

Today we are celebrating 100 years of a women's service organization at Bluffton First Mennonite Church. Thanks to those who went before us, and kept a record of what they did, and saved those records in the college archives, we have been able to reconstruct much of that 100-year history. That is what we're going to share with you today.

But first, a little preparation by you, our audience.

We will look at our history by decades - celebrating each 10 years with some stories, songs and hymns from each particular decade. You will help us sing the hymns. All of those hymns will be from our regular Mennonite Hymnary - except for the last one which will be from Sing the Journey. Our soloists and ensemble will sing new words to a popular song from that same decade, words that explain some of the projects that our women were involved in.

So, in preparation for our beginning sketch, I'm asking you to turn in the hymnal to page 327, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." We'll be singing only the first verse and refrain of that hymn - and many of you might already know that one by heart and won't even need the hymnal.

Anyway, get ready for a trip through history - some of that history we've only heard about. Some of that history we're living through. But all of that history will give you an idea of where we've been, and how we've changed with the times.

So, let's get started!!

(1 minute)

The year was 1918 and the First Mennonite Church building was only 12 years old. The women of First Mennonite were already part of the larger Mennonite women's community - a group that had been meeting at least once each year for an all-day sewing. Sometimes the women met at Ebenezer, at other times at St. John, Grace, or Bluffton.

But, by 1918, each church had a strong-enough membership for each church's women's group to hold its own meeting in its own church building and work on its own projects. So the ladies of Bluffton First Mennonite drew up a constitution and organized their own Women's Missionary Society. Their first president was Mrs. E. J. Hirschler, wife of a Bluffton College professor (and, incidentally, the grandmother of Marilyn Bishop).

At a meeting on March 6, 1919, the minutes tell us that "*Ms. Fred Gratz was appointed President of the Refugees Relief Committee - twenty dresses were made.*" (unquote) These dresses were for Belgian and French refugees of World War I.

In October of that same year, 1919, we read, "*Some tomatoes were canned for the Rescue Home in Lima and the society voted to pay for the cost in doing the work. The amount was 75 cents.*" (unquote)

Here is the list of items made during the all-day sewing on March, 1920: *6 large and 2 small comforters, 4 large dresses, 3 aprons, 5 petticoats, 2 boys waists, 8 white baby dresses, 13 gingham dresses for children, 3 drawers, 4 suspenders, 6 boys pants, 1 middy suit, 1 sheet and 3 pillow slips. Some of these were sent to a mission in Altoona Pennsylvania, others to the Chicago Mission.*"

The sewing project for the following year, 1921 was for Champa, India. Two years later, \$75.00 worth of clothing went for Russian Relief. And in 1925, clothing was sent to "*Russian immigrants in Canada.*"

During this early period, a "mite box" was mentioned regularly. Small change was saved at home by individuals, then donated once a year. A total of \$72.33 was raised this way in 1924. Often, members were report on how they managed to fill their "mite boxes." Some said they saved all their Lincoln pennies. Some saved the buffalo nickels. But it all added up.

So, from the very beginning, our women were sending money - and clothing - all over the world.

(3 minutes)

Let's turn the calendar now to the next decade - the years 1928 to 1938. Our hymn from this period is on page 638 of the hymnal. "God is Working His Purpose Out." So open to page 638 and be ready when you hear the introduction. However, let's first talk a bit about that era.

When we look at the dates, 1928 to 1938, we realize that we are deep in the Great Depression - as well as the years leading into World War II. Time were tough and our records are not filled with long lists of things sent across the ocean. But there were quite a few missionaries who came to us, to tell their stories.

In the yearly report, written by Mrs. Arthur Rosenberger (Elnore Yosts's mother) she says (and I quote):

"As we have reviewed the work of the past year we are made conscious of the great work that is ours as Christian women, of our responsibility in the promoting of the Kingdom of God. And also we are made conscious of its enrichment and inspiration these monthly meetings have been to our own Christian life. May we ever consider it a privilege to serve our God and Savior in this way, and with new purpose and joy press on to better things for God and our fellow men." (unquote)

One other interesting note from records of this decade: (quote) *A mother-daughter banquet was held December 9, 1938 in the church basement. 178 persons attended.*

(unquote) That's a lot of people!! Who cooked the meal? The records don't say. But, since it was in the '30s, it was probably the women themselves!

(2 minutes)

Now we come to the time of war. For our hymn, later on we will be singing the second verse of hymn number 418 - Move In Our Midst. Number 418.

Some of us here today are well aware of those war years. For Mennonites, it was a time for soul-searching. There were options for able-bodied men. The military? Non-combatant service? Conscientious objector? It was a time when many women felt "what can we do?" We pray, but what is enough?

For our women's society, we shifted some of our missionary focus. A box of used clothing was sent to MCC for European relief. Money and other items were sent to CPS (Civilian Public Service) camps. An all-day sewing was designated for European relief and for the American Red Cross. Our focus had turned from the earlier projects in India and home missions to relief work in Europe and South America.

It was also during this time, in 1948, that the term "Christmas Bundles" was mentioned in our meeting minutes. I quote, *"it was announced that 11,000 Christmas bundles had been received at Akron, Pennsylvania for shipment to Europe."*
(1½ minutes)

We reach our fourth decade, 1948 - 1958. We will be singing the first verse of hymn 584, "They That Wait Upon the Lord." Hymn number 584

The war is over, it is the beginning of the "baby-boomer" era. Our church is filling with young couples - their children are filling our nursery. AND we now have three separate women's groups meeting regularly.

The name "Fellowship Guild" first appears in minutes of December 1950. It is a new group comprised of mostly young married women. Friendship Circle was made up of the older, unmarried working women of the church and the original Mennonite Women's group was still very active, but this new group added a new dimension. In a report to the Conference in 1957, membership of the groups were: Women's Missionary Society - 45 members, Friendship Circle - 25 members, Fellowship Guild - 50 members.

Another new name comes to mention - that of a "Home for the Aged" - a new recipient of funds, although nothing had been built as yet. Work projects included knotting comforters, rolling bandages, counting tax stamps, Christmas Bundles.

And, in 1957, the Mother-Daughter banquet was served by - the men.
(1½ minutes)

The years from 1958 to 1968 finds the world expanding with new discoveries and new ways of doing things. Our designated hymn for this period sings of these changes. "Earth and All Stars" can be found in your hymnals on page 47. Our ensemble will introduce the hymn and, later on, we will sing verse 3. So turn to page 47.

So, the world changes around us - what do we as a women's group do? We also change, while keeping some of our earlier projects going as usual. Attendance dwindles, but we keep on.

We still enjoy an all-day sewing, but we also make up tote bags, school kits, lead Bible School for migrant children. We set up a Service Committee to serve funeral meals. We continue to look for new ways of serving the church as well as the wider world.
(45 seconds)

Changes in the world around us continued to accelerate during our 6th decade - 1968-1978. Our selected hymn for this period is hymn #90 - "For the Fruit of all Creation" which uses the theme "thanks be to God" at the end of each phrase. What a testimony to our faith! So be prepared to help us sing hymn #90 when the time comes.

And yes, we had much to be thankful for. Our younger Fellowship Guild was now definitely taking the lead, with help from Women in Mission, while the dwindling group of older single women, Friendship Group, was no longer able to meet. A new generation was taking the leadership now.

We sold "shoo-fly pies" and "nothings" at Bluffton's antique car show - as well as at Mountaineer Days. We took a four-day trip to Akron PA to tour and learn at MCC. Et Cetera Shop opened and took in over \$1,000 their first two weeks of operation. Our

projects might be different, but our hearts and hands were still busy. The world might be changing, but we are on solid ground - "thanks be to God."
(1½ minutes)

Service projects continued to bind our Mennonite women together during the late 70s and 80s. Our hymn selected for this decade is #87, "Great Is the Lord." So have it ready - hymn #87.

Projects, projects, projects seemed to be the theme of this decade. So much need around the world! We have added Africa to our list of countries to remember in particular - Zambia and Botswana - because some of our own members are there, teaching and serving.

Meeting attendance continued to fall, but we never failed to keep our conference commitments. And we kept on knotting comforters and rolling bandages.
(45 seconds)

Now we turn to the 90's - a time when our older women's group was dwindling because of age, and many of the younger church women were working outside the home with little time to spare for evening meetings. We will sing of those ages and stages with our next hymn, "Lord of our Growing Years, number 479. We will be singing all four verses, but not all at one time. I'll try to bring you in at the right time. So you can prepare for hymn 479.

The need - all over the world - continued to call to our church women. Although our numbers at meetings were small, we committed ourselves each year to do what we could. However there was a shadow of uncertainty and sadness that hovered. Should we, this dwindling group of women, continue to meet? Are we really doing any good, or have we lived our lifetime?

But we kept on. We made up school kits and health kits, made quilts and knotted comforters, sent food to Bosnia. We reached out to women from other Bluffton churches and, for several years, we invited them to join us for a spring "Breakfast at the Buckeye." We kept on keeping on. (1 minute)

For our last segment, we'll move from the hymnal we've been using to one of the smaller books, "Sing the Journey." "Now Is the Time to Worship" is on page 9 of that book. So get ready with page 9.

Now, we're into the 2000s - a new century. One relatively small but very vital and viable active women's group was still meeting regularly. And we were thriving in other ways. We hosted a two-day Sister Care Conference with very good attendance from our church, plus some women from the community as well. We helped sponsor a number of youth during their voluntary service and corresponded with them regularly. Each year we took on projects and completed them. And we kept on quilting and knotting.

We are bringing in new, young members. We are finding our way in another new world, with new songs and a new spirit. The Women of First Mennonite Church are still moving forward.
(1 minute)

