

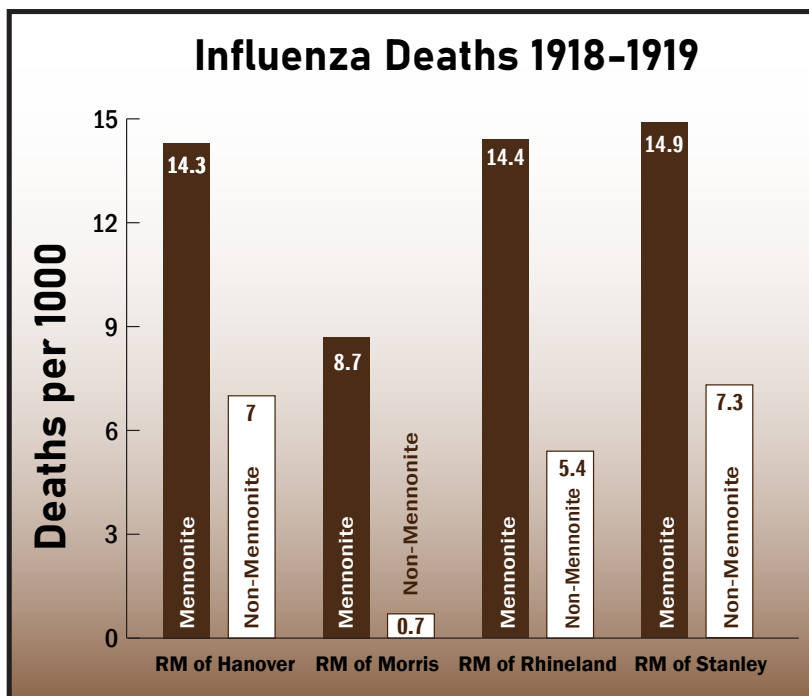
Communal Living, Our Blessing...and our Burden

A Lesson from Manitoba Mennonites

In the fall of 1918 and into 1919, Manitoba was gripped by the 'Spanish' Influenza pandemic. When the waves of illness subsided, a total of 1,216 Manitobans had died, most of them in Winnipeg. To place the pandemic in historical context, it is helpful to note that it was sandwiched between WWI and the General Strike in 1919.

Bill Redekop, from the *Winnipeg Free Press*, writes that in the general population "the Spanish flu resulted in scores of broken families. Families lost brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers. Single mothers and single fathers were left behind to care for surviving children, and orphanages swelled with children made homeless."

Tragically, the rate of devastation was even higher in the Mennonite villages of Southern Manitoba. Why is that? Research conducted by retired University of Manitoba microbiologist Glen Klassen and Kimberly Penner, suggests that Mennonites were more susceptible because they maintained traditional practices of gathering for church and visiting in spite of the government warnings. Klassen notes that "they died at twice the rate of non-Mennonites within the same municipality and between municipalities." Vanessa Quiring notes that the unwillingness to heed government warnings was partly due to the strained relationship between Mennonites and all levels of government; the contentious issues of the time included conscription and control of schools. Perhaps, like Hutterites of today, these communities were also lulled into a false sense of security by their "apartness" from the rest of society. Stated simply, Manitoba Mennonites—in contrast to their non-Mennonite neighbours—died at twice the rate because they neglected to practice physical distancing during the critical early period of the viral outbreak.



This graph shows the effects of the "Spanish" Flu virus travelling through the close-knit Mennonite community versus mainstream society.

Manitoba Mennonites—in contrast to their non-Mennonite neighbours—died at twice the rate because they neglected to practice physical distancing during the critical early period of the viral outbreak.

Can Hutterites glean insight from the tragic experiences of our 'cousins-in-the-faith?' Like early-20th-century Mennonites in Manitoba, we have a close-knit community. In both the good and challenging seasons of life, this closeness is a blessing that sustains us. When a viral disease is rampant, however, it also becomes a significant challenge. It is a terrible paradox that what our elderly and vulnerable people need and appreciate most—human contact—is the very thing that may put them in danger.



Jon Swain, "The 400-year-old Commune,"
The Atlantic Monthly, November 1972.

Living together in close-knit, partially-isolated communities can also work in our favour, particularly during a pandemic such as we are presently experiencing. By establishing clear communal isolation protocols and closely following government guidelines, our communities can avoid a great deal of suffering and anxiety. Should, however, the virus make an appearance in a community, isolation of individuals will become essential. The lesson we can learn from the Mennonite experience is that our greatest strength lies in self-isolating at the community and at the individual level.

This challenge calls for creative solutions best summarized by this question: How can we draw near to each other even as we remain safely physically distant? Possibilities abound! We can pick up the phone. We can go for a walk at a safe distance. We can make and share favourite desserts. We can.... Indeed, we are only limited by our imagination.

Sources:

Glen R. Klassen and Kimberly Penner, "Influenza Pandemic Deaths among Manitoba Mennonites in 1918-19," in *Preservings*, 2008: 24-29; John Longhurst, "Century-old lessons echo for retired scientist," *Winnipeg Free Press*, March 27, 2020; Vanessa Quiring, "Mennonites, Community and Disease: Mennonite Diaspora and Responses to the 1918-1920 Influenza Pandemic in Hanover Manitoba" (Master's Thesis: University of Manitoba, 2015); Bill Redekop, "Survival of the Weakest: Spanish Flu Terrorized the World a Century Ago," *Winnipeg Free Press*, February 2, 2019; Peter Wilton, "Influenza," *Manitoba History* 23, Spring 1992. This bulletin is produced using sources from the Mennonites Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, MB. The HSC is grateful for kind permission to use their work.

Effective Physical Distancing and Self-Isolation

Coronavirus is spread from person-to-person mainly by coughing, sneezing or direct contact with an infected person or touching a contaminated surface. We are fortunate in that, as partially isolated communities, it may take the virus longer to find us. This will only be the case if we practice effective physical distancing which buys us precious time. That time is useless, however, if we don't use it to put protocols in place that will limit infection rates once the virus does enter a community. Each community member can take steps to slow the spread of COVID-19 and minimize its effect. Good physical distancing strategies include:

- Cancel or postpone events with more than the permitted number of people
- Stay home; avoid all non-essential travel, especially if you are part of a high-risk population
- Limit the number of people you come in close contact with, especially the elderly or people with preexisting conditions
- Maintain a distance of two metres/six feet (visualize two arm-lengths) between yourself and others
- Minimize contact with others to 10 minutes
- Avoid greetings that involve touching, such as handshakes and embracing
- Have your food dropped off at your home
- Follow public health advice regarding self-monitoring and self-isolation if you have travelled or exposed to someone ill with covid-19

Ideas for Staying Close Socially While Practicing Physical Distancing

When COVID-19 does enter our communities, the gift of closeness will become a burden. Framed more positively, physical distancing and separation are a way we can express our reverence for life and love of neighbour. Here are some concrete suggestions for safely "gathering" socially while remaining physically apart:

- Phone family and friends, especially those more vulnerable and likely to be lonely
- Remove digital distractions and spend quality time with your immediate family
- Moderate your media consumption to avoid becoming depressed; ensure your news sources are trustworthy
- Stay active: go for family walks while maintaining safe distances from others
- Find ways to keep busy, to be creative, and to stimulate your mind; read a book!
- Maintain a routine, especially with young children
- Involve children in preparing meals and clean-up
- Realize that this is a challenging time: be kind, generous, and gracious to all

Any questions or concerns please contact HSC directly at: hbcovid19@gmail.com

