

Imagining a Mennonite Community: The *Mennonitische Post* and a People of Diaspora

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Now that we Mennonites have spread ourselves throughout the world— parents, siblings, and children living far apart— it is worth a lot to have another Mennonite newspaper, so that we may hear more about what's going on.”¹

The Mennonite diaspora extends throughout the world; seemingly endless migrations over the past five centuries have left a scattered people, but a people nonetheless. North and Latin America in the past century have witnessed hundreds of journeys of this restless people, seeking solace and that ever-elusive “utopia” where finally they will truly be able to live out their calling as “die Stillen im Lande.” This paper focuses on the contributions to the *Mennonitische Post*, a German-language newspaper, by the descendents of Mennonites who migrated from Canada to Latin America in the first half of the twentieth century. Many have made the journey between Canada and Latin America or Latin America and Canada several times, taking the path beaten by countless others across the continents, leaving friends and family in their wake. These Mennonites are known by several

names: the Kanadier, Colony Mennonites, or Low-German Latin Americans; they consist of several groups—the Old Colony Mennonites, the Sommerfelder, the Bergthaler, and the Kleine Gemeinde; they inhabit more than half a dozen countries—Canada, Mexico, Paraguay, Bolivia, Belize, the US, and Argentina. Each group is somewhat different from the other, but all have sought a place to engage in community with lost loved ones.

Herein lies the purpose of the *Mennonitische Post*, a newspaper designed to reunite this Mennonite diaspora and create a new, “imagined community” across space and time. In his work, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that most national communities, flung across broad geographies, are imagined, but real nonetheless.² Following Anderson’s model, the community formed by the *Post* is no less “real” than a literal, face-to-face neighbourhood; it is simply a different type of community, one united by common interest as opposed to common place.³ The *Post* community is united by several common interests: shared religious beliefs, common history and ethnicity, mutual acquaintances and relatives, and a migratory, pilgrimage lifestyle. This community, like the larger Mennonite community, is both religious and cultural in nature.

The *Mennonitische Post* draws together this diaspora of Low German-speaking Mennonites whose ancestors travelled to Latin America at some point and creates a space where their descendants can interact, intimately and simultaneously. This is accomplished primarily through the plethora of letters from readers, which comprise the bulk of the periodical’s text. While occasional references will be made to editorials and regular columns, this paper focuses almost exclusively on the letters. This newspaper-sustained community has distinct parameters and set discourses, with its own values and mores. While it is undeniably similar to the conservative Mennonite community as a whole, it is also unique, in that it is egalitarian and in that it provides a voice for those who traditionally might otherwise be silent.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. The first goal is to identify the nature of the community created through the *Post*’s letter section, that is, the age, sex, and socio-economic status of its members. The second objective is to outline the common characteristics shared by members of this community, namely, religion, language, and a common conception of time and space. The final goal is to examine how these common interests are reflected in the actual discourse of the letters, and how they contribute to the maintenance of the “imagined community.”

The *Mennonitische Post* was started in 1977 by the Kanadier Mennonite Colonization Committee, a committee within the

Mennonite Central Committee Canada (MCCC).⁴ It was an attempt to educate, encourage, and reconnect conservative Low-German Mennonites who were spread across two continents.⁵ It was modeled after the *Steinbach Post*, a German language paper published in Steinbach, Manitoba, in the early to mid-twentieth century. The majority of the intended audience lived in Latin America, if only because North American Mennonites had other publications “to draw upon for information and spiritual inspiration.”⁶ The paper sought to accomplish its goals through articles such as “Wortschatz,” “Der Arzt Sagt,” and “Was Sagt die Bibel?” and sensitively and subtly has sought to inform a people who have had extremely limited access to information. More than educating the people, however, the *Mennonitische Post* provided a forum, in its letter section, through which these Mennonite people have educated themselves.

As the history of the *Post* covers a period of twenty-five years, one might expect that its discourse as expressed through the letters would evolve over time. Interestingly, the script has remained relatively constant.⁷ The only noteworthy change has been the fact that the members of the *Post* community appear to have grown accustomed to the medium. Initially, writers tended to focus on the *Post* itself, but over time concentration on the medium has receded and emphasis on the dialogue has replaced it. Other changes have come with the fair number of new contributors who have joined the discourse each year and thus expanded the *Post*'s social networks. Some readers view the *Post* not only as a means of maintaining already existing relationships, but also as a medium through which new ones could be formed. Johan T. and Justina Sawatzky of Colonia Asuncion, Paraguay, writing in 1977, state: “It is a joy for us to hear from Mennonites from all different places in the *Post*. Through the *Post* we can get to know one another from near and far.”⁸ In spite of the geographic separation between community members, other demographic features draw them together.

Although the majority of the contributors do not state their ages, it is apparent from the content that many of them are older and perhaps have a different sense of being a migratory people than many younger Mennonites. Several of the contributors sign as either *Witwe* or *Witwer* [widow or widower], and those who do not often write of grandchildren, seniors' gatherings, their failing health or even of impending death, thereby alluding to their age. One of the contributors, *Witwer* Abram N. Hiebert, at age ninety nine, ranks as the oldest contributor.⁹ This state of elderliness not only shapes the community itself, but the topics of conversation as well. The large number of elderly contributors may be a result of a few different factors. First, it is presumable that older people have more time to

write than younger men and women. Second, it is possible that as their lives are drawing to a close, the elderly are growing increasingly nostalgic for the homeland. For the Mennonites, however, the homeland is not a geographic location; rather, it exists through kinship ties and a sense of common history.

In many cases the generations, through numerous migrations, have lost contact with one another and are seeking to reconnect as one younger contributor exemplifies: "I have a question. Is my great grandmother still living? Her name is Frau Jacob Redekop. She is totally blind. She is already 100 years old and has lived for five years in a personal care home in Ontario, Canada. If anyone knows, please let me know."¹⁰ Besides elderly contributors, numerous children write in to the *Post*. In fact, a few pages of every publication are devoted specifically to children. This "Kinderecke" [children's page] consists of games, letters, "Wortschatz" and stories intended for younger readers. In many instances this is one of the only forms of reading material available to children.¹¹ One of the regular features is "John Bunyan's Pilgerreise in Bildern," a comic strip rendering of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*,¹² no doubt a reflection of the enduring Anabaptist concept of pilgrimage and migration. Because the children's section is totally separate from that of the adults, this section is almost another community in itself, with its own set of discourses.

Another dimension of the demography of the *Post* is the large number of female contributors. At least half of the contributors are women. For example, in a randomly chosen issue, May 5, 1995, eleven of the letters are from women, eight from men, and eleven from couples. Women have as much right to contribute to the *Post* as men, and their opinions are considered equally valid in that there is no official hierarchy, and women's voices are given at least as much space as those of male contributors. As one historian writes, for "Mennonite women, a strong sense of Anabaptist history and a rudimentary literacy provided them not only with an ethnic identity, but with both the means and the permission to write publicly as women."¹³ Clearly, this situation is reflected in the *Post*, where women approach the community with no more humility or timidity than the men.

Almost without exception, members of the *Post* community are humble and self-deprecating. Numerous writers begin their letters by apologizing for their poor writing ability. Most echo this admission of ineptitude: "my German writing ability leaves much to be desired."¹⁴ After such brief apologies the writers usually proceed freely with the letter. Dora Dueck's history of the Mennonite Brethren *Zionsbote* aptly explains the ostensible timidity of the writers in the first instance as anxiety, but later as literary convention: "Gestures of

humility may have signaled relatively low status or authority in the community [but]... eventually [they] seemed to become a convention. . . put[ting] the writer on a footing with others.¹⁵ Similar to their apologetic beginnings is the need that many people appear to feel to justify their position, as if they need a reason to write, or a reason to enter into this community. One contributor states that: "I am writing because I have been encouraged to write by several friends. So I thought that I cannot refuse anymore. Although reading is easier than writing, without writers there can be no *Post*."¹⁶

Although members of this community do possess several common characteristics, they are certainly not homogenous. In many ways the community is defined as much by its differences as by its similarities. While all of the contributors are Mennonite, a wide variety of Mennonites participates in the *Post*. Because Mennonites participate in this community from throughout North and South America, there are differences related to geographic location, but also differences of socio-economic position. North American Mennonites generally enjoy certain amenities which are considered luxuries in South America, for instance land, social benefits, and overall a more stable economy. In spite of this, members of this imagined community, and Mennonites generally, continue to have a bond that transcends socio-economic boundaries. Benedict Anderson's description of unity among imagined communities is particularly applicable. He argues that "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the [community] is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."¹⁷ Abe Penner of Winkler, Manitoba, writing in 2002 about a recent trip he and his wife, Lena, had taken to South America, addresses this issue of social inequality among the Mennonites and by extension, the *Post* community. He states: "I have learned that even if not all Mennonites have things the same, they can still engage in positive community with one another."¹⁸

One of the defining and unifying characteristics of the *Post* community is the centrality of religion in daily life. This "imagined community" is a church community, a community based on a common worldview. Arthur Gish, writing about Christian community, states that "God's message of salvation involves becoming a part of the new community of God's people. Although personal relationship to God is vital, according to biblical thought God is more concerned with creating a people than with private religious experience....God wills to have a people, not just individual believers."¹⁹ This conception of salvation and its relationship to Christian community clearly is supported and facilitated by the *Post*. Its letters indicate that this community is not one of strangers, but a place where contributors confront, console, and converse. The tone of the letters is generally

benevolent and even confrontational letters are loving admonitions. An example of a conflict enmeshed with humour comes from Aylmer, Ontario, in 1978: Isaak K. Bergen writes, “[a]nd brother-in-law David T. Redekop, remember that dollar I sent you two years ago? I still haven’t gotten a letter out of the deal. Did you forget, or do you just not want to [write]?”²⁰ Another gentle admonition is written by Greta Ginter from Asuncion, Paraguay, to a Maria Dueck, in May 2001: “Maria Dueck, you should write to your mother, because it seems she has forgotten the name[s] of your youngest children. Please.”²¹

A key feature of this community is that it is not only ethnically based, but also based on a common faith. Christian, and indeed Mennonite, cultural scripts of pilgrimage and separation from the world constantly underlie the discourse: “So many loved ones are no longer here and live so far away from one another. One cannot see some at all. Hopefully we will see one another one day in heaven.”²² One of the goals of the creators of the *Post* was that it would serve to encourage the readers in their faith and to educate them in matters of the Bible and morality.²³ John Dyck’s regular column, “Was Sagt die Bibel?” is of considerable importance for this task. Dyck addresses several different topics pertaining to the Bible and Christian life. They range from “Was lehren die verschiedenen Religionen?” to the teachings of 1 Corinthians 11:4 and 5 regarding women’s head coverings (1 Cor 11:4,5).²⁴ An article, by Ed Zacharias, “Onse Welt enn onse Spruck: Woo hab wie onse Bibel gekraegen?” is a subsequent example of trying to meet the readers on their level, in Low German.²⁵ While regular articles are unquestionably important in the education of the readers, spiritual encouragement from contributor to contributor is at least as important for the edification of the community.

Just as the members of this community are united by a common faith, they are also drawn together by common language and shared ways of speaking and writing. One of the crucial—and in some ways ironic—aspects of this text community, is that the majority of its adherents are part of a predominantly oral culture. Not only is the culture essentially oral, it is also diglossic, with both a high and a low language, where the high variety is employed by the writers to the *Mennonitische Post* and the low variety is spoken by them in everyday life. Diglossia, as defined by Nancy Bonvillain, refers to “situations where each language is systematically employed in certain domains or events.”²⁶ While there is a regular Low German column, “Em Plautdietschen,” the rest of the paper is in High German, and the letters are all in High German. In spite of the possible barrier that this practice might represent, people have continued to write letters to the *Post* in overwhelming numbers, seemingly determined to

connect with others. Without the conventions of print, such a community would not be possible. Dora Dueck writes in her history of the *Zionsbote*: "It was the readers of the paper who were writing their stories [drawing]...from what had been read, and in its turn establish[ing] meaning which others read." Thus the readers were "both bonded and bounded [by] those who considered themselves part of the community within the periodical's pages."²⁷

All the while, the newspaper's language reflects the influence of oral culture. The tone of the letters, though occasionally awkwardly formal at the beginning, is generally informal and intimate. The letters seem to be unplanned, as if the writer is speaking and not writing. The letters themselves signify a people in transition, in between an oral and literate society; the community created by the letters reflects what Dueck found in the *Zionsbote*, "a new literate discourse still in the thrall of an older and more prevalent oral discourse."²⁸ Jane M. Danielewicz argues that most people regard spoken and written words as a dichotomy, whereas it is more appropriate to regard the two as opposite ends of a continuum, "where all forms of language fall somewhere on the continuum."²⁹ Employing Danielewicz's model, the letters of the *Post* would likely fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum, an unplanned written discourse category, sounding very much like informal discussion.

Because the Mennonite culture is diasporic, the importance of the *Post* as a vehicle for connecting its people across two continents is evident. The *Post* community satisfies a desire to create order out of chaos and separation. The placing of letters from various countries alongside each other on the page creates a certain sense of stability. Individuals who have been separated by thousands of miles suddenly find themselves directly next to each other on a nicely ordered page. Unlike immigrant groups who have a homeland to long for and reminisce about, the Mennonite people, particularly those who immigrated to South America, have no clear homeland. Rather, their homeland, similar to the community created by the *Mennonitische Post*, is a place of the heart and of the imagination. It exists in the memories of its people, both collectively and individually.

Clearly, many of the contributors recognize the ability of the *Post* to transport their presence to the place of loved ones. Maria Dyck, for example, organizes her letter around the principle of her actually "going to" the addressees of her letter. She writes, "Now I am going to *Onkel Abraham* and *Tante Maria* in the Bergthal community, South America...And now I am going to my siblings in the Chaco, Neta S. Wiebe and Johann Hiebert....And now to Bolivia to Tante Grete Heindricks..."³⁰ Her letter continues on in a similar fashion until she has greeted well over twenty people. Not only has she saved

herself a lot of effort and postage costs, but she has travelled across the continent in a few brief paragraphs! Another contributor, Herman K. Loewen, also refers to the importance of the *Post* in connecting a scattered people when he states: “Now that we Mennonites have spread ourselves throughout the world—parents, siblings, and children living far apart—it is worth a lot to have another Mennonite newspaper, so that we may hear more about what’s going on.”³¹

The readers and writers have a unique way of locating themselves spatially within the discourse. Nearly every single letter refers to weather, and most to the state of the crops. Rains, blizzards, and droughts all allow the readers to imagine the writer and associate him or her with a certain geographic region. A contributor from Germany, Wolfgang W. Bergman, writing in 1995, begins by stating “It’s spring here, mildly warm with a beautiful blue sky...days are twelve degrees Celsius and nights around four.”³² Another example, this one from Peter F. and Aganetha Neufeld in Argentina, states: “We’ve had a lot of rain recently. The land is richly moist and we can work with enthusiasm. In a month we’ll be able to plant.”³³ One of the most pertinent examples, however, is that of Frank E. and Agnes Froese, of Upper Kennetcook, Nova Scotia, from 1995. In their letter they recount a telephone call they received from their nephew in Mexico: “on 28 May we received an unexpected phone call from our dear nephew Cornelius T. Loewen. It meant a lot to us. He told us that he had a stroke a couple of months ago, and that the weather in Mexico was dry and windy.”³⁴ In this brief sentence, the Froeses poignantly express the two most important details one must divulge if one wishes to be a part of this community, health and weather.

In addition to the repeated allusions to weather, all the letters are ordered according to the writer’s country of domicile, and the city, town, or village of residence of the writer is listed at the beginning of each letter. Thus, a sense of geographic order is maintained. Members of this community also seem to conceptualize geographic space differently than mainstream society. They see the world not as cities and provinces, but from *Hof* to *Hof*, from farmyard to farmyard, attesting to an isolationist mentality. Jacob F. and Elizabeth Wiebe, of Loma Plata, Paraguay, writing in 2001, capture this conception of space when describing a recent trip to Bolivia: “We are back from our trip to Bolivia, where we visited my brother and many friends. We left on 4 July from our yard...and by 11:30 in the evening we were on my brother’s yard... While in Neu-Holland, we were also at the houses of Bernard Klippenstein, Lena Martens, Jacob Martens....” and so it continues.³⁵ This example illustrates the personal nature of the world of these people, the manner in which people mark places and make literal geographic location an almost arbitrary indicator of space.

The *Post* has united people not only across space, but across time as well. The periodical in many ways transcends orthodox conventions of both space and time. Given the huge discrepancy in the distances of the contributors from Steinbach, letters written on any single day might arrive at the *Post* over a two week period. Letters that are written over a month apart appear next to each other on the same page, obliterating the distinction between one month and the previous, and making discourse appear more spontaneous than conventional correspondence by letter.

The *Post* community is not unique in its use of convention and conformity. As a text community, however, its conventions necessarily refer to accepted ways of speaking, or in this case, writing. Nancy Bonvillain, writing about speech networks, contends that adherents of a group compel others in the group to conform to group norms. She argues that dense “networks exert pressure on members to conform because values are shared and individuals’ behaviour can be readily known.” She adds that because “linguistic usage is one type of behaviour that is monitored and regulated within dense networks, members tend to maintain speech norms with little variation.”³⁶ Bonvillain’s statement explains the paucity of variation in the letters. The *Mennonitische Post* could easily be considered such a “dense network.” Even though it incorporates readers from across two continents, readers share a common faith and ethnicity, and often close kinship ties. They reflect Bonvillain’s observation that “speech is constantly, although nonconsciously, being evaluated,...always vulnerable to the judgements of...peers.”³⁷ And if the language of the speaker is affected by group norms, so is the topic of conversation, again explaining the lack of variation in the letters. It is almost as if the format of the letters has become a cultural script, where any deviation is considered in violation of cultural norms.³⁸

One very tangible way in which the people of the *Post* have connected has been the sharing of food recipes. The sharing of food traditionally has been an integral facet of Mennonite community and while these people physically are unable to sit at a table and pass the potatoes, the sharing of recipes represents this communion. Examples of recipes are Pizzabuerger, Saftiger Falscher Hase (moist meat loaf) and Kartoffeln mit Kaese (cheesy potatoes).³⁹ Presumably there is no mention of traditional Mennonite dishes such as the East European-based *Kjielkje*, *Vrenekje*, and *Borscht* because the majority of readers would already be familiar with these recipes. The recipes do not appear to hail from any particular geographic region, but come from all over, further obliterating geographic boundaries.

One of the most significant topics of discussion is that of personal health. The discussion of health arguably dominates the

conversations of the majority of seniors. The *Post* is no exception. In fact, references to health seemingly are expected in most letters, regardless of age. Nearly every letter contains references to the physical conditions of the letter-writers themselves as well as their families. Martha Friesen, writing in 1977 states: "I want to report that Danny Funk, who was hurt while working at the sawmill, is already working without crutches." A subsequent example is from J. Klassen, who in 1983 states: "First we would like to wish everyone the best of health, which we have also enjoyed, except for the arthritis in my wife's knees."⁴⁰

Just as people readily discuss the state of their health, they also do not hesitate to share news of death and tragedy. In many cases, the *Post* served as the only viable means for announcing the death of a loved one, especially considering how scattered most families were. Often it seemed that sharing of bad news had a cathartic effect on the writers. They were able to share personal experiences and know that the readers of the news would share in the sorrow and bear the burden with them. Michael Epston and David White argue that "the writing tradition, insofar as it facilitates the mapping of experience onto the temporal dimension, has much to offer those activities defined as therapy."⁴¹ While the *Mennonitische Post* is not explicitly a form of therapy, it is evident that the process of letter writing and sharing of experiences does have therapeutic benefits for the participants in the community. One lonely writer admits that his reason for writing is the loss of his wife: "Because my dear wife has left me to go to a better place, and because I have a lot of time on my hands, I thought I would visit all my old friends." He ends the letter with "Greetings from a lonely writer."⁴² At another instance, Witwe Anna K. Banman shares the story of her husband's untimely demise, describing how he was hit by a truck when, for a moment, he stepped out of their vehicle on the way to Santa Cruz.⁴³ The *Post* provides a place for Christians to grow in community through the sharing of intimate feelings.

Sharing personal experiences with other *Post* readers not only draws the listeners into closer community with the speaker, but also allows the speaker to let him or herself be heard. One reason for the maintained popularity of the *Post* is this unique function that it performs in the community. The *Post*, particularly the letters, allow the individual readers the opportunity to express their views. Not only does the printing of their letters validate their concerns, opinions, and beliefs, but response to these letters by other readers further reinforces the right to exercise one's voice. The pages of the *Post* in many respects provide a more neutral, egalitarian territory from which to express one's views than colony life or traditional conservative environments might allow. Each contributor has as

much right to be heard as the next. The pages of the paper are flat and non-hierarchical; each letter lies next to the other, and unless the reader is personally familiar with the writer, it is often difficult to ascertain which contributors are more privileged socio-economically or even ecclesiastically than others. The *Post* not only validates the writer's right to express his or her voice, but the very act of writing fosters individuality and independent thought, which is not necessarily valued in all Mennonite communities.⁴⁴

Like all communities, ensured maintenance of that community is contingent upon communication. According to Calvin Redekop in *The Old Colony Mennonites*, visiting is an integral facet of daily life in the Mennonite colonies of Mexico. He argues that "the intense Old Colony interest in people is peculiarly that of 'keeping up' on the latest events of members of the Old Colony society....[especially] the most recent economic gains or losses that have befallen Old Colony members." He adds that a "second topic delineates the genealogy of a particular person," serving "as the 'thread of continuity' to bring other relatives into the picture."⁴⁵ While members of the *Post* community do not generally dwell on the financial successes or failures of others in the community, the tendency to discuss others, especially connecting relatives, carries over in this medium. According to Redekop, most "of the families that migrated to Mexico left close relatives behind and not a single family that remained in Canada is without relatives in Mexico. Thus, much visiting back and forth took place in the years following the migration."⁴⁶ This propensity towards visiting carries over into the medium of the *Post*.

The vast majority of letters are full of greetings and tales of visits to friends and relatives. In fact, at one point many members of the *Post* community were so eager to greet loved ones that the editor issued a plea for fewer greetings and more specificity, as many readers were complaining about people being mentioned by given name only.⁴⁷ According to the editor's comment, the *Post* had taken the place of personal correspondence for many people. In an effort for people to engage in more intimate discourse, general applicability was occasionally sacrificed

The sharing of Scripture is an integral facet of virtually all religious communities, and this practice extends to the *Post*. Numerous contributors quote the Bible, write their opinion on a spiritual matter, and seek to generally encourage other readers. Like the greetings, many contributors have been so eager to share Scripture that the editorial staff at one juncture felt compelled to caution against sharing too much Scripture, especially when the references lacked context within the letter itself.⁴⁸ The fact that some readers wanted more Scripture in the letters and others wanted less

may reflect a religious controversy that existed among the readership. Some, particularly those who had been in North America for an extended period of time, were becoming increasingly evangelical and others, like the Old Colony Mennonites in South America, were quite communitarian. Some of the letters are obviously evangelical in nature whereas others are void of any religious content. A letter from Ben S. Penner of Winnipeg commemorates Easter, 1984. But it is more reminiscent of a sermon than a letter. He writes:

I would like to attempt to prepare the readers for Easter..Let us go in spirit to Golgotha and consider the three crosses, one to the right, one to the left, and one in the middle, which had not been prepared for the innocent Christ. Let us observe the middle cross with the dying Jesus, who hangs there for my sins and yours and says "It is finished."...We must come before him with our sins in order that he may take them from us. Only then will we be saved...He lives! Would that he m i g h t also live in us.⁴⁹

A further example is from Aganetha Bergen of Leamington, writing a decade after Penner, but also at Easter time: "I wish that everyone would have a happy Easter and begin a new life in Christ and bury the old one with Jesus."⁵⁰ These inspirational letters clearly depict a more evangelical, pietistic understanding of the Gospel message, where the focus is on individual sin and relationship with Christ. This salvation theology is less communitarian in its focus than the teaching in the majority of churches in Latin America, and in the more conservative churches in Canada.

In addition to spiritual encouragement, the constant reference to Scripture serves a subsequent function. Because the Bible has been with the Mennonites throughout their various migrations, and because of its aged authority, it possesses an almost transcendent quality. By alluding to Scripture, the writer is not referring simply to an interesting book, instead, the Bible acts as a code, uniting the people across the distance. It is part of their homeland, the place where they all belong. Quoting Scripture is a way of referring to their collective memory. In many ways, for these people, the Bible exists in a realm outside time and space; it has been one of the very few unchanging cultural anchors in their ever-changing world. It is perhaps this conception of the Bible as transcendent authority that accounts for the fact that contributors quote Scripture at seemingly random points throughout a letter. Bernard and Helena of Neudorf, of Santa Cruz, Bolivia, writing in 1995, quote Psalm 104:33, "I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I

live.” They quote the verse without any apparent context, as if none is necessary.⁵¹ The sharing of Scripture in itself evokes a sense of camaraderie and common understanding. It seems that the sharing of Scripture in the *Post* fulfills a role similar to the role it fulfilled in the *Zionsbote*, where the “Biblical text, in short, was to fill the cavity created by the absence of personal presence.”⁵²

Individuals sometimes use the *Post* to address sensitive social issues, both in North and Latin America. These letters represent a potential disruption of the “imagined community,” in that they draw very closely from literal communities. Focusing upon regional issues might have the effect of alienating some readers and highlighting geographic boundaries. A sensitive Latin American issue is Mennonite involvement in narcotics. One Mexican Mennonite man writes from a prison in Juarez, near Chihuahua, Mexico, in 2001. He uses the *Post* as a way of alerting other Mennonites of his plight by speaking of the desperation arising from poverty and lack of available land. He describes the isolation and sense of alienation he has encountered from the vast majority of friends and family. He writes: “It feels as if people have run away from me...Please come back. Tell the people about us; tell them that they ought to come and visit us [Mennonite inmates] and tell them that we both want and need their support.”⁵³ If disrupting the “imagined community” of the *Post*, such letters nevertheless fulfill a unique function in that marginalized members of the group are able to present their case.

Economic problems, and specifically the lack of land in certain Latin American colonies, is another huge social issue raised from time to time by various contributors. Abram S. Schmitt, writing in 1977 states that “farming is for many no longer the primary occupation, because the land is so scarce. It sounds as if there are possibly more people without land than people with land.”⁵⁴ According to Jacob and Anna Wiebe of Leamington, Ontario, in October of 1983, unemployment was a major problem faced by Mennonites in their province. They write, “the harvest here in Ontario is not as rich as it was last year, and because there are so many unemployed, it seems as if we will not be able to improve the situation.”⁵⁵ Perhaps the reason that individuals write about social issues is that the *Post* provides a relatively neutral place for such discourse to occur. The complaints and concerns of the *Anwohner*, the landless, are just as valid as those of the most affluent land owners.

In conclusion, the *Mennonitische Post* has created a community of conservative Low German-speaking Mennonites who traveled to and from Latin America. It has drawn writers from the vast diaspora of Mennonites, and has brought them together in an imagined community by providing a tangible space where they can visit, share

news of hope, of loss and tragedy, and of the arbitrarily chosen facts of everyday monotony. Though these people are of different ages and genders, live in different countries, and have different conceptions of salvation and technology, they come together to engage in community once every two weeks. Many have been a part of this community since the *Post's* inception in 1977, while others are still tentatively seeking admittance through hesitant letters. To the outside observer, the periodical might appear to offer little; its conventions of speech and cultural scripts of weather, crops, and greetings to a seemingly endless, faceless list of individuals, seem to make for lackluster reading. However, the *Post* is not meant for outside observers. For the adherents of this community this is the story of their lives, and the ostensibly arbitrary details of weather and names are the threads that sustain the community. In many respects, this community is not imagined at all. Its members are just as tangible, their experiences just as recognized, their burdens as shared, and their voices at least as loud, as if every member of this community lived in the same literal village and sat at the same table eating "Saftiger Falscher Hase" and "Kartoffeln mit Kaese."

Notes

- ¹ Herman K. Loewen, 17 August 1977, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6. "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined."
- ³ David Clark, *Basic Communities: Towards an Alternative Society* (London: SPCK, 1977), 230.
- ⁴ See: Myron Dyck, "A History of the *Mennonitische Post*," presented at the "Return of the Kanadier" conference, 3 October 2002.
- ⁵ F. H. Epp, 20. Mai, Waterloo, Ontario, letter from *Post* committee, printed in *Mennonitische Post*, Issue No. 1, Vol. I, 21. Mai, 1977. "Es ist der Wuensch aller dasz die Post unsere Leute so weit und breit zerstreut, wieder verbinden wird und dasz sie in ihrem Glauben am Herrn und in ihrem Leben fuer den Herrn gestaerkt werden."
- ⁶ Abe Warkentin, 19 June, 1976, *Mennonitische Post* Sub-Committee of MCC meeting.
- ⁷ Because of the immense volume of the material, the methodology used for the purposes of this paper was a random sampling of issues spanning the entire history of the *Post*. For this essay the years included 1977, 1978, 1983, 1984, 1995, 2001, and 2002.
- ⁸ Joh. T. and Justina Sawatzky, 15. December, 1977.
- ⁹ Abram N. Hiebert, 1 Feb. 2002, *Mennonitische Post*, 7.
- ¹⁰ S.R.P., 26 Mai, 1977, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ¹¹ MCC video, 1995.
- ¹² "John Bunyan's Pilgerreise," *Mennonitische Post*, 16. Juni 1995, 13.

- ¹³ Royden Loewen, *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2001), 53.
- ¹⁴ John K Schellenberg, 5 Mai, 1977, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ¹⁵ Dueck, 103.
- ¹⁶ Name unknown, 21Sept. '01, 7, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ¹⁷ Anderson, 7.
- ¹⁸ Abe and Lena Penner, Nummer 22, 15 Maerz, 2002, *Mennonitische Post*, 2.
- ¹⁹ Arthur Gish, *Living in Christian Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 23.
- ²⁰ Isaak K. Bergen, Aylmer, Ontario, 7 April, 1978, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ²¹ Greta Ginter, Asuncion, Paraguay, 18 Mai, 2001, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ²² Franz und Maria Bueckert, 5 Mai, 1995, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ²³ Abe Warkentin, *Mennonitische Post* meeting minutes June 19, 1976, "The purpose of a Mennonite newspaper would be multifold. 1. It would provide spiritual guidance and information. This should be the prime purpose of the paper. Religious articles should be general and positive."
- ²⁴ John Dyck, "Was Sagt die Bibel, 5 Okt., 2001, 7, 21. Sept. 2001, 7, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ²⁵ Ed Zacharias, "Onnse Welt enn onnse Spruck, 4 Jan. 2002, *Mennonitische Post*, Nummer 17.
- ²⁶ Nancy Bonvillain, *Language, Culture, and Communication: The Meaning if Messages*, 2nd ed (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997), 312.
- ²⁷ Dora Dueck, *Print, Text, Community: A Study of Communication in the Zionsbote, A Mennonite Weekly, Between 1884-1906*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 2001), 10.
- ²⁸ Dueck, 66.
- ²⁹ Jane M. Danielewicz, "The Interaction Between Text and Context: A Study of How Adults and Children use Spoken and Written Language in Four Contexts," *The Development of Oral and Written Language in Social Contexts*, Vol. XIII, series *Advances in Discourse Processes* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1984), 243.
- ³⁰ Frau Maria Dyck, 17 Aug., 1977, *Mennonitische Post*, 5.
- ³¹ Herman K. Loewen, 17 August 1977, *Mennonitische Post*, 5.
- ³² Wolfgang W. Bergman, 2 Juni, 1995, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ³³ Peter F. and Aganetha Neufeld, 23 April, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ³⁴ Frank E. and Agnes Froese, Upper Kennetcook, Nova Scotia, 7 Juli, 1995, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ³⁵ Jacob F. and Elizabeth Wiebe, Loma Plata, Paraguay, 7 Sept 2001, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ³⁶ Bonvillain, 3.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ White and Epston write that "when engaging in language we are not engaging in a neutral activity. There exists a stock of culturally available discourses that are considered appropriate and relevant to the expression or representation of particular aspects of experience." White and Epston, 27.
- ³⁹ Contributor unknown, Nummer 11, 5 Okt, 2001, 7 and Nummer 18, 18 Jan. 2002, 6, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ⁴⁰ Martha Friesen, 1 September 1977, and J and H Klassen, 18 November, 1983, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ⁴¹ Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: WW Norton and Co, 1990), 36.
- ⁴² J. Wieler, Menn Post, 20 Mai, 1983, *Mennonitische Post* 9.
- ⁴³ Anna K. Banman, Nummer 20, 15 Feb., 2002, *Mennonitische Post*, Jahrgang 25, 5.
- ⁴⁴ Dueck, 67.
- ⁴⁵ Redekop, 194.
- ⁴⁶ Calvin Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969) 20.
- ⁴⁷ Schriftleitung, *Mennonitische Post*, 21 Sept. 2001, *Mennonitische Post*, 15.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.

- ⁴⁹ Ben S. Penner, Winnipeg, 19 April 1984, *Mennonitische Post*.
- ⁵⁰ Aganetha Bergen, Leamington, 10 April, 1995, *Mennonitische Post*
- ⁵¹ Bernhard and Helena Neudorf , Freitag, 7 Juli 1995, Kolonie Las Piedras I, Bolivien, Santa Cruz Bolivien, *Mennonitische Post*. "An die Liebe Post! Das Wetter ist warm und nass, wenn Suedwind kommt, fuehlt es sich kalt, aber frieren tut es hier in dieser Kolonie nur selten. . . 'Fuelle uns fruehe mit deiner Gnade, so wollen wir ruehmen und froehlich sein unser Leben lang.'
- ⁵² Dueck, 91.
- ⁵³ "Mennonit berichtet aus dem Gefaengnis in Juarez," Abram Friesen, *Mennonitische Post*, 18 Mai 2001, 17.
- ⁵⁴ Abram S. Schmitt, 2 Juni 1977, *Mennonitische Post*, 7.
- ⁵⁵ Jacob und Anna Wiebe, 22 Juli, 1983, *Mennonitische Post*.