

## A letter to readers of *Vision*

Arlo Frech

**D**ear People of Vision,

Last time I wrote you from our farm here, outside of Stemming, North Dakota, I told you that my sister, Dora Frech, gave me a copy of your magazine. You probably don't remember that Dora is our pastor—pastor of Christ Church, Stemming, which used to be the Old Mennonite Church, General Conference, of Stemming.

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Anyhow, Dora told me and the Mrs.—that's my wife, Emma—that you folks are going to be writing about testimony, and about being missional.

I was glad to hear that. Glad to hear about the first part, anyway, about testimony. Like I wrote you last time, it was my grandpa Marcellus Frech who founded our church, and he was a Pentecostal Holiness preacher out of Tennessee. He judged that the North Dakotans and Manitobans up here didn't take all that well to a Pentecostal style, so after studying up on things, and after some pretty hard talking within the church, Grandpa

Marcellus said we should be the Old Mennonite Church, General Conference. That name didn't mean a whole lot to most folks, but Grandpa Marcellus carried a lot of weight back then. He was the founder of our church, and he was also the town barber in Stemming, back when men got shaves with a straight razor. A preacher who says what he thinks while holding a sharp blade to your throat does carry some influence.

Our church's having been Mennonite of some sort was some way connected to Grandpa Marcellus's farm, which is now my farm . . . mine and Emma's. He built his house, which is now our house, just south of the border, and he built the barn just north of

it. So all of us who were born in the house are North Dakotans, but all the cows have been Manitobans. Time came when importing them cows' milk from the barn in Manitoba to the house in North Dakota got to be more trouble than it was worth, so we just carried it on up to Broussard. That's a town a bit more than a half-mile, or what they call a kilometer, north of the border. The name is French, somebody told me, but the folks living there are mostly Mennonite and they talk mostly in Low German. I don't know a word of Low German, and them folks didn't speak much English, but when it came to money, they sure did know how to count.

Some of them Mennonites from Broussard, some of the younger folk, came down to Stemming, to our church, some Sunday evenings a lot of years back. Sunday evening, once a month, was when we held testimony meetings. Those usually got started with one of the older deacons, maybe Elmer Steinle, saying how he loved the Lord, and how thankful he was that his sins had been forgiven in Christ, and that he had been reading something in Paul's Epistles or Hebrews or one of the Gospels, and how it

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touched his heart, and he was praying that his life would be more conformed to Jesus Christ, and that he would be a testimony to others, that they might come to know the Lord.

Oftentimes, one of the older women, like Clara Vanderbork, would talk of how her heart had been heavy, and then the Holy Spirit had led someone to talk with her and to read a passage in the Bible that had brought her joy, and she wanted to give thanks to God. Always, Clyde Beckman gave his testimony, and it almost always ended with a prayer request—that us folks would pray that a friend of his would be brought under conviction. We all knew he was talking about his neighbor Gus Dobrinski, who was given to drink. His wife and kids suffered a lot from Gus's drinking. Toward the end, some of the younger ones gave a short testimony, a lot of times just reading a Bible passage, sometimes praising the Lord for how they had grown in their faith. Back then, Grandpa Marcellus always closed the testimony meeting with prayer, giving thanks to God for all the

testimonies, for the people who had given them, and for our church, and praying that the Lord would continue to hold us all in the Holy Spirit, “for the sake of your dear son, Christ Jesus.”

After the meeting, we would all hang around and visit for a time. I guess there’s something about a testimony meeting that makes you want to be around the folks a little while longer.

Maybe you just love them a little more, or you have the feeling that the Holy Spirit is lingering with the lot of you. That’s how Grandpa Marcellus put it. Like I said, he was Pentecostal Holiness.

**We stopped having Sunday evening testimony meetings. A lot of us who remember the old days really miss those meetings. But you just can’t tell Dora anything since she got back from seminary.**

Anyway, I was saying that some of the younger Mennonites from Broussard, north of our barn, came down for some of those testimony meetings. They must have enjoyed them, because they wanted their Mennonite church in Broussard to have them. That didn’t work out. And those Mennonites stopped coming to our church. The way we heard it, their preacher told them that us with

our testimony meetings, we weren’t real Mennonites. That really got under Grandpa Marcellus’s skin, and he renamed our church The Ex–Old Mennonite Church, General Conference.

I’m sorry to say that we don’t have testimony meetings anymore. Like I said, my sister Dora is now our pastor. She went to St. Julian’s seminary, down in Minot. I think it’s Episcopalian or Presbyterian or something. Dora brought a lot of changes when she became our pastor. She changed the name of our church to Christ Church, Stemming. And we stopped having Sunday evening testimony meetings. A lot of us who remember the old days really miss those meetings. But you just can’t tell Dora anything since she got back from seminary.

That’s why I’m so happy that you folks down there in Elkhart are getting back to testimony. Dora’s a good pastor, mostly, and she is my sister. But she’s only a little bit younger than me, so maybe sometime soon we’ll get a pastor from your seminary and will have testimony meetings again. Emma and I are hoping for that.

Now I have to say, I don’t know what you folks mean by *missional*. Maybe the word is on those Internets people talk about,

but it's not in my old Webster's. Cletus Mayhew's nephew, who teaches at the college in Fargo, visited our church last year, and he said we had mission furniture. But I don't guess that a bunch of old chairs is what you folks mean by missional. We had Dora over for supper some time back, and I asked her what missional meant. She talked for a time, but she didn't clear things up for me. I asked her if some of us going to the rescue missions in Havre and Minot, holding services there, giving our testimonies, meant we were missional. No, she said, that's not it. She said a lot more, and talked about God's mission in the world. "The mission o'day," I think she called it. I'm just a wheat farmer who milks cows and feeds pigs, so a lot of that went right over my head. But it came to me that maybe Elmer Steinle and Clara Vanderbork and Clyde Beckman, and those young folks who gave testimonies, and those who gave testimonies at the rescue missions, were connected some way with God's mission in the world. Call it what you want to.

Anyway, people of Vision, I would be pleased to hear some of your testimonies. Our church is at the corner of Broadway and Main, right in Stemming. And please come over for Sunday dinner. Emma's boysenberry pie is something you won't forget. If you take cream in your coffee, I'll import some from the barn.

Faithfully yours,  
Arlo Frech

P.S. The Mrs. says "hello."