

Issues in the Future of Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholarship

PREFACE

Convening a gathering of Mennonite graduate students in religion has been a good intention for some time. Given that Toronto was to host the 2002 annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC), under the leadership of former director and current student affairs advisor Lydia Neufeld Harder, seized the opportunity to hold a conference on November 21-22, just prior to this larger event. The conference drew a relatively diverse group of 28 students (18 men, 10 women; 12 currently from the US, 16 from Canada) in fields such as theology, ethics, religious studies, New Testament, Old Testament, philosophy, history, and pastoral studies.

The aim of the conference was to provide an opportunity for future scholars to offer, before their peers, papers and presentations that contribute to Anabaptist-Mennonite scholarship. The reality is that Mennonite doctoral students study in secular or ecumenical settings, or in both, and even if they understand this scholarship to be in service of the church, they rarely get a chance to test work with colleagues of a similar faith heritage. The theme, “Issues in the Future of Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholarship,” was broad enough to encompass the issues with which participants were already working, yet it pushed the presenters to consider the differences in method and substance that Mennonite particularity makes.

Beyond the benefits to participants of getting to know future colleagues and engaging in substantive conversation, the conference was an occasion for the wider church to indicate support of its future teachers and theological leaders. Grants from Mennonite Foundation of Canada, Mennonite Education Agency (USA), and the Good Foundation of Waterloo, Ontario covered meeting and travel expenses. Deans from several Anabaptist-related institutions met with the group, and discussed college and seminary teaching trends and the qualities they look for in faculty members. Yet, given that younger scholars in various ways straddle the worlds of church, academy, and secular society, finding the balance of critical distance, faithful engagement, and institutional location remains an open question.

If the papers given at the conference are evidence of how younger scholars are balancing church, academy, and society, the future looks promising. In terms of church, there was a healthy balance between critically analyzing of the history of Mennonites, understanding current practices, and suggesting paths Mennonites might benefit from in future. Of note here were the suggestions that Mennonites might benefit by “borrowing” from the Reformed and Catholic traditions.

With regard to the academic dimension, the papers reflected a certain ambivalence. A sub-theme of the conference, introduced by one of the presenters, was the Mennonite reliance on the work of John Howard Yoder. While the papers reflected an impressive range of methods found in academia today, the regular references to Yoder suggested a narrowness of perspective that limits the richness of the Mennonite tradition. Yet, the variety of methods of study — including community studies, performance theory, and analytic philosophy — combined with students’ self-identification as Mennonite, suggests that the boundaries of Mennonite scholarship are quite broad. Perhaps, in the future, Mennonite scholars will no longer need to think of fellow Mennonites as their primary audience.

Along with church and academy, the papers reflected an interest in engaging the larger society. On the issue of pacifism, there was a critical historical analysis of the relationship between Mennonites and the Nazis, as well as a contemporary consideration of the relationship between pacifism and involvement in the state. On the issue of culture, there was a study of gender identity among Mennonite women in the 1920s and 30s and another on how Mennonites might perform their faith on the world’s stage. This suggests that Mennonite scholarship in the future will continue to struggle in connecting faith with the world.

Response to the conference was overwhelmingly positive. It was an ideal opportunity for young scholars, sharing the same faith background, to get to know each other better through both formal presentations and informal discussion. Due to this response and the encouragement of the participants, we are already planning the next conference with the hope that these events, held on a regular basis, will serve to encourage both the church and Mennonite scholarship.

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