

Foreword:

The *Journal of Mennonite Studies* for 2009 focuses on the issue of “wealth and poverty” in Mennonite society, past and present. Money, the end result of an abstract process of ascribing value to an object or service, provides humans with power over one another, and power brings conflict and social differentiation, as well as cultural creativity and moral query. The papers in the *JMS Forum* section arise from this discourse, and in particular from a scholarly conference held on 9 and 10 October 2008 at the University of Winnipeg. The sixth in a series dubbed “Divergent Voices of Canadian Mennonites” (DVCM) and funded in large part by MCC Canada, this conference featured some 20 papers from a variety of geographies, time periods and points of view, a dozen of which are published here. Significant other papers presented at the conference – by Piet Visser, Anna Voolstra, Carel Roessingh, Lauren Harder, Patricia Harms, Paul Redekop, Janis Thiessen, and Royden Loewen – will be published in other venues or are works-in-progress. Sadly, armed conflict arising from social injustice made Hector Mondragon’s appearance at the conference unsafe for him.

The idea of a conference on the thorny issue of money, wealth and poverty was first suggested by Dr. James Urry some years ago, so it was fitting that he be invited to offer the keynote address, a significantly revised version of which is reproduced here as the lead article. Urry argues that in the Dutch and Dutch-Russian Mennonite experience rapid rise in wealth brought internal differentiation in the community and closer association between secluded Mennonites and the wider society. A dynamic cultural interaction developed in the matrix of biblical teaching on simplicity and charity, inherited peasant ways

and emerging capitalist opportunities, and times of loss in the context of persecution, war or migration. Urry points out that the standard dichotomy of rural and urban in Mennonite history is contradicted by a dynamic interaction with an urban-centered capitalism.

Similar observations appear in three other papers on the Dutch Mennonite experience. Mary Sprunger argues that early seventeenth century Dutch Waterlander Mennonites had come to participate so fully in capitalism that becoming a Mennonite no longer was a cause for lost status; careful research suggests that oftentimes well-to-do Dutch citizens became Mennonite, either through baptism late in life or through marriage. Karl Koop introduces the thinking of seventeenth century Dutch Mennonite theologian Pieter Pietersz, a well known critic of superabundance in his day; Pietersz denounced a capitalist-driven impulse of greed, believing it contradicted both the inner life of the spirit and an outer discipleship. Yme Kuiper and Harm Nijboer focus on the apex of this wealth and attenuating cultural transformation; they consider times in the late eighteenth century when Frisian Mennonites in the Dutch republic increasingly defined themselves in public as a people of “virtue, taste and a civilized education”, in this case exhibited by a collection of expensive art works among Mennonites from Harlingen.

The next three papers examine the Mennonite experience in north German and Russian contexts. Mark Jantzen studies Mennonites in the Vistula Delta in Poland/Prussia, tracing how the state requirement that Mennonites pay a special military exemption tax ironically raised the power of Mennonite church ‘Elders’, which already had been high given the tradition of selecting Elders from among the wealthiest of the farmers. John Staples takes the narrative into Imperial Russia and employing new research of the Peter Braun Archive describes the crucial role played by rural reformer, Johann Cornies, in introducing a system of easily-accessible credit or nascent banking, to the rural economy of Molochna Colony. Reina Neufeldt brings a cultural analysis to the common, but understudied, theme of economic loss following revolution, war and famine in the Soviet Union; she shows how narratives during these times of loss reasserted the Mennonites’ sense of ethical worth and peoplehood.

The next four papers consider these themes in the Americas. Two of the papers are analytical in nature. Werner Franz employs the thinking of John Howard Yoder to evaluate the business-based philanthropic work of a Mennonite organization in Paraguay, CODIPSA, and argues that the Christian church and business can possess a complimentary ethic. Travis Kroeker reviews a number of ethical, theological and historical works on Mennonites and the economy, and concludes that well known calls for a messianic economy may well find a precedent

in traditionalist societies faulted for being isolationist and out of touch with modern realities. In two personal writings Hugo Neufeld and Wally Kroeker report on their own experiences of working with issues of poverty, albeit from two very different perspectives. Neufeld recounts a sojourn among the socially disadvantaged in Hamilton, Ontario while in the employ of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Kroeker who works for Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) reflects on its work in “wealth creation.”

Three final papers introduce a diversity of disciplines and themes. Edna Froese considers the process of reading fiction through a “hermeneutics of devotion,” asking how sets of “poetic choices” in David Elias’s novel, *Sunday Afternoon*, reflect a particular embrace of religious thought. Priscilla Reimer brings together themes of sexuality and church discipline in Blumenort, Manitoba, and considers the meaning of forgiveness, betrayal, belonging and justice. Judith Klassen explores the ethnomusicology among Low German Mennonite families in northern Mexico, arguing that although music can unify community life, defiant music making among families also serves to challenge community norms and structures.

As always a rich array of book reviews, all testimony to a remarkable literary and scholarly energy among scholars of Mennonites and Mennonite writers, concludes the volume. I am deeply grateful to Kathleen Venema and Brian Froese, *JMS* book review editors, for their task in soliciting reviewers and presenting their work.

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Respectfully submitted,
Royden Loewen, editor

