

Foreword

The major section in this issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* stems from the “Ex-Mennonite/Near Mennonite” history conference held at the University of Winnipeg on October 3 and 4, 2014 and sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. It sought to address a fundamental aspect of our rapidly changing society, one given to more fluid identities, including those arising from Mennonites leaving the churches or belief systems of their youth or conversion for other religious or secular worlds.

The first two papers consider two cultural poles of experience among Mennonites common in English North America. Kate Bowler considers the way in which the prosperity gospel, apparent in many North American, non-denominational, urban mega-churches such as Springs in Winnipeg, has attracted a disproportionate number of conservative Mennonite and Hutterite families who exchanged a “tired” gospel of humility and simplicity for an “uplifting” one of “health and wealth.” Susie Fisher also traces the religious trajectory of urban Mennonites desiring at once a non-ethnic and a reinvigorated religious experience, albeit within a liturgical context; she observes it, with references to the large percentage of members at St. Margaret’s Anglican Church in Winnipeg and set in an open and modern society, an “emergent” identity that is “neither Anglican nor Mennonite.”

The second set of papers considers the process by which converts or the descendants of converts in specific Mennonite mission fields leave their churches, either to revert to former religious groups, or to embrace secular worldviews. Jim Pankratz,

basing a study on his major research initiative into the history of Mennonite Brethren missions in India, considers the process by which a people marginalized by both caste and religion are torn between a faith identity and deeply rooted social and cultural realities. Richard Lougheed analyses the recent decline of the Mennonite presence in Quebec, one which had grown rapidly as a result of missionary activity in the 1960s but has bumped into trends of secularization and evangelical Protestant forces in recent times.

The final three papers in this section consider remarkably diverse themes of religious re-identification, ones based on migration, sexuality and theology. In each study, well-established Mennonite religious identities are challenged and troubled. Christina Barwich traces the history of *Aussiedler* Mennonite migrants who recall a history of persecution, but have especially found old, simple categories of “believer” and “non-believer” challenged in open and modern Germany and then severely contested in Canada where a critical mass of conservative, evangelical immigrant communities have sought to reassert old dichotomies. Alicia Dueck-Read reports on an aspect of her graduate thesis on sexuality within the LGBTQ community in Winnipeg, especially the way in which evolving and sometimes ambiguous sexual identities contest a “normative” heterosexual, ethno-religious “performativity.” In a theological treatise, Paul Martens, a professor of religion at Baylor University, also questions well-established Mennonite identities: he argues that leading twentieth century Mennonite theologians – Bender, Yoder and Weaver – were in effect “near Mennonites” as they engaged in an anthropocentric distillation of a biblically based Anabaptism.

In the “Reflections” section, four conference presenters offer their personal narratives of faith journeys from the Mennonite world, to embrace Islam, Atheism and various forms of Christianity. Elma Harder speaks of leaving her close-knit Mennonite world in Saskatchewan to marry a Muslim man and eventually accepting Islam as the true faith, an “enlightenment” rather than a conversion she says, and one that directed her into a prominent leadership role as a Muslim educator. Peter Erb recalls his shift from an Amish and Mennonite world into the complexities of Catholic theology decades ago and his more recent intellectual consideration of the very foundation of belief within a world beyond Catholicism. Abe Funk speaks about his family’s history in the Old Colony and Sommerfelder Mennonite churches depicting a departure from an old “dearth of spirituality” into a “life giving” evangelical Christianity, ultimately leading Funk to become a

national Baptist leader. Lukas Thiessen recalls his teenaged commitment to Christianity and deep involvement in his church, and then his “involuntary” pathway to unbelief, albeit without anger or bitterness or desire to abandon the Anabaptist ethos of his youth.

The general research paper section by happenstance considers some of the very themes outlined above. In William Smith’s paper, we move into the “Deep South” of the United States to visit a Beachy Amish Mennonite community that, while maintaining a number of plain customs, has found a way of breathing new life into its congregation by embracing elements of both evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Janis Thiessen offers a chapter on her oral history of a North American labour history by exploring a variety of unconventional religious processes by which Mennonites are marginalized or fear marginalization within their congregations. David Rempel Smucker’s case study of the Mennonite pavilion at Winnipeg’s multicultural Folklorama festival in the 1980s outlines the furious debate this exhibition created over the question of whether the term “Mennonite” could include an ethnic dimension. Tanja Pasil presents a similar dynamic in her close study of the ‘horse and buggy’ Old Colony community of Shipyard, Belize, in which evangelicalism has questioned the value of old “plain” customs, and in her case an anti-modern religiosity.

The book review section reports as always on the remarkably vibrant fields of Mennonite literature and history. The literature section leads off with two heralded accounts of suicide, while the history section includes works on Amish, Hutterites and Latina/o Mennonites. Once again, we offer much gratitude to Rosmarin Heidenreich and Brian Froese, our unflappable book review editors for their untiring work.

Many thanks, too, to Robert Zacharias for his expeditious role as Associate Editor, and Andrea Dyck for her committed work in copy-editing and layout.

Finally, I hope you enjoy the new look of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, meant to add ‘colour’ to the central theme and an on-cover announcement of that theme. It marks the first change of cover since Dr. Harry Loewen, the *Journal’s* founding editor, introduced a graphic on the cover of the 1990 edition, twenty-five years ago.

Royden Loewen, editor