondence – 1957–1960, CMM-MRM/FLC Series, MHA, Winnipeg. This Mennonite conference was reorganized and constituted on October 28, 1947. For details and the groups that joined, see Epp Ens, *In Search of Unity*, 92.

²¹ Adolf Ens, "Epp, Frank H. (1929–1986)," *GAMEO*, 1990, [gameo.org/index.php?title=Epp,_Frank_H._\(1929-1986\)&oldid=128504](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Epp,_Frank_H._(1929-1986)&oldid=128504), accessed May 1, 2016.

²² Helen L. Epp, "A Source Analysis of Letters Received in Response to The Abundant Life 1958–1963," Hist Mss 1.26, PF CCT MC Helen L. Epp, 1964, Frank H. Epp fonds, Mennonite Archives of Ontario [hereafter MAO], Waterloo.

²³ Epp Ens, *In Search of Unity*, 142-43, charts all the Mennonite Radio Mission programs aired from 1957–1995; see also Epp, "A Source Analysis of Letters" for details of when the program was placed on various stations.

²⁴ Helen L. Epp, "A Source Analysis of Letters." This research was submitted to Frank H. Epp, her husband, as an assignment in a Mass Communication course he was teaching in spring 1964.

²⁵ "Report of the Radio Committee to the Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba, November 10 & 11, 1961 at Crystal City, Manitoba," Hist Mss 1.26, PF MRM, Minutes and Reports, 1959–1963, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

²⁶ "Canadian Mennonite Radio Committee, Minutes, January 25, 1963," File 2 Radio Committee – 1960–1966, Series 5: Board of Missions, Conference of Mennonites in Canada

in Winnipeg, achieved national presence and affirmation within their first decade of operation.²⁷

Rhetoric of Conversion

In conducting a textual analysis of more than 240 radio broadcast scripts of *Gospel Light Hour* and *Abundant Life*, I concluded that the dominant rhetoric of both programs from 1950 to 1963, while Schmidt and Epp were producers, was one of conversion. In an analysis of the relationship between Christianity and mass media in America, Quentin Schultze argues that

Protestants created a powerful rhetoric of conversion that shapes practically every excursion into religious broadcasting. Protestants have long imagined mass-media technologies as powerful tools for transforming culture, building churches, and teaching society moral lessons.... This rhetoric was an ode to persuasion or, to put it more religiously, an aria to the power of symbols to foster social progress as well as to save souls.²⁸

This rhetoric has functioned vocationally as “a calling to build media organizations that would attract, engage, and convert people to faith.”²⁹ Evidence for this rhetoric of conversion is found both in the two producers’ personal faith experiences and in each program’s mandate and content.

Born in Russia in 1918, John M. Schmidt emigrated to Canada with his parents and grew up on the family farm in Coaldale, Alberta.³⁰ His memoir recounts how one Sunday evening at age 17 he went to the schoolhouse for Bible study because his father invited him to drive their new Studebaker car,

fonds, MAO, Waterloo; see also Bender and Zimmerman Umble, “Broadcasting, Radio and Television.”

²⁷ Leo Driedger, “Post-War Canadian Mennonites: From Rural to Urban Dominance,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6, no. 6 (1988): 70-88, offers a compelling sociological analysis of Winnipeg as a center of influence. By 1961 Winnipeg was the biggest center of Mennonites in Canada and became home to the national conference offices of the two largest Mennonite groups in Canada in 1960 (Mennonite Brethren) and 1961 (Conference of Mennonites).

²⁸ Quentin J. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2003), 11-12, 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁰ “Rev. John M. Schmidt,” Rev. John M. Schmidt Obituary, July 12, 2008, passages. winnipegfreepress.com/passage-details/id-137962/SCHMIDT_JOHN.

a rare occurrence.³¹ After a discussion of Christ's Second Coming, Schmidt explains that "the Holy Spirit dealt with me in a very powerful way and showed me my lost condition and where it would lead to."³² He lingered after the Bible study, assuming someone would realize he wanted to talk about his personal salvation. When the men at the front promptly began a committee meeting, he almost left—but then turned back and interrupted them with "I want to get saved tonight."³³ Their meeting came to an abrupt end. "I received a deep consciousness of forgiveness," reports Schmidt, "[and] this blessed assurance of salvation has stayed with me all my life."³⁴

Frank H. Epp, born in Manitoba in 1929, recounts two conversion experiences in an autobiography he wrote in 1952.³⁵ The first experience at age 14 was "practically meaningless" in its effect.³⁶ After the family moved to British Columbia, Epp was baptized and subsequently became a church member in 1947. "It was at this time that I was deeply convicted of sin, and it was only after a new, genuine conversion experience and a return to faith in Christ that I began to gain victory over my old nature."³⁷ At the end of the autobiography he gives readers a sense of his calling: "I believe that I am living in a growing measure the abundant life. I look forward to a field of activity ministering to the social and spiritual needs of mankind."³⁸

Epp offers a systematic articulation of his convictions in "A Personal Credo" submitted to Bethel College in 1956.³⁹ In discussing the plight of the individual, he places a high priority on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ

³¹ John M. Schmidt, "My Personal Conversion – J.M. Schmidt" n.d., Vol. 1330, File 7 Memoir Pages, John M. Schmidt fonds, CMBS, Winnipeg. A more detailed account is Schmidt, *The Lord's Donkey*, 20-22.

³² Schmidt, "My Personal Conversion."

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Frank H. Epp, "Autobiography: An assignment presented to Rev. D. Janzen, Canadian Mennonite Bible College May 1952," Hist Mss 1.26, PF CC – Christian Family, 1952, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁹ Frank H. Epp, "My Mission in Life in the Light of My Christian Faith: A Personal Credo presented to the Dept. of Bible, Bethel College February 1956," Hist Mss 1.26.3, PF CC – Basic Christian Convictions (Credo), 1956, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

and points to exercising free will as vital to salvation.

As man fell into sin through an act of his will, he can only be redeemed from sin by an act of his free will. God's regenerative energy made available in Christ cannot work in man, until man chooses God to work in him.... Faith is not a mere intellectual assent or a mystical feeling. It is an act of the will, a deliberate choice to return once more to God for his redemption and forgiveness.⁴⁰

The result of this faith in God through Christ is a new life—"an eternal life, and abundant life, a meaningful life."⁴¹ Epp comes to this conclusion:

Having realized the plight and hopeless condition of individual man without God in my own life and having witnessed to it in numerous other lives, I regard it as my mission in life to be dedicated to the proclamation of the message of salvation, as the message of hope and purpose for individual men everywhere.⁴²

I suggest that Schmidt and Epp both lived with a clear awareness of their own conversion experience and named that experience as central to their life's vocation as they engaged in broadcasting.

Alongside this personal sensibility around conversion, a rhetoric of conversion is evident in each program's founding mandate. Executive committee minutes from *Gospel Light Hour's* first year of operation state that the broadcast's aim was "to reach the many people—saved and unsaved, shut-ins, and those in isolated districts, with the clear Gospel concerning Jesus Christ and the way of salvation."⁴³ In a listener's letter of May 8, 1947, just months after the program began, co-founder Henry Poetker wrote that "It is our prayer that God will bless the broadcast as you listen to it and above all that sinners might find their Saviour."⁴⁴ Poetker described himself

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 9.

⁴³ "Gospel Light Hour Executive – Minutes: 1947–1948," n.d., Vol. 276, File 2 BC260.2.1, Square One World Media Series, CMBS, Winnipeg. Co-founder Henry Brucks reiterated this aim in his historical account during the 15th-anniversary broadcast on February 18, 1962 in Winnipeg.

⁴⁴ Letter dated May 8, 1947, from Henry Poetker to a listener, Vol. 277, File 11 BC260.2.2

as merely “a starter” in the project, as he was with the program for only a few months before leaving for a lifetime of overseas mission work in India. “We realized, if we were going to share the Gospel ‘out there,’ why wouldn’t we do it here?”⁴⁵ Early speakers, including Rev. P.R. Toews, Henry Born, and subsequently John Schmidt, maintained this singular focus. A 1962 report written while Schmidt was producer stated that since its inception “this program has been frankly evangelistic in tone, its primary aim being to reach the unsaved, who are unlikely, unwilling, or unable to hear the Gospel of salvation in regular church services.”⁴⁶ The vision of *Gospel Light Hour* was unwavering.

A rhetoric of conversion pervaded the founding mandate of the CMM’s radio interests. As early as 1949, the missions committee of the conference had begun exploring possibilities for radio broadcasting in Manitoba.⁴⁷ Soon after, a concurrent interest emerged in the conference’s Manitoba Youth Organization. The conversations occurred in the context of itinerant ministry and home missions. When *Abundant Life* eventually made it onto the air in 1957, it was the Youth Organization that paid for airtime on Winnipeg’s CKY.⁴⁸ Listener responses in a youth publication include one from an orderly who heard the program played in hospital rooms by “non-Mennonites,” and another “from a young convert” who was concerned about their parents’ eternal destiny.⁴⁹ Perhaps the clearest articulation of the program’s mandate came from Frank Epp at a 1957 meeting of CMM’s newly established Radio Committee. He had just accepted the role of Radio Director for the conference. In an addendum to the agenda he outlines a lengthy series of organizational and philosophical concerns about the radio project. This is how he sees its primary goal:

The message of our radio work should be evangelical, purely

Director’s Correspondence and Reports, 1947–1956, Square One World Media Series, CMBS, Winnipeg.

⁴⁵ Henry Poetker, interview with author, June 3, 2001.

⁴⁶ “Ministry Report 1962,” Vol. 276, File 1 BC260.1 The Gospel Light Hour History 1961, Square One World Media Series, CMBS, Winnipeg.

⁴⁷ Epp Ens, *In Search of Unity*, 101.

⁴⁸ “MYO Bulletin,” 1958, Hist_Mss_1.26.2, 88, Religion DMG CoM Manitoba Mennonite Conference, 1958–1966, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

biblical, simple and clear; and in no circumstance should there be a compromise with a cheap Christendom. The foundation of our faith, including nonresistance and our commitment to discipleship and nonconformity to this world should come to full realization. The Gospel should also have something to say to the problems of our time.⁵⁰

In a program review survey sent to ministers and church workers in October 1959, the cover letter reads, “The Mennonite Radio Mission and also Brother Epp are not interested in just airing another program, but our desire is to help Christians grow in their Christian faith and to lead sinners to Christ.”⁵¹ An item in the survey asks, “Are non-believers made aware of their situation? Are they shown the way of salvation, does it truly share the Way, the Truth, and the Life?”⁵²

Informed by their founding mandates, the contents of both programs reverberated with an evangelistic vision. The lyrics of the opening theme music of *Gospel Light Hour*, a hymn written by Maud Frazer Jackson, point to the broadcast’s overriding content:

’Tis a true and faithful saying,
 Jesus died for sinful men;
 Though we’ve told the story often,
 We must tell it o’er again.
Refrain: Oh, glad and glorious Gospel!
 With joy we now proclaim
 A full and free Salvation,
 Through faith in Jesus’ name!⁵³

A radio message that first aired on March 22, 1953 and again on

⁵⁰ Frank H. Epp, “Einige Gedanken über Unsere Radio Arbeit, February 11, 1957,” Vol. 1596, File 1 Radio committee minutes, correspondence – 1957–1960, Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba Executive Committee Series, MHA, Winnipeg; translated by the author.

⁵¹ Survey cover letter sent to leaders across Canada, signed by J.K. Klassen, Director of Mennonite Radio Mission, October 19, 1959, Hist Mss 1.26, PF MRM Survey 1960s, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Gospel Light Hour 15th Anniversary Broadcast, 1962*, CD, Square One World Media Archives, Winnipeg.

December 30, 1962 epitomizes the preaching of John Schmidt during his 13-year leadership. In an exposition of 2 Kings 17:32-34, Schmidt opens this way:

The devil is a great clown, he can imitate most everything and everyone! For Christ, he sets up an anti-christ. If there is a true church, he sets up a world church to copy it. For a gospel, he produces false cults by the dozen. He substitutes mental assent for heart faith. He mimics ‘assurance’ with presumption, and imitates repentance, with a little emotional remorse.... Listen dear friend, God doesn’t care how religious you might be outwardly, for unless you have sincerely repented and forsaken your sins, you are not one of his. Accept [*sic*] ye repent, you shall likewise perish.⁵⁴

After illustrating the deception of the times through indulging in alcohol, selling the body, and following Mammon, he closes with “Open your heart even now and Christ will come in, let Jesus come into your heart.”⁵⁵ Radio scripts specifically categorized under “Salvation” appear in all the years of Schmidt’s tenure as speaker and director of *The Gospel Light Hour*. All employ a similar language, including a call to repentance and an invitation to receive Christ. Common phrases include “come now for there is mercy,” “call upon Him,” and “may your sin-burdened heart find its rest in Christ.”⁵⁶ Other scripts thematically categorized under “Soul,” “Assurance,” “Revival,” “Regeneration,” and “Love” extend salvation and conversion as the primary intent of the program.⁵⁷

The Abundant Life similarly employed a rhetoric of conversion that drove its content. A common program opening was “*The Abundant Life* is a broadcast of Christian inspiration and challenge designed to bring

⁵⁴ John M. Schmidt, “Promiscuous Religion,” March 22, 1953, Vol. 1248, File 32 Salvation. – ca. 1950–1963, John M. Schmidt fonds, CMBS, Winnipeg.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ A total of 120 radio scripts across various categories was assessed. Of the 37 in the “Salvation” category, 22 specifically indicate *Gospel Light Hour*, and a few are marked as *Evening Devotions*, a concurrent program Schmidt produced beginning in spring 1957. While many of the scripts may have been from *Gospel Light Hour*, my argument draws only on scripts specifically indicating *Gospel Light Hour*.

Christian healing and salvation to the minds and souls of men and women everywhere.”⁵⁸ An analysis of scripts from 1957 to 1963 reveals an explicit, ongoing invitation for listeners to give allegiance to Jesus Christ and to find salvation. A direct invitation to turn to God through Christ was particularly characteristic of Epp’s earlier years of leadership. Out of 60 radio talks from September 1958 to December 1959, at least 26 extend a direct appeal of this nature:

My friend, if you today are experiencing the anguish of heart and soul, the remorse of a life that is bankrupt, this is the good news we have for you: God paid your debt: he pardons your guilt; he gives you a new start; he makes you a new creature.⁵⁹

In a September 1958 program entitled “A Living or a Life: Today Christ offers not a living, but a life,” Epp opens with this:

In our time we have many surpluses. But we also have some shortages. Our biggest shortage at the moment is a strong belief in almighty God. Many people today talk and live as if there were no personal God. If you are one of these, or if you are tempted to join them, then this message is for you.⁶⁰

In keeping with *Abundant Life*’s dual focus on leading sinners to Christ and helping Christians grow in faith, topics throughout the years also included matters of discipleship. This is particularly true of talks from 1960-61, which have a daily living and political focus. However, Epp persisted in his unreserved espousal of salvation through Christ and re-emphasized it in 1962-63. In a September 1962 talk entitled “The Grace of God Covers It All,”

⁵⁸ Frank H. Epp, “Healing for the Brokenhearted, December 1961,” Hist Mss 1.26, PF MRM Script, 1960s, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

⁵⁹ Frank H. Epp, “Your Sins Are Forgiven, February 1959,” in *The Dynamics of a Strong Life: And 214 Other Radio Talks Given on The Abundant Life 1958-1963* (Ontario: Frank H. Epp, 1975), radio talk 20. Content analysis of radio talks included a topical assessment of titles and a close reading of the closing of 120 scripts. Closings were investigated to identify direct calls to action, including emphases such as “make Him Saviour,” “repent/yield/turn to Him,” “disobedience/sin,” “judgment,” “commit lives to Him,” “decide/choose Jesus Christ,” and “Christ/God is calling.”

⁶⁰ Frank H. Epp, “A Living or a Life, September 1958 Sermon Pamphlet,” *Abundant Life Sermons*, Vol. 753, File 1 1958-September, CMM-MRM/FLC, MHA, Winnipeg.

he asserts that

You can present your gallery of great men: Winston Churchill, Harold S. Bender, H.H. Ewert, William Lyon Mackenzie King, George Washington, or J.M. Pauls. There is none whose achievements merit salvation. A man is not justified by his works, he is damned by his works. Only grace can save him.⁶¹

The references to prominent Mennonite leaders such as Harold S. Bender would not have been lost on many listeners. Several months later, in a compelling exposé of political dynamics of the day, Epp reasserts his conviction:

The first ingredient of our prescription for peace is the salvation of the individual.... There will be no peace among men until there is peace within man. There will not be peace within man until man is at peace with God. Man must be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and then be reconciled to his brethren through Jesus Christ. Man must experience the love of God before this love of God can be exemplified in human relationships.⁶²

Religious and Social Contexts

The presence of a rhetoric of conversion in these two Mennonite radio programs is not surprising. Communication theorist Heidi Campbell argues that faith communities uniquely accept, reject, or adapt a technology in light of their core beliefs and practices.⁶³ This appears to have occurred among Manitoba Anabaptist-Mennonite communities in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. Both MB and CMM communities had an established practice of itinerant and local church evangelism. For example, within two years of the establishing the first MB church in Burwalde, Manitoba in 1888, members requested that the US Mennonite Brethren send them evangelists, which

⁶¹ Frank H. Epp, "The Grace of God Covers It All, September 1962," in *The Dynamics of a Strong Life*, radio talk 174.

⁶² Frank H. Epp, "A Prescription for Peace, November 1962," in *The Dynamics of a Strong Life*, radio talk 182.

⁶³ Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 19.

they did.⁶⁴ John A. Toews describes 1910-1954 as an “Era of Lay Evangelists” within MB communities across Canada, one that included numerous “Bible school and Bible college teachers who devoted their summer months to evangelistic work.”⁶⁵ The Canadian Conference of MB Churches first considered establishing a conference evangelist at the 1953 convention and formalized the position with an appointment in 1959.⁶⁶ This commitment to and practice of evangelism had its historical precedent in the influence of Pietism as a “major factor in bringing about a new life movement that eventually resulted in the formation of the M.B. Church.”⁶⁷ Cornelius Krahn summarizes Pietism’s contribution as “the emphasis on a personally experienced salvation, on the Christian outreach at home and abroad, and the use of newer forms of spreading the Gospel.”⁶⁸

Evangelism was also practiced by the CMM community surrounding Frank Epp. Epp recalls how his early spiritual formation was impacted by a “tendency toward Fundamentalism in the church program, which was stimulated and more clearly defined by numerous travelling evangelists and gospel radio programs.”⁶⁹ From 1947 to 1956 in Manitoba, according to Anna

⁶⁴ Neufeld, *From Faith to Faith*, 30.

⁶⁵ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren*, 316. In 1960 Frank Epp included an MB Bible College summer evangelist, F.C. Peters, in a survey assessing the form and content of *Abundant Life*; see “Program Evaluation for Abundant Life,” October 19, 1959, Hist Mss 1.26, PF MRM Survey 1960s, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

⁶⁶ Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren*, 317-19, identifies 1954-1972 as the “era of Conference evangelists.”

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 364.

⁶⁸ C. Krahn, cited in Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren*, 365. See also Andrew Dyck, “The MB Genome Project,” *MB Herald*, February 2012, www.mbconf.ca/home/products_and_services/resources/publications/mb_herald/february_2012/features/mb_genome/, accessed May 1, 2016. For MB affinity to evangelicalism leading to the borrowing of literature and radio resources in the 1940s and ’50s, see Bruce L. Guenther, “From Isolation and Ethnic Homogeneity to Acculturation and Multi-Cultural Diversity: The Mennonite Brethren and Canadian Culture,” *Direction* 39, no. 2 (2010): 138-61; Bruce L. Guenther, “Reflections on Mennonite Brethren Evangelical Anabaptist Identity,” in *Renewing Identity and Mission: Mennonite Brethren Reflections after 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck, Bruce L. Guenther, and Doug Heidebrecht (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2011), 47-82; also Ray Harms-Wiebe, “The Global Mennonite Brethren Mission Movement: Some Reflections and Projections,” in *Renewing Identity and Mission*, 218-19.

⁶⁹ Frank H. Epp, “My Mission in Life in the Light of My Christian Faith,” ii.

Epp Ens:

Evangelism was happening everywhere. There were evangelistic services in private schools, in congregations, in mission churches, at youth retreats, at children's camps and at conferences. Evangelistic tent crusades silhouetted the Manitoba horizon. Summing up the work of the home mission committee at the 1952 Manitoba Conference sessions, the resolutions committee concluded that one of its most important tasks was that of saving souls. Reports frequently indicated how many persons had been saved or had found peace with God.⁷⁰

A striking example of this evangelistic interest in southern Manitoba is the revival meetings in Altona, Steinbach, Winkler, and Winnipeg held by George Brunk, a Mennonite evangelist from Virginia, from June to September 1957. Frank Epp's *Revival Fires in Manitoba* reports the strong collaboration between Brunk and local Mennonite leaders in hosting these meetings. Attendance was in the thousands, and in Altona alone "first time decisions as well as rededications, [were] a total of 380."⁷¹ Three special issues of *The Canadian Mennonite*, of which Epp was the founding editor, also reported on the events.⁷² In terms of Heidi Campbell's argument, the strong evangelistic precedent in the historical core beliefs and practice of Manitoba Mennonites informed how the medium of radio would be adopted. One might say that the impulse towards a rhetoric of conversion was carried to Manitoba through the reverberations of itinerant evangelists who had come before.

Further impetus to adopt a rhetoric of conversion came from the radio environment of the day. James Opp points to an array of personalities who refined the evangelistic radio style for the prairies. These included radio preacher and Alberta premier William Aberhart in Calgary during the mid-1920s, and Henry Hildebrand of Briercrest Bible Institute in Caronport, Saskatchewan, broadcasting the *Young People's Hour* on CKCK in Regina in

⁷⁰ Epp Ens, *In Search of Unity*, 111.

⁷¹ Frank H. Epp, ed., *Revival Fires in Manitoba* (Denbigh, VA: Brunk Revivals Inc., 1957).

⁷² Epp offered a favorable review of the events; see Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, 148.

1936.⁷³ John Schmidt describes how his brother Bill was drawn to conversion after hearing the radio program of L.E. Maxwell, president of Prairie Bible Institute in Three Hills, Alberta.⁷⁴ Through his brother's experience, Schmidt came to believe "in prayer and fasting, but also in the effectiveness of radio evangelism."⁷⁵ Schmidt and Epp conducted personal correspondence and obtained program preparation resources from other Christian radio producers, including those putting out *The Mennonite Hour*, *Back to the Bible*, and *Hour of Decision*, among others.⁷⁶ Also notable is Epp's intense research during his graduate studies at the University of Minnesota into Billy Graham's methods and strategies.⁷⁷ An amusing attestation to interplays within the radio milieu is an *Abundant Life* listener's letter from Steinbach, Manitoba dated October 12, 1957, commending the previous day's program, written on the back of a prayer and donor letter from a couple working with the *Back to the Bible* broadcast in Frankfurt, Germany.⁷⁸ *Back to the Bible* had been started by US Mennonite Theodore Epp in the 1930s.

Emphasis on Social Transformation

While *The Gospel Light Hour* and *The Abundant Life* shared a rhetoric of conversion, they differed in their emphasis on social transformation. Radio scripts spanning 1950 to 1963 reveal distinct stylistic differences between the

⁷³ James W. Opp, "The New Age of Evangelism: Fundamentalism and Radio on the Canadian Prairies, 1925–1945," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (1994): 102, 106, 112.

⁷⁴ Timothy Wray Callaway offers a detailed analysis of Maxwell's radio programs in "Training Disciplined Soldiers for Christ: The Influence of American Fundamentalism on Prairie Bible Institute during the L.E. Maxwell Era (1922–1980)," Thesis, University of South Africa, 2010, uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/3369.

⁷⁵ Schmidt, *The Lord's Donkey*, 26.

⁷⁶ For Schmidt, see Vol. 1244, File 5 Assurance. – ca. 1953–1962, John M. Schmidt fonds, CMBS, Winnipeg, and Vol. 277, File 12 BC260.2.2, Director's Correspondence and Reports 1957, Mennonite Hour correspondence, Square One World Media Series, CMBS, Winnipeg. For Epp, see Hist Mss 1.26, 88. Religion - Co - CC Christian Crusade, 1961–1964, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

⁷⁷ Frank H. Epp, "Mass Communication and Persuasion in Religion: A Case Study of Billy Graham," Hist Mss 1.26, 8. Biography - g - Pe - EFH MA - Thesis Papers, 1960, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

⁷⁸ "Letter from Henry G. Ens to Frank H. Epp, Steinbach, Manitoba," October 12, 1957, CMM-MRM/FLC, Vol. 628, File 1 Response – 1957, MHA.

two producers. On the one hand, Schmidt took a consistently expositional and doctrinal approach in crafting his program. A sermon series from 1955 exemplifies this approach. A sermon for October 30, 1955 entitled “The Passover Lamb Ex 12:12–13” opens with this: “In a series of messages on the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, we have come to the very heart of the book of Exodus, namely ‘REDEMPTION by the PASSOVER LAMB.’” Schmidt’s emphasis here moves from interpretation of Scripture to implications for the human condition. Expositions included cultural allusions, anecdotes, and quips, but were delivered as a complete sermon and organized as a study of Scriptural texts.⁷⁹ On the other hand, Epp’s scripts for *Abundant Life* were topically constructed, opening with cultural allusions, newspaper clippings, quotes from US presidents, and references to poets, philosophers, and theologians, and then moving into Scripture.⁸⁰ George Wiebe, first music director of *Abundant Life*, describes conversations about interspersing music between spoken word segments.⁸¹ Broadly speaking, Epp’s content began with the sociopolitical circumstance of the listener and then turned to an exploration of Christian principles. A workshop conducted by conference leadership in 1962 indicates that this structure was not altogether comfortable for some who contrasted the “life-situation approach” to an “evangelistic” one. Minutes indicate that in the end Epp’s theology was deemed sound but his approach was questioned.⁸²

While a comparison of Epp’s and Schmidt’s scripts demonstrates distinct production approaches, the differences are more than simply a matter of form. A close reading of two programs aired in 1962 bears out this judgment. In March Epp delivered a series of four radio talks on *Abundant Life* entitled “Revolutionary Christianity.” Just a few weeks earlier Schmidt had delivered a sermon at the South End MB Church in Winnipeg during a special 15th-anniversary broadcast of *Gospel Light Hour* on February 18.⁸³

⁷⁹ Program outlines are found in Vol. 283, File 15 BC260.18.6, English Program Formats Gospel Light Program 1957–58, Square One World Media Series, CMBS, Winnipeg.

⁸⁰ Numerous program outlines are available in Vol. 625, File 1 Abundant Life Formats Frank Epp. – January 1960–July 1965, CMM-MRM/FLC Series, MHA, Winnipeg.

⁸¹ George Wiebe, personal conversation, May 10, 2016.

⁸² “Findings of the Radio Workshop held in Altona, March 23–24, 1962,” Hist Mss 1.26, PF MRM Reports, 1956–1963, Frank H. Epp fonds, MAO, Waterloo.

⁸³ Frank H. Epp, “Revolutionary Christianity, March 1962, Sermon Pamphlet,” CMM-MRM/

Epp had been on the air since 1957, Schmidt since 1950. Their addresses in 1962 came at a time when both had honed their convictions and delivery. The two messages offer distinct insights into the place of social transformation in their theological understandings. Schmidt's focus was almost exclusively on peace with God through Christ, while Epp retained this fundamental salvific center but cast a vision for transformation of the social order. Both men prayed the Lord's Prayer with an unyielding desire to see "Thy Kingdom come," but what they meant by "on earth, as it is in heaven" was markedly different.

At *The Gospel Light Hour's* anniversary event, which also aired as a special broadcast, Schmidt offered a seven-minute sermon and closed with these words:

Let us point men and women, boys and girls to the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.... May we so act and so live today that the words of the King, will be our blessing now and forever more, for in as much as ye have done it unto one of these the least of my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Lord direct, empower and bless our lives to thy glory and to that end we pray, Amen.⁸⁴

The Scripture referenced was Matthew 25:40, where Jesus describes how those who offer the stranger food and drink will find favor with God. Schmidt's singular theme that day was motivating and inspiring the audience to proclaim verbally the Good News of Jesus Christ for the salvation of souls. By implication, the action to be taken on behalf of "the least of these" was to share with them this message of salvation.

A few weeks later just across town Epp put forth his "Revolutionary Christianity," describing it "as a force of rebirth and renewal [that] was meant to be the dynamic of history. The Christian faith was to be the harbinger of change and progress, constantly exchanging the old decadent order for

FLC, Vol. 753, Abundant Life Sermons, File 5 1962-March, MHA, Winnipeg; *Gospel Light Hour 15th Anniversary Broadcast, 1962*, CD, Square One World Media Archives, Winnipeg; "Gospel Light Hour Fifteenth Anniversary," *MB Herald*, February 1962, copy received from John C. Klassen, Winnipeg, via e-mail communication.

⁸⁴ Transcription of *Gospel Light Hour 15th Anniversary Broadcast, 1962*.

the new emerging one.”⁸⁵ Epp’s conception of Christianity began with the person of Christ, who came “proclaiming a revolutionary message, ‘I am the way; I am the truth and I am life; no one comes to the Father except by me’ (John 14:6).”⁸⁶ Epp describes conversion as “the rebirth of personality” at the heart of this Christianity, chiding superficial revivalism and evangelism that offer mere emotional crisis and verbal assent as “synthetic manifestations.”⁸⁷ Further, when “Christ captures a man’s life, enters it within, and there effects new attitudes, new ideas, new motives, which emanate in new actions, we have a most revolutionary experience.”⁸⁸ Menno Simons and Walter Rauschenbush, the US social gospel advocate, are cited as examples of leaders who coupled soul-saving with social action, where the evangelist becomes the prophet embodying “the dual thrust of the Christian faith: bringing man to heaven and bringing heaven to man.”⁸⁹

Epp saw as inseparable the individual dimension of salvation and the social dimension of concern and love for neighbor; the Christian church would “champion the cause of social and economic righteousness.” He stated emphatically that

At all times, in all places, in all situations, revolutionary Christianity presents a full gospel for the whole man in the total situation, introducing the principles of the Kingdom into the social order of men. Revolutionary Christianity seeks the answer to its own prayer, that ‘Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.’⁹⁰

When he spoke in October 1959 on Matthew 25—the same text that Schmidt had referenced in his anniversary broadcast—Epp entitled his talk “Hungry-Sick-Naked” and described the refugee crisis of 1949 in Palestine, calling listeners to act on behalf of others.⁹¹ While both broadcasters shared

⁸⁵ Frank H. Epp, “Revolutionary Christianity,” March 1962, MHA, Winnipeg.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Frank H. Epp, “Hungry-Sick-Naked, October 1959 Sermon Pamphlet,” CMM-MRM/FLC, Vol. 753 Abundant Life Sermons, File 2 1959 – October, MHA, Winnipeg.

a strong conviction of the need for personal salvation, Epp conceptualized salvation to include transforming the social order in more emphatic terms.

Conclusion

John M. Schmidt and Frank H. Epp, both strong adherents of their respective Mennonite communities, stood behind microphones only a few blocks apart and enacted an emerging public Mennonite voice in southern Manitoba. The timbre of those early years of *The Gospel Light Hour* and *The Abundant Life* was marked by a rhetoric of personal conversion that espoused salvation and peace with God through Jesus Christ. The two programs diverged, however, in their emphasis on transformation of the social order. Both Schmidt and Epp ended their respective leadership roles with *Gospel Light Hour* and *Abundant Life* in 1963, leaving behind significant communication legacies of zeal, conviction, and creativity. Their weekly programs broadcast a compelling Mennonite voice that found its way into thousands of homes in Manitoba and across Canada.⁹²

The research I have presented in this essay signals at least three trajectories for further investigation. First, given the scope of these two programs in their respective communities, there would be merit in seeing how the communication dispositions I have identified played out over the next decades of radio production in the Mennonite community. To what extent did these approaches and understandings knowingly or unknowingly mark the pattern of future media production? Second, it would be worth extending Jeremy Wiebe's fine analysis of the interplay between Mennonite broadcasting interests and group identity in southern Manitoba.⁹³ Consideration could be given to how these two flagship programs informed Mennonite sensibilities. And third, while acknowledging the contested nature of Bender's "Anabaptist Vision," it would be heuristically valuable to probe these radio programs in relation to Bender's conviction that personal

⁹² I am very grateful for research assistance provided by Conrad Stoesz, Archivist at the Mennonite Heritage Archives; Jon Isaak, Director at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies; and Laureen Harder-Gissing, Archivist, Mennonite Archives of Ontario. Their efforts were invaluable in facilitating the investigation of primary sources.

⁹³ Jeremy Wiebe, "A Different Kind of Station: Radio Southern Manitoba and the Reformulation of Mennonite Identity, 1957-1977" (M.A. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 2008), FGS - Electronic Theses and Dissertations (Public), hdl.handle.net/1993/3128.

conversion and social action are two primary characteristics of Anabaptist thinking and belief.⁹⁴

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⁹⁴ Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18, no. 2 (April 1944): 67-88. For an important assessment of the historiography around Bender's work, see Bruce L. Guenther, "Rediscovering the Value of History and Tradition," in *Out of the Strange Silence: The Challenge of Being Christian in the 21st Century*, ed. Brad Thiessen, Bruce L. Guenther, and Doug Heidebrecht (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2005): 192-95.