

Preface

We are pleased to offer in this issue a selection of papers and presentations from the most recent Women Doing Theology conference, together with a related Afterword and an array of book reviews. The 2003 event, titled “Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating,” not only dealt with women “doing theology” but also celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the Women’s Concerns Committee of the Mennonite Central Committee US. Thus we are including papers and presentations on both subjects. Readers will encounter an engaging diversity of styles, from the formal and academic to the informal and reflective.

We extend hearty thanks to Beth Graybill and Patricia Haverstick, both formerly with the MCC US Women’s Concerns Desk, for pulling the materials together for publication and for contributing, respectively, the Introduction and Foreword. We also salute Linda Gehman Peachey, current director of the Women’s Concerns Program, and Jen Miller, for their valuable assistance as our production date drew near. The Afterword has kindly been provided by Lydia Neufeld Harder of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre, who has a longstanding connection to the Women Doing Theology conferences.

The Conrad Grebel Review has published articles from Women Doing Theology conferences since their inception in 1993. Readers may wish to consult the Spring 1996 or Fall 2001 issues for an overview of topics and issues discussed at previous gatherings. (The next conference in the series will be held in Canada in 2006. For information, contact Linda Gehman Peachey: lgp@mcc.org.)

Upcoming CGR issues will focus on theologian John Milbank, Mennonite thinker John Howard Yoder as an historian, papers from a 2004 Mennonite graduate student conference, the Lord’s Supper, and other subjects. We invite comments, submissions for possible publication (see authors’ guidelines on inside back cover) and, of course, new subscriptions and renewals!

C. Arnold Snyder, *Academic Editor*
Stephen A. Jones, *Managing Editor*

FOREWORD

Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating

Patricia Haverstick

Women have always been under-represented in Anabaptist scholarship. While significant improvements have occurred in this area in recent years, and books and articles written by women have proliferated, the fact remains that not as many women as men are publishing, lecturing, teaching, and being asked to present at conferences. Therefore, the “Women Doing Theology” conference (held biennially since 1993, with the location alternating between Canada and the United States) continues to be an important event where Anabaptist women can come together to discuss theology, providing a forum for new scholarship, for discussing women-centered or -guided theology, and for encouraging younger generations to study and discuss theology.

The 2003 conference, held May 16-18 in Harrisonburg, Virginia, was attended by more than 200 men and women. It attempted to bridge the gap often found between theology and the arts, the academic and the spiritual, and white women and women of color. The theme, “Gifts of the Red Tent: Women Creating,” was loosely based on the larger themes found within the novel *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant. The women-centered tradition of the red tent – all of the women of a family or clan, servants and enslaved women included, gathered under the red tent once a month – is a very powerful symbol of women coming together and caring for each other. The planning committee chose to focus on the themes of shelter, inter-generational storytelling, and creative skill-making found within the confines of the red tent.

From the start, the planning committee attempted to be anti-sexist and anti-racist. As Jane Hooper Piefer, a pastor and committee member, said at the opening plenary session, “We worked hard to include a ‘good mix’ of women of color and white women for speakers . . . for workshop leaders . . . etc. And yet we realized we were falling into the trap of multicultural tokenism as it applies to racism.” This led us to take a hard look at how we were doing things, and it led to some changes.

Patricia J. Haverstick was editor of the Women’s Concerns Report and served as coordinator of the 2003 Women Doing Theology conference planning committee.

One such change, which we felt actually made our conference “more” Anabaptist, was that we deviated from the traditional academic conference model of paper presentation to a paper response method that we called a “dialogical response.” This method utilized a panel of four respondents that dialogued with each other on a few guided questions regarding each paper. The responses were academic, theological, personal, and spiritual. The intent of this approach was to be more inclusive and liberating. It also recognized the Anabaptists’ founding belief that the interpretation of the Bible should occur within a community. Early Anabaptists exhibited communal and dialogical models of biblical interpretation and preaching. This type of response also honors the wisdom of women’s experiences, as well as academic knowledge, when discussing theological matters.

The main papers considered the themes of wonder, wandering, and hospitality (welcome) – each of which are found within *The Red Tent*. These themes connected well with the workshop offerings that focused more exclusively on the arts – topics such as the spirituality of dance, storytelling, and drumming. The emphasis on spirituality and the arts was also reflected in the worship and artistic responses to the major themes. The artistic responses included a one-woman play, a short dramatic piece with four actors, and a poem.

Response to the conference was very positive. The papers were well received, the workshops were well attended and enjoyed, and the artistic responses were highlights of the weekend. Participants also seemed to appreciate the work done on anti-racism. Of course, there were some criticisms and learnings for the wider church community. For one, while the work on being inclusive was approved, it was also noted that sexuality was overlooked and that there was no mention that voices of homosexuals were still possibly excluded. It also was apparent that much theological educating still needs to be done among women, particularly the younger generation. There seems to be an absence of knowledge of the basics of women-centered theologies (i.e., Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista). For example, the wisdom tradition, or “Sophia,” was mentioned in each of the main papers yet many in the audience did not recognize the concept.

The need for continuing education of Anabaptist young people – in this case, particularly young women – shows that the Women Doing Theology conference must continue. As you read these papers from the 2003 conference, I hope you will be inspired to attend and participate in the 2006 conference.