

Reflections on Mennonite Studies at a Secular University

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Canadian Mennonites in an Urban Environment

More than half of Canada's Mennonites live in cities and are represented in all occupations and professions. Their agricultural past is for many of them a distant memory. Very few of them dream of moonlit Russian villages on the steppes, of which Fritz Senn and other Mennonite poets wrote before the Second World War. Not only have Canadian Mennonites moved to large city centres like Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver, they have also contributed directly to the growth and cultural development of some of those cities. For example, the growth of cities like Kitchener-Waterloo and Abbotsford, which began as small Mennonite communities, and Winnipeg, where Mennonites began as truck farmers in North and East Kildonan, benefited greatly from the presence of Mennonites in those areas.

The urban society in which Mennonites live and work is, of course, largely secular. According to Harvey Cox in *The Secular City* (1965), urban secular society is characterized by individual freedom, social fragmentation, loss of religious faith, relativization of moral values, predominance of science and technology, and an education which

generally excludes religion. Many observers in the 1960's and 1970's welcomed this process of secularization. It freed the individual from burdensome customs, traditions and values, and helped people to think for themselves. Even Christians were encouraged to communicate their faith in non-religious terms, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer had suggested. Institutional religion was on the decline, it was claimed, and the material, scientific and technological age was upon us. However, Cox's optimism about secularization would prove to be more than somewhat overstated.

Toward the end of the twentieth century sociologists and religious thinkers came to realize that while secularism seemed well entrenched, spirituality, religious faith, and even some religious institutions were experiencing a revival. Writing in 1995, Cox confessed: "Nearly three decades ago I wrote a book, *The Secular City*, in which I tried to work out a theology for the 'postreligious' age that many sociologists had confidently assured us was coming. Since then, however, religion...seem[s] to have gained a new lease on life. Today it is secularity, not spirituality, that may be headed for extinction" (Cox 1995:xv). It is doubtful that secularity is headed for extinction, but it seems certain that spirituality, however we define it, is experiencing a comeback. What accounts for this spiritual revival? we may ask. The answer lies no doubt in the nature of human beings and of religious faith. People in the '60s and '70s experienced a kind of culture-shock when confronted by the period's *Zeitgeist*, which in turn caused them to "search for new forms of community and an effort to retrieve and transform old symbols and beliefs" for a new age (Cox 1995:104).

Canadian Mennonites did not experience the loss of religious faith to the extent that others did, at least not generally. As they moved to the cities, they seemed better prepared for the onslaught of secularism. When Mennonites left their farms in increasing numbers beginning in the 1950s, and the *Russlaender* (Mennonites who came to Canada in the 1920s) and later the post-Second World War refugees acquired an education in the cities, they not only adjusted to their urban environment but were also able to use the city to their advantage. To meet the challenge of secularism, Mennonites established protective "canopies," to use a sociological metaphor (Driedger 1988): They built congregational communities and other institutions to preserve and strengthen the faith of their children and young people; they also created organizational structures such as relief agencies, credit unions, insurance companies, even travel agencies to serve their people at home and abroad. Above all, educational institutions were established to meet the challenges of modernity and secularism. Mennonite private high schools, Bible schools, and colleges were designed to help young people maintain their traditional faith and values, equip them for service in

the church, and prepare them for life in an urban society.

E. K. Francis was right when he wrote in the '50s: "Even those Mennonites to whom religion has become but a thin veneer have retained value orientations which are in the Mennonite religious traditions, and which are felt to be intimately related to its institutional expression in the various branches of the Mennonite church. As long as a Mennonite remains part of a local community in which such values are still dominant, neither secularization nor even apostasy are able to destroy his religious heritage entirely..." (Francis:277). Other sociologists agreed. Kaufman and Harder stated: "With a few noted exceptions, doctrinal adherence to the Anabaptist vision has moved 12th-generation Anabaptists to a position that stands against the stream of society..." (330). And Cal Redekop concluded that "with the increased attendance of Mennonite young people at Mennonite colleges, along with the increasing esteem that the Radical Reformation is receiving in society at large, it is possible or even probable that the process of secularization may be lessened or attenuated" (303).

Mennonites not only survive in a predominantly secular environment, they also influence that society religiously and culturally and thus contribute to the spiritual revival of which Cox speaks. The Mennonite peace position, for example, has not only served Mennonites in times of war, allowing them to bear witness to an important biblical principle, it has also contributed to the growth of pacifism among non-Mennonite Protestant church leaders and groups, as Thomas Socknat and Peter Brock have shown (Socknat 1987; Brock 1991). Thus, Mennonite teaching institutions provided an important "canopy" for Mennonites and helped them to shape and preserve their identity within an urban environment.

Mennonite studies as part of a university programme, however, do not necessarily follow the agenda of Mennonite-based institutions. The Mennonite Studies programme at the University of Winnipeg was not designed primarily to strengthen Mennonite young people's faith, nor to prepare ministers for the churches, nor to evangelize the unchurched students at the university. My elderly friend, the late Gerhard Lohrenz, often called me a "Mennonite missionary at the University." I knew he meant well and expressed what no doubt other Mennonites expected from the Chair, but I always maintained that I did not consider myself a missionary. Like any other academic discipline, Mennonite Studies at the University is there to "profess," to contribute a particular body of knowledge which is different from other disciplines and courses at the University. Also the *intent* and *purpose* of university teaching and scholarship is somewhat different from what a church-sponsored institution seeks to achieve. I will have more to say about this later.

An Immigrant Boy from Russia Comes to Canada

In May 1948 I came to Canada as a poor and uneducated seventeen-year-old Mennonite immigrant. On our way from Halifax to Alberta our family stopped over in Winnipeg to see some of our relatives. Touring the city, we came to the Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC), located at 77 Kelvin Street (today Henderson Highway). I knew about MBBC from H. H. Janzen, its president at the time, whom I had gotten to know in Germany through his speaking tours among us refugees. When I saw the red brick building of MBBC, I exclaimed, as my grandmother remembered it: "Here I want to study some day to become a teacher and possibly preacher!" My grandmother thought to herself: "Du armer Flüchtlingsjunge, was wird wohl aus dir werden?" ("You poor refugee boy, what will become of you?"). I don't think she really believed that my study dreams would ever come true.

City lights, paved streets, streetcars, railway stations, bridges over rivers, tall buildings, parks, schools—all these city wonders were not altogether new to me. I had resided briefly in, and passed through, war-torn European cities like Lodz, Berlin, Detmold, and Dortmund, most of them in ruins, as we fled West during the last two years of the Second World War. In Revelation (a book many of us refugees loved to read at the time) heaven, the New Jerusalem, is portrayed as a city with a river flowing through it and living trees on either side bearing fruit twelve times a year. How I longed for such a city as we prepared for emigration to Canada.

When I came to Winnipeg in 1951 to study at MBBC, one of my teachers asked what impressed me most about this city. I'm still ashamed of my somewhat rude answer. I said: "The dirty streets of this city!" I added, "I prefer the countryside, nature, rolling hills and forests." In saying so, I thought of the picturesque German farms I had worked for before emigrating to Canada. And deep down in my Mennonite psyche there must have been that love for the soil our Russian Mennonites were so deeply rooted in.

And yet, many of our Anabaptist forebears of the sixteenth century originated in cities such as Zurich, Strasbourg and Amsterdam. Some of the early leaders were university-educated, having studied in cities such as Vienna and Paris. But as the movement grew and its leaders were persecuted and killed, Mennonites fled the cities and made their living as tenants, farmers and artisans wherever they were tolerated. Some of them established themselves as professionals and business people in cities like Amsterdam and Hamburg, but for most of them the countryside became their preferred abode. Menno Simons, their early Dutch leader, went so far as to encourage his flock to farm and milk cows. In other words, it was easier, he believed, to preserve one's

faith in the country than in the city.

In Canada I came to work on my Uncle Jacob Kroeker's farm in southern Alberta—and I loved it. To cultivate the large sections of rich soil, to seed wheat in springtime with machines, to harvest the ripe grain with big combines—all this was new to me and exciting. To break virgin soil on the wide prairie with a big yellow caterpillar tractor and an enormous plow behind it, especially during night shifts under an expansive starry western sky—what a sense of power that gave me and how romantic! No wonder I wrote verses to the girl I was in love with as I guided my tractor through the night with the headlights showing the way. I was in love and God was close! When my uncle asked me one day what I wanted to do with my life, I answered without hesitation: "I want to farm." He just smiled and said: "As long as you stay away from the city lights out west." He meant the larger Mennonite settlement of Coaldale, Alberta, an hour's drive away. After paying off our *Reiseschuld* in the fall of 1948 we moved to Coaldale. There I attended the Coaldale Bible School for three years. Most courses were still taught in German, but immigrant students were also given English lessons.

The Coaldale Mennonite community was composed of Russian Mennonites who had come to Canada from the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Decades prior to leaving their Russian homeland they had begun to open their doors to urban cultural values. As Russia modernized and transformed its economy toward the end of the nineteenth century, Mennonites raised their level of education, built factories and other industries, and sent their young people to Russian and foreign cities for higher education and training. Early in the 20th century bright young students like Benjamin Unruh, Abram Fast, Peter Epp, Arnold Dyck, and Johann P. Klassen, to name just a few, went to study in European centres such as Odessa, Moscow, Petersburg, Basel, Munich, Hamburg and Berlin. When they returned to their home communities many of them no longer farmed as their parents and grandparents had done for over a hundred years. They now contributed to their communities the skills and cultural values they had acquired away from home, city values that had been largely foreign to their parents and grandparents.

One example among many will illustrate this. Johann P. Klassen, a Russian- Mennonite farmer's son, left by train in 1906 for theological studies in Basel, Switzerland. He stopped over in Vienna to experience a large metropolis for the first time. The young man wrote his friend Abram Enns in Altona, Molotschna Colony, Russia, about beautiful Vienna, its architecture, art, music and culture, sights and sounds he had never experienced before. Arriving in Basel, he could not find words to describe that city's impressive site along the Rhine River.

Klassen eventually gave up his theological studies and plans to serve as a foreign missionary, and chose to study art instead. From Munich, where he enrolled in art studies, he wrote his friend Enns that he now lived the life of an artist, experiencing "life to the full." He advised his friend to do the same. No wonder Klassen's parents and home community were unable to understand the young artist when he returned home just before the First World War. Ironically, it was the war, the Revolution of 1917, the Civil War, and the emigration movement that "saved" Klassen for the Mennonite community: after his emigration to Canada in 1923 he moved to the United States, where he became an artist and teacher at Bluffton College in Ohio. In Canada and the United States these Russian-Mennonite "city boys" became cultural and spiritual leaders among their people.

For Mennonites who remained in the Soviet Union in the '30s and '40s, things turned out otherwise. They lost not only their material possessions, but also their traditional communal life with its spiritual and cultural leaders. Their churches and schools were shut down, the practice of their religion forbidden, and most families were torn apart, disenfranchised and exiled. Many men, like my father and grandfather, for example, were arrested and shot. Many others were dispossessed and banished to Siberian labour camps, where many of them died of hard work and malnutrition. Like many other young refugees from the Soviet Union, I knew next to nothing about Mennonitism. In fact, I never heard the word "Mennonite" until after the Second World War when the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) came to help us refugees materially and spiritually in German refugee camps. MCC also sought to raise a Mennonite consciousness among the refugees by providing reading material for them and conducting worship services. All this was new, especially to young Mennonites like myself. The first Mennonite history book I ever read was Cornelius Krahn's 1936 Heidelberg doctoral dissertation on Menno Simons' life and work, which was given to me in Gronau, one of the MCC camps in Germany. In retrospect, that book was no doubt the first step toward my later teaching of Mennonite studies at the University of Winnipeg.

Establishment of the Chair in Mennonite Studies

While a student at MBBC in the early '50s, I was introduced to Harold S. Bender's 1943-44 seminal paper "The Anabaptist Vision." As for others at the time, Bender's view of Anabaptism opened a new world of Mennonitism for me. Not only did I learn where Mennonites came from and what they originally believed, I also discovered that modern Mennonites were only a faint shadow of the early Anabaptists about whom I wanted to know more. And so I came to do graduate

work at the University of Manitoba on Luther and the radical reformers of the sixteenth century. In my doctoral studies I pursued German language and literature, but the Reformation period in general and Anabaptism in particular remained my special area of interest. I wanted to know why and how modern Mennonites had deviated from their Anabaptist ideals, ideals I considered closer to the faith and life of the first-century Christians than were the beliefs of modern Mennonites.

In the spring of 1978, while heading the German department at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), I was invited by the University of Winnipeg to occupy the newly established Chair in Mennonite Studies. This was the second of the so-called "ethnic chairs" established in a Canadian university. In subsequent years more such ethnic programmes were established across Canada. These ethnic chairs were created as part of Canada's multicultural policy initiated in the 1970s by the federal government under Prime Minister Trudeau.

Endowed with both private and public funds, the Chair in Mennonite Studies, the first and only one of its kind, was in a sense an expression of modern Mennonites' educational aspirations and a symbol of Canadian Mennonites coming of age intellectually and academically. Dr. David Friesen, a Winnipeg businessman and lawyer, who provided half of the funds for the endowment, and the so-called "Friends of Higher Learning," organized by the late Frank H. Epp and others, were convinced that the time had come for a Mennonite studies programme within the academic environment of a secular university. The federal government, which provided the other half of the required funds (over \$600,000.00), gave the University of Winnipeg a free hand to develop the Chair's programme within its arts and science faculty as it saw fit (Loewen 1988:263).

My two areas of interest and specialization, namely history and literature, were no doubt among the reasons why I was invited to fill the newly-created position. My colleague Frank C. Peters at WLU, whom I asked for advice, was most encouraging and said: "Harry, this Chair is like 'zugeschnittene Hosen für dich'" (The position is tailor-made for you). Other colleagues felt that the position would allow me to create something entirely new and important, a chance that might never come my way again. I had my doubts about all this, but with the encouragement of many friends, and especially my wife Gertrude, I decided to accept the invitation. In the fall of 1978 we moved to Winnipeg and I began to develop, with the help of many others, a programme of Mennonite studies. That first semester we had eighteen students.

Why Mennonite studies in a secular university? It was felt by the sponsors that the religious and cultural contributions of Anabaptist-Mennonites to society during the 450 years of their existence deserved

a place in the halls of academic learning. The unique and rich heritage of the Mennonites had been recognized for some time by non-Mennonite historians and sociologists as a source for advanced investigation and study (e.g., Roland H. Bainton, E. K. Francis, James Urry). Mennonites now believed that as heirs to that tradition they, as "insiders," could contribute an important dimension to Mennonite studies that so-called "outsiders" could not. They also recognized that there were many students of Mennonite background at the University of Winnipeg who would never attend a religiously-based Mennonite college, but would consider enrolling in courses in Mennonite studies as part of their arts or science programme. Moreover, the very nature of a university education would allow for a dimension in Mennonite studies that was different from the approach and direction in a religious institution. The sponsors believed with some justification that the "pursuit of truth" by academics in a secular institution is more independent, if not more objective, than is the case in a church-related institution, and that it would allow them to probe, interpret and discuss freely the good and the bad in Mennonite history, faith and life (Loewen 1988). Having taught in a Mennonite-sponsored high school and Bible college, I concurred with these views and objectives.

The growing pains of the Chair were intense at times. Some of the sponsors believed that the Chair should be basically a teaching position with as little research and publication as possible. I objected as politely as I could, maintaining that the role of a university professor was to teach (and I loved teaching), do research, write and publish articles and books, but also to be in close touch with the community by serving it with appearances, papers, and conferences. "If that is not acceptable," I added, "you perhaps got the wrong man for the position." The sponsors accepted my explanation and wished me well; a few years later they assured me that they were happy with the way the programme was developing.

Another difficult issue arose in the late 1980s, namely whether the Chair should become part of the emerging Menno Simons College (MSC), which was to be affiliated with the University of Winnipeg. I believed that the Chair should remain part of the University's arts and science programmes, whereas others, including some members of the University administration, pressed hard to make the Chair part of MSC. It was a hard struggle, but in the end the administration agreed that the Chair would remain a university programme, as it had been envisioned from the beginning and under which conditions I had accepted the position in the first place. Approaching retirement age, I had one major concern about the Chair's future: would it survive? I was greatly relieved when I was assured that the Chair's programme, including the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (JMS) founded in 1983,

would continue as part of the university's arts and science faculty. When Professor Royden Loewen was appointed as my successor, there was no doubt in my mind that Mennonite Studies would not only survive but continue to grow and develop.

A Philosophy of Mennonite Studies at a Secular University

The nature and objectives of Mennonite studies at a secular university are different from those at a church-related institution. My comments are not meant to question the purpose and value of church-sponsored colleges and universities. We all know that these institutions have played and still play important roles in Mennonite education and have served our Mennonite communities well.

Mennonites are not only a religious denomination like the Catholics, Baptists or Lutherans, but an ethno-religious group similar to the Jewish people. This is recognized by Canadian federal and provincial governments and by most social scientists. The recently published *Encyclopedia of Canada's Peoples* (1999) includes a substantial article (which I was invited to write) on Mennonites as an ethno-religious people similar to other ethnic groups living in Canada (Loewen 1999:957-74). Like other ethnic groups, Mennonites are a historic people with a particular tradition, faith, culture, and, to a certain extent, even language—although the German and *Plautdietsch* languages are admittedly on the decline. As an ethno-religious group Mennonites settled in various parts of Canada, built their communities and sought to maintain their cultural and religious traditions and identity.

Mennonites since the 16th century have made significant contributions to society in many areas. First in Russia and later in North and South America, they added significantly to society's understanding of religious freedom, democracy, separation of church and state, pacifism, and education. Together with other "peace groups," they were the first to protest against slavery as early as the seventeenth century. They were also expert and innovative agriculturalists who specialized in such areas as land reclamation, dyke building and horticulture. Yet as Roland H. Bainton has shown, Anabaptist-Mennonites have generally not been recognized nor given proper credit for their important contributions. He compared them to the Vikings who discovered the New World 500 years before Christopher Columbus, yet it was Columbus who was hailed as the "discoverer" of the Americas. According to Bainton, Mennonites' notable discoveries and contributions to civilization were not recognized as "Mennonite" because they were transmitted to Western society by

“larger” historical movements like the Puritan and French revolutions (Bainton 1957).

In fact, due to the Mennonites’ small numbers and their pariah status for many centuries, historians have largely ignored and even misrepresented them, or at best referred to them in footnotes. It was not till the late 19th and early 20th centuries that historians began to take them seriously. In those parts of Europe where the movement originated little is known about Mennonites to this day. In Germany, for example, academics—not to speak of the general public—know little about the history of Anabaptist-Mennonites. All they know about the “Wiedertäufer” (rebaptizers) is the tragic, and to them ridiculous, story of the 1534-35 Münster fanatics. A few years ago I was asked to give a paper on the 16th-century Anabaptists at the University of Mannheim. After the lecture the chairman of the German department thanked me and said with a smile betraying a touch of embarrassment: “It takes a Canadian to tell us Germans what really happened in our own country!”

Indeed, Mennonites have an important story to tell and a significant contribution to make to the cultural history of society in general. And this story must be told, taught, researched and published in an academic context that will not be perceived as sectarian but as an objective and critical discipline. The secular university is a good place to interact with scholars of many disciplines and colleagues of different backgrounds. Secular academics help us not only to do good scholarship, they are also the first in our immediate surroundings to benefit from our work. I was pleased, for example, when one of my colleagues at the University of Winnipeg proposed that we exchange books that he and I had published. And another historian of Jewish background one day said to me: “Let’s sit down, Harry, and compare differences and similarities between Jews and Mennonites.” This sharing of knowledge and research in a secular university is all to the good.

The Chair in Mennonite Studies, in its close to 25 years’ existence has made considerably progress. Undergraduate students, both Mennonite and non-Mennonite, have taken its courses in history, literature and sociology, and several have gone on to specialize in Mennonite history or literature in their graduate work at other universities. The Chair has researched and published scholarly articles and books, and established the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* in 1983. The annual symposium, organized by the Chair and supported by other Mennonite colleges in the city, attracts many scholars and allows them to publish their findings in *JMS* and other journals. A unique feature of the Chair’s programme is its appeal to the general lay community. I have been at many academic conferences where just a handful of

scholars listened to papers on some esoteric or uninteresting subject. The Chair's conferences and other activities attract both scholars and lay people who are interested in what is being done.

Winnipeg is an ideal place for Mennonite studies. This programme, while not sponsored nor supported by Mennonite churches, is in close touch with a large and vibrant Mennonite community. Geographically, Winnipeg is well placed for advanced Mennonite studies. Of the more than 200,000 Canadian Mennonites (this number includes baptized and unbaptized Mennonites) some 66,000 reside in Manitoba (Loewen:1999). Half of Manitoba's Mennonites live in Winnipeg. The many churches, schools, colleges, MCC head office, several German and English-language publications, archival centres, and now even a Mennonite university—not to speak of the rich artistic and cultural life here—make Manitoba and Winnipeg second to none for advanced Mennonite studies. Cornelius Krahn was right when he wrote about Winnipeg as a Mennonite cultural centre: "Soon one may be tempted to compare Winnipeg with Amsterdam and Haarlem of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the role of the Mennonites in the fine arts, social work, government, law, medicine, and business was outstanding in comparison to their number" (Smith 1981:516).

Krahn's interesting comparison is based on an accurate description of the Mennonite intellectual, artistic and cultural scene in and around Winnipeg. However, this comparison with Dutch Mennonites also reminds us of how some historians have viewed the *Doopsgezinde* congregations during the "Golden Age" of the Dutch Republic and later. Rationalism, the enlightenment, materialism, and a general "worldliness" contributed to Mennonites' abandonment of core principles and a complete assimilation into Dutch society (Horch: 254-56; Smith: 130-32). While the history of Canadian Mennonites is different from that of the Dutch, materialism, assimilation, and loss of identity are problems that Canadian Mennonites also face.

But, one may ask, should Mennonite studies at an academic level also be directly responsible for spiritual revival in Mennonite communities? I do not believe that a Mennonite academic at a university is obliged to teach his or her courses with a view to propagating Mennonite faith. In the past many teachers in Mennonite Bible schools and colleges were ordained ministers. They were directly responsible to their supporting churches and constituencies and were seen not only as classroom teachers but also as spiritual leaders within their congregational communities and conferences. They were a natural link between the Bible colleges and the churches. They preached and conducted Bible-teaching sessions in churches, were respected moderators and leaders of conferences and were sought for spiritual direction and guidance.

The Mennonite academic in a secular university has no such duties, at least not as part of his or her university programme. He or she “professes” his or her area of specialty without an obligation to specifically inculcate Mennonite-Christian faith and values among students and colleagues. Indeed, if a Mennonite professor at a secular university feels the need to proselytize he would be better to leave the halls of learning and become a regular minister or a missionary.

Having said this, however, I would add that Mennonite studies at the university has an important role to play in indirectly helping to build the Mennonite community. As part of a professor’s function, namely “community service,” a Mennonite professor can and should, if at all possible, participate in church and community-related activities. At such functions there is ample opportunity to present, discuss, and transmit historical Mennonite principles and faith values which may be in decline among modern Mennonites. In public appearances, in popular articles in church papers or on the Mennonite conference floor, the “brother” or “sister” academic can and should participate fully in building Mennonite community.

Like Dutch Mennonites before them, Canadian Mennonites in their assimilation process and flight from their heritage seem to be abandoning some core Anabaptist principles, including their peace position, justice concerns, community and family values, and their role as critics of government policies. Mennonite academics can teach their communities the history, faith and life of Mennonites, thus informing and reminding them of their tradition and need to recapture what has been lost.

Must a professor of Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg be a believing Mennonite, in other words, a Mennonite Christian? This is indeed a difficult question. I believe that since Mennonites are an *ethno-religious* group, it is preferable that the holder of the Chair be a believing Mennonite. As a believer he or she will not only understand the history and faith of Mennonites from inside their community, but also have better access to that community which is still largely committed to its religious faith and values. When toward the end of my tenure at the University of Winnipeg the question of a successor was raised, it was our friend and colleague James Urry, a non-Mennonite, who suggested to me, correctly I think, that the Chair in Mennonite Studies should be a Mennonite.

Some Personal Experiences at the University of Winnipeg

My eighteen years at the University of Winnipeg were the most enjoyable and productive years of my life. The support I received from

Mennonite and non-Mennonite colleagues was outstanding. Without them the programme we initiated would not have succeeded. Also, many of my Mennonite colleagues in other disciplines, notably English, German, History and Sociology not only assisted me, but told me that our new programme had kindled their interest in Mennonite studies and their desire to research and publish in Mennonite areas. I also learned from them as they advised me, criticized me gently, helped me with my writing style (I am especially grateful to Professor Al Reimer), and encouraged me when I was discouraged.

While I enjoyed writing and editing, I considered teaching my first obligation and love. I am critical of professors who think their students interfere with their more important activity, namely research, writing, and publishing. Professors need to publish, but their research must also come from and lead to good teaching. A professor's research, enthusiasm and ability to communicate knowledge will inspire students to do good work.

I appreciated having students say positive things about Mennonite studies. More than one told me: "For the first time I love history." Another said: "When I came to the University I was ashamed to be known as a Mennonite. Now I am proud to be one." A third asked: "Why were we not taught some of these things in our churches?" One Chinese student said enthusiastically: "When I go back to Hong Kong I'll establish a Mennonite church there"!

When students asked me about the Mennonite faith, I never sought to convert them to Mennonitism. I explained to them what Mennonites believed and the reasons for their faith, but I never suggested that the Mennonite faith was superior to other Christian beliefs. Sometimes non-Mennonite students criticized the beliefs of their own denomination. Invariably I would suggest to them that they should at least study their own religious faith carefully before deciding to abandon it or adopting another.

When I retired at the end of 1995 my greatest fear was that I would miss students and teaching. To my surprise, however, I have not missed the classroom as I continue with the work I love doing, namely reading, doing some research and writing, presenting an occasional paper here and there, and once in a while publishing a book. I naturally continue to be interested in the work and progress of the Chair and its programme. With a talented young historian at its helm and a vibrant and supportive community behind it, I am confident that the Chair in Mennonite Studies will continue to serve the Mennonite cause well.

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