

## **One Generation Away: *Martyrs Mirror* and the Survival of Anabaptist Christianity**

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The tendency of authors to imagine their books will benefit every audience, and should therefore be read by everyone, is nothing new. In 1659, as the Dutch Mennonite minister Thieleman van Braght finalized his preface to *The Bloody Theater* (now called *Martyrs Mirror*), he took time to address a trio of age-specific audiences, each of which he believed would profit from the book's contents. Along with aged readers and middle-aged ones, van Braght identified young people (*Jonge lieden*) as potential beneficiaries.<sup>1</sup> These youthful readers, he wrote, would be well served by *The Bloody Theater*, for in its pages they would find persons who were "fourteen, fifteen, eighteen, twenty years old" and who, presumably unlike them, had "forsaken the vanities of the world and the lusts of youth." These young men and women had not simply forsaken their ungodly desires but they had also "remembered their Creator and Savior, bowed their youthful members under His yoke, accepted His commandments, obeyed Him with all their heart, and surrendered themselves willingly to Him—so that they, for His sake, did not spare their lives unto death."<sup>2</sup>

How did 17th-century young people respond to van Braght's invitation to read his book? We simply don't know. We do know, however, that the desire to place this work into the hands of young Anabaptists did not expire with van Braght's death in 1664. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the book's 350-year reception history is the lingering presence of young adults—not so much *their* voices but the concern about them in the voices of those who sought to multiply the book's influence: publishing agents, church

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<sup>1</sup> T.J.V.B[raght], *Het Bloedigh Tooneel der Doops-gesinde, en Weereloose Christenen . . .* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Jacob Braat voor Jacobus Savry, 1660), 1 sig\*\*[1]v.

<sup>2</sup> Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians...*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House/Herald Press, 1938-present), 14. Because the Sohm translation—hereafter "van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (1938)"—has been reproduced more often than any other English translation, my quotations are from that translation.

leaders, and parents. These proponents of *Martyrs Mirror* sometimes wanted young people to buy the book; or if not that, to at least read it; or if not that, to be apprised of its contents in church or at home. This was true in the 18th century, the 19th century, the 20th century, and the 21st century: the hopes for the book, expressed by older adults, frequently fixed on young persons coming of age.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay I will explore that reality as it played itself in a number of 20th- and 21st-century settings. The custodial desire to get young people to ponder the martyrs became so widespread in the last half of the 20th century that it can be easy to overlook its counter-intuitiveness. We might ask a question like this: If religiously committed adults want their children to embrace their brand of the Christian faith, why remind them that the people who embraced it were hunted down, tortured, and killed? In considering this question, it will be helpful to place the use of *Martyrs Mirror* in the context of larger conversations about emotional appeals to youth as well as conversations about what leads youth to make religious commitments. In particular, we will want to consider what one Christian educator, Kenda Creasy Dean, calls an “invitation to oddity,” a phrase she connects to psychologist Erik Erikson’s claim that adolescents are searching for something “to die for.”<sup>4</sup> We will begin, however, with a mid-20th-century example of commending the Anabaptist martyrs to young adults, an example that is at once both unique in its details and commonplace in its goals.

### The Survival of the Fittest Church

In 1950, Gerald Studer, a twenty-three-year-old Mennonite minister, produced a one-page article heralding the reprinting of *Martyrs Mirror* by the Mennonite Publishing House. A student of Mennonite history with a keen interest in youth ministry, Studer saw this publishing event as a rich opportunity for securing adolescent faith commitments.<sup>5</sup> His article,

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<sup>3</sup> For numerous examples, including the production of the first North American edition of *Martyrs Mirror* in the 1740s, see David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror: A Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 35.

<sup>5</sup> As a Goshen College student, Studer published “A History of the *Martyrs’ Mirror*” in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 22 (1948): 163-79. He later served on the board of Christopher

published in a Mennonite Church periodical aimed at young adults, urged quick action (“Order yours now so that you don’t miss it!”) and highlighted “a few things” that readers would find in the massive martyr book. For starters, wrote Studer, those who buy this new edition of *Martyrs Mirror* would read about a sixteen-year-old girl “whose youth and beauty stirred such pity that all begged that her life be saved.” When the adolescent girl refused to recant, he continued, “the executioner carried her in his arms to a horse trough and held her under water until she was dead, then laid her lifeless body on the flames.”<sup>6</sup>

That Studer featured the story of a teenaged martyr for his young adult audience is not surprising. In fact, he followed that particular story with three other examples from *Martyrs Mirror*, all of which featured young adult victims.<sup>7</sup> But the story of the sixteen-year-old girl, the most detailed of the four examples he offers, is remarkable for at least three reasons. First, Studer takes care to tell his readers that this girl was physically beautiful, a beauty that in his telling made it all the more tragic to her contemporaries that she was being executed. Second, he underscores the physicality of the executioner’s treatment of his victim, noting that he “carried her in his arms” to the site of her death. Third, and perhaps most remarkable of all, while the story of this teenaged girl can be found in another Mennonite source—C. Henry Smith’s *The Mennonites*, published in 1920—it doesn’t actually appear in *Martyrs Mirror*.<sup>8</sup>

Studer’s use of a non-*Martyrs Mirror* account to encourage young people to buy *Martyrs Mirror* may have been an unintentional gaffe; that is, Studer may have read the story in Smith’s history and mistakenly thought that Smith had gotten it from *Martyrs Mirror*. Nonetheless, when we compare

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Dock Mennonite High School in eastern Pennsylvania.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald C. Studer, “You Can Afford a *Martyrs Mirror*,” *Youth’s Christian Companion* (July 1950), 247.

<sup>7</sup> The other three stories that Studer cited are found in van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (1938), 182, 429, 762.

<sup>8</sup> C. Henry Smith, *The Mennonites: A Brief History of Their Origin and Later Development in Both Europe and America* (Berne, IN: Mennonite Book Concern, 1920), 26. Smith’s story bears some resemblance to a *Martyrs Mirror* account in which “several sisters” were drowned in “a horse pond.” In the *Martyrs Mirror* account, however, neither the women’s age nor their physical attractiveness receives any mention; see van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (1938), 437.

Studer's version of the story to Smith's version, we can see more clearly Studer's goals in telling this particular story. Whereas Smith informs his readers that the girl's "innocence" stirred onlookers to pity, Studer says it was her "beauty"; and whereas Smith's executioner simply "fastened [the girl's] hands to her side" before drowning her, Studer's executioner "carried her in his arms" to the horse trough, then carried her lifeless body to the flames. In these ways, Studer intensifies the visceral, even sensual nature of what was already a gruesome story. Helping his mid-century readers, particularly young male readers, to imagine the girl's physical beauty, her manhandled body, and her horrific death, he seeks to heighten their emotional response to their church's martyrological past.

In her 2013 essay, "Mightier than the Sword: *Martyrs Mirror* in the New World," Julia Spicher Kasdorf notes that those who composed martyr accounts in the 16th and 17th centuries often awarded female Anabaptist martyrs a "combination of idealized masculine and feminine qualities."<sup>9</sup> Steadfast in the face of death, these women were praised for their "manly courage" and their "valiant manliness," even as they were identified with their roles as nurturing wives and mothers.<sup>10</sup> Studer's exemplary female martyr demonstrates courage, to be sure, but he ascribes to her characteristics—beauty and passivity—more befitting of the ideal woman in postwar America.<sup>11</sup> Studer knew that mid-century Mennonites had increasing access to sensational stories in the media, and he sought to redirect their sensory experiences in service of the church. "You can't avoid being shocked by crime news on the radio," he advised his youthful readers, but "you can afford to be uplifted by the gruesome but glorious stories" in *Martyrs Mirror*.<sup>12</sup> These exhilarating stories, he said, would help them recognize what it means to live "as strangers and pilgrims in the earth instead of [as] wealthy, complacent

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<sup>9</sup> Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "Mightier than the Sword: *Martyrs Mirror* in the New World," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 31 (2013): 55.

<sup>10</sup> Kasdorf cites two particular *Martyrs Mirror* accounts in this regard: the martyrdoms of Ursula van Essen and Christina Haring. See Kasdorf, "Mightier than the Sword," 55-57; and van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (1938), 844, 441.

<sup>11</sup> For conceptions of the ideal woman in the 1950s, see Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminist Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 67-70.

<sup>12</sup> Studer, "You Can Afford a *Martyrs Mirror*," 247.

citizens of a smug North American community.” Moreover, these stories should remind youth that in the final analysis everything depended on them, because they demonstrated that “the Mennonite Church has been founded and kept going by the lives and deaths of many young people.”<sup>13</sup>

Studer’s claim has some historic validity: some Anabaptist martyrs were indeed young, and their witness likely inspired some Anabaptists to take their faith more seriously. But the more historically compelling component of the claim is that the Mennonite Church, like most religious entities in human history, has been kept going by the *lives* of young people. That is, the survival of Anabaptism over the centuries, at least in North America, has hinged upon the willingness of relatively safe Anabaptist teenagers, like those reading Studer’s article, to embrace the faith of their mothers and fathers. As theologian Stanley Hauerwas has frequently jabbed, North American Mennonites like to think of themselves as a believers’ church, but the fact remains that most North American Mennonites, especially through 1950, carried names like Yoder and Landis and Friesen and Reimer. In other words, most 20th-century North American Mennonites were cradle Mennonites who, as young adults, could have chosen otherwise but opted to embrace their parents’ faith. And because this process of making and retaining babies has been the primary survival strategy of most North American Anabaptist churches, the question that every generation has faced was this: What are the most effective practices for retaining the children of the church, especially when the church is asking them to make a countercultural commitment? Given the attenuated state of denominational loyalty in contemporary North American churches, this is a question that has not gone away.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Passions of Youth and Religious Commitment**

The place of passion in the context of religious life, and particularly the elevation of people’s emotions to advance religious commitment (as Studer sought to do), has long been a point of contention in American Protestantism.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> For the lack of denominational loyalty, see the Pew Research Center report, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” (2015), especially the chapter entitled “Religious Switching and Inter-marriage.” <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>, accessed September 11, 2018.

From the Great Awakening to the present, critics have frequently charged religious leaders who stimulate emotional reactions with manipulation.<sup>15</sup> These leaders, say their critics, use their authority to induce vulnerable people to make commitments they would not otherwise make. Some of these criticisms have focused specifically on religious activities that engage young people (e.g., the tear-filled campfires on the last night of summer camp), the assumption being that adolescents, already primed for passion, lack the wherewithal to resist the designs of their adult manipulators.<sup>16</sup>

However, the critics of religious passion have themselves had their critics, who argue that a religious life without passion is not a religious life at all. In his assessment of the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards admitted that passionate outbursts did not prove that God's Spirit was at work; at the same time, he said, it was reasonable to believe that an encounter with God's Spirit would manifest itself in an emotional response.<sup>17</sup> In the 20th century, the global advance of Pentecostal enthusiasm redefined the nature of Christianity, not only by giving increased attention to the work of the Holy Spirit but also by validating emotional experience as a principal element of the Christian life. Long before the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles brought Pentecostal fervor to the fore, African Americans assumed that passionate expression—dancing, shouting, and crying—was part and parcel of authentic Christianity, and they sometimes chastised whites who reduced the Christian faith to intellectual claims and sedate worship rituals.<sup>18</sup>

It is one thing to suggest, as Jonathan Edwards did, that people respond emotionally when they encounter the Spirit of God; it is another to claim that spiritual transformation happens by way of massaging of people's emotions. Nevertheless, one prominent American revivalist was unapologetic about

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, Charles Chauncy, "A Letter to Mr. George Wishart," in *The Great Awakening*, ed. Richard L. Bushman (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969), 116-21.

<sup>16</sup> For a consideration of the Friday night campfire, see Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 100-105.

<sup>17</sup> See especially Jonathan Edwards, "On the Great Awakening," at [www.nhinet.org/ccs/docs/-awaken.htm](http://www.nhinet.org/ccs/docs/-awaken.htm), accessed September 5, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> For a recent example of this critique, see Jason E. Shelton and Michael O. Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Religious Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2012), 57-85.

using such means to convert the masses. In his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 18th-century revivalist Charles Finney argued that revivals were not miracles but the results of human efforts that raised people's "excitements" for God to the point of spiritual surrender. Because the world was filled with so many ungodly excitements, "there must be [religious] excitement sufficient to wake up the dormant moral powers and roll back the tide of degradation and sin."<sup>19</sup> Finney did not stop with theoretical claims, but instead offered his readers a catalog of "measures" he found effective in transporting the unconverted to the place of commitment, most famously the "anxious seat," where those under conviction could sit while others gathered around them to pray.<sup>20</sup> The point of the anxious seat was ultimately to relieve people's religious anxieties, though not before raising these excitements to a fever pitch. A hundred years later, revivalist Billy Graham used the hymn "Just as I Am" in much the same way: as a means to foster life-changing commitments by transforming into joy the spiritual anxieties his sermon had just raised.<sup>21</sup>

Mid-century Mennonites used similar means to secure religious commitments. A few years after Graham's first citywide crusade in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1947, George R. Brunk II and Myron Augsburger began holding their own revival meetings in Amish and Mennonite regions of North America. Their evangelistic services, typically held in tents, featured "all the trappings that had come to define the American revivalist tradition," writes Devin Manzullo-Thomas, trappings that included "expressive preaching, compelling music, modern methods of advertising and promotion, and invitations for listeners to leave their seats, walk down the aisle to the altar, and experience a religious conversion."<sup>22</sup> Like Graham, Augsburger sometimes used "Just as I Am" as his closing hymn, though not as often as "Almost Persuaded," a hymn that urges sinners to "come [to

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<sup>19</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (New York: Leavitt, Lord, and Co., 1835; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1960), 12. Page numbers refer to the Belknap edition.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 267-68.

<sup>21</sup> For Graham's invitational technique, see Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2014), 63-67.

<sup>22</sup> Devin Manzullo-Thomas, "America's Pastor among the Quiet in the Land: Billy Graham and North American Anabaptists, Part I," <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/tag/howard-hammer/>, accessed September 5, 2018.

Jesus] today” because tomorrow the “harvest is past” and “doom comes at last!”<sup>23</sup> Mennonite teenagers flocked to these revivals, and they sometimes responded positively to the evangelists’ pleas. One girl recalls sitting with her peers on the front row of a Brunk revival, and together they went forward for prayer. Recalling the event years later, she noted that the whole experience was “kind of fun” but also rather “heavy.”<sup>24</sup>

The North American revival tradition has often been criticized, and because its means of massaging people’s emotions are so carefully calculated (and so often dread-inducing), it is an easy target. Still, it is only fair to note that all religious traditions rely on human means to foster spiritual commitment. In *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*, Carol E. Lytch uses “socialization” as an umbrella term for the typical means by which young people are introduced to the symbols, rituals, narratives, and habits of the Christian life.<sup>25</sup> Sermons, catechetical instruction, Christian education classes, and youth group gatherings: these are just a few of the socializing means that a congregation might use to foster religious loyalty in young adults. These measures not only introduce young adults to the faith of their older adult mentors, but in most cases they serve an apologetic function, offering a defense of a particular approach to religious life as a valid approach, if not the best one.

While socialization is critical for fostering young adult commitment, Lytch contends that a second reality is equally important. She calls this second reality “religious experience,” a time when in retrospect a young person recalls that he or she had experienced God or at least God’s calling in his or her life. These experiences typically occur when the rhythms of ordinary religious life are disrupted or intensified. They most often happen at a geographical remove from ordinary life but they may also happen on familiar turf, when the narrative of Christianity is cast in a new key or when the ordering of the standard religious fare is upended in some way.<sup>26</sup> These

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<sup>23</sup> James O. Lehman, *Mennonite Tent Revivals: Howard Hammer and Myron Augsburger, 1952-1962* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2002), 186.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements: A Community Paradigm* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 285.

<sup>25</sup> Carol E. Lytch, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 58.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.



experiences transform an acquired faith into a personally appropriated faith. They “breathe meaning into old, familiar symbols and practices,” which in turn leads to a deeper involvement in one’s religious community where those symbols and practices reside.<sup>27</sup> Lytch’s argument is not without empirical foundation. In her study of three large congregations in Louisville, Kentucky, Lytch found that the most religiously loyal teens, those who were deeply involved in congregational life and planned to remain involved, were ones whose lives included both consistent religious socialization and religious experiences filled with high emotion.<sup>28</sup>

Lytch does not connect her thesis about fostering religious commitment to the use of martyr narratives, but a second Christian educator, Kenda Creasy Dean, fills in the blanks. In *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, Dean notes the widespread fascination that contemporary American youth have with martyr stories. Pointing to examples in recent American history, including the story of a teenaged girl killed in the school shooting in Columbine, Colorado in 1999, she writes that “the life of the martyr fascinates adolescents, not because they want to share the martyrs’ grisly suffering, but because they envy their passion, their purpose, [and] their brazen determination.”<sup>29</sup> Like the martyrs they read about, these adolescents want to “die for” something, says Dean—though, like Erik Erikson, she tempers this phrase to mean that youth are driven by fidelity, that is, “the search for something and somebody to be true to.”<sup>30</sup> According to Dean, American young people are too often told, even in the church, that to be an adult in contemporary North America they must

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 62. Lytch cites the work of C. Ellis Nelson in her discussion of the interplay between socialization and religious experience.

<sup>28</sup> For a similar view, see John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 73-76. See also Bob Yoder, “Nurturing the Faith of Mennonite Youth: A Historical Review,” in *A History of Mennonite Youth Ministry, 1885-2005*, ed. Bob Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2013), 11-62. Yoder cites Lytch’s work at various points.

<sup>29</sup> Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 250. Researchers David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins agree with Dean that “young adults today are interested in [the] martyrs’ lives of jeopardy and fulfillment.” David Kinnaman, with Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 105-106.

<sup>30</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1968), 233, 235.

abandon their passions, capitulate to half-truths, and settle down—a message that compromises the notion of an authentic religious commitment. Dean, whose primary point of view is youth ministry in the United Methodist Church, sounds a warning that other observers of mainline Protestant youth culture have also made, namely that young adults flee mainline churches not because they are offended or intellectually unconvinced but because they are bored.<sup>31</sup> Rather than feed teenagers the bland American “heresy of wholesomeness,” congregations would do better to extend to them an “invitation to oddity.”<sup>32</sup> In fact, Dean says, the best Christian practices for fostering young adult commitment are ones that “heighten the tension between youth and their culture, and mark them as people who belong to a community ‘set apart.’”<sup>33</sup>

Dean’s recommendation for adolescent youth formation may sound strange to mainline Protestant ears, but it is not far removed from Gerald Studer’s invocation of the Anabaptist martyrs as strangers in a spiritually complacent world. In the following decades, Mennonite revivalist-turned-college-president Myron Augsburger would commend the same set of martyrs for a reason that paralleled Studer’s: to underline the contrast between faithful Christianity and an encroaching culture of unfaith. In *Pilgrim Aflame*, published in 1967, Augsburger expanded the relatively brief *Martyrs Mirror* account of Michael Sattler into an historical novel that in various ways made Sattler’s story more emotionally compelling to his 20th-century readers.<sup>34</sup> Ten years later, in *Faithful Unto Death*, Augsburger narrated the stories of fifteen Anabaptist young people put to death in the

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<sup>31</sup> Laura Darling, “Listening to the ‘Nones’: An Interview with Elizabeth Drescher,” Confirm, Not Conform blog, May 13, 2013, [www.confirmnotconform.com/blog/listening-nones-interview-elizabeth-drescher/](http://www.confirmnotconform.com/blog/listening-nones-interview-elizabeth-drescher/), accessed September 13, 2018. See also Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Religious Lives of America’s Nones* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 35-36.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Myron S. Augsburger, *Pilgrim Aflame* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967). Most significantly, Augsburger expanded the story to include Michael’s growing attraction and eventual marriage to Margaretha Sattler; e.g., “The two lunched in a little alcove of the inn, and far into the afternoon they talked of their love” (62). The *Martyrs Mirror* account of Sattler’s martyrdom, which mentions his wife only briefly, can be found in van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (1938), 416-20.

16th century, stories that showed that “Christian fidelity is not dependent upon long years of involvement in Christian doctrine” but rather is based upon “a genuine, existential relationship with Christ.” In a late 20th-century world characterized by “subtle attacks on our faith by secularism,” young people would be wise to learn about the martyrs and “follow in their train.”<sup>35</sup>

Before the end of the century, Augsburger’s enhanced account of Sattler’s life would become a feature-length film. *The Radicals*, produced in 1990, was shown widely in Mennonite youth education settings and on Mennonite college campuses. It dramatized Sattler’s life with a stirring musical score and portrayed his death in graphic, full-color detail. Writing for a Christian movie review website, one reviewer called *The Radicals* “compelling, dramatic, and inspiring” and encouraged his readers to watch it, even as he warned them about the film’s salty language and some “passionate kissing between a man and a woman.”<sup>36</sup> Of course, how better to arrest the attention of assimilated Mennonite adolescents than by including a few PG-13-rated scenes? From actual copies of *Martyrs Mirror* in 1950 to historical fiction in the 1960s to an “edgy” film in 1990: this was the trajectory of keeping 20th-century Mennonite adolescents emotionally invested in the 16th-century martyrs and, in the best of all worlds, existentially committed to the faith of their fathers and mothers.<sup>37</sup>

In some late 20th-century Mennonite communities, however, movies were considered unnecessary for holding young people’s attention. In these churches, *Martyrs Mirror* and its stirring words were thought to be sufficient for that task.

### **Encountering the Martyrs at Churchtown Mennonite Church**

Churchtown Mennonite Church, located in a brick meetinghouse in south-central Pennsylvania, is a congregation in the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church (EPMC). A conference of about sixty Mennonite congregations, the EPMC was born in the late 1960s, when a number of churches left the

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<sup>35</sup> Myron S. Augsburger, *Faithful Unto Death: Fifteen Young People Who Were Not Afraid to Die for Their Faith* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978), 8.

<sup>36</sup> The review, written by Edwin L. Carpenter, can be found at <https://dove.org/review/11350-the-radicals/>; accessed September 10, 2018. Carpenter cites the use of “whore” and “whoremonger” as examples of the film’s questionable language.

<sup>37</sup> The word “edgy” is Carpenter’s term for the film. *Ibid.*

Lancaster Mennonite Conference.<sup>38</sup> At the time, the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites' primary concern was that the Lancaster Mennonite Conference was becoming too worldly, particularly in the area of dress. Nearly fifty years later they have not changed their minds. A commitment to nonconformity continues to be a strong theme in the EPMC, a theme its male leaders use to distinguish their conference from more culturally assimilated forms of North American Mennonitism.<sup>39</sup>

In fall 2010, Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites from a handful of local congregations gathered at Churchtown Mennonite Church for what they call their "Annual Bible Meeting."<sup>40</sup> As is customary in these churches, the men and boys sat on one side of the sanctuary and the women and girls sat on the other—although on this particular day the teenagers sat with their peers in front of the main seating area, boys on the left and girls on the right. The entire focus of the two-hour gathering was *Martyrs Mirror*, with spoken prayers, congregational hymns, and two forty-five-minute sermons, all aimed at helping those in attendance encounter the book's message.

The sermons were ostensibly for everyone in attendance, but clearly the preachers had shaped their messages with adolescents in mind. Much like Gerald Studer in 1950, the ministers returned time and again to stories of teenaged martyrs, often mentioning specific ones, such as Eulalia, "not more than . . . thirteen years old, who was filled with such ardor of the spirit to die in the name of Christ."<sup>41</sup> In one case, preacher Clifford Martin told of a fourteen-year-old boy favored by the Roman emperor until he refused to pay homage to the Roman gods, at which point the boy was threatened with decapitation.<sup>42</sup> Turning to his adolescent listeners, Martin asked, "Youth here this afternoon . . . would you be able to so defend your faith as this youth did?" Martin quickly conceded that everyone in attendance, regardless of

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<sup>38</sup> Jesse Neuenschwander, "Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Eastern\\_Pennsylvania\\_Mennonite-Church&oldid=160677](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Eastern_Pennsylvania_Mennonite-Church&oldid=160677), accessed September 13, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> See Kenneth Aufer, *Keeping the Trust: Issues Surrounding the Formation of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church* (Ephrata, PA: Eastern Mennonite Publications, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> The following account is based on my visit to the Churchtown Mennonite Church near Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania, on October 3, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> The story of Eulalia appears in van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (1938), 176-78.

<sup>42</sup> The story of Pancratius appears in van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (1938), 179.

age, should ponder the boy's witness, but by the choice of his and his fellow preacher's martyrological examples, the focus was definitely on the youth.

What message did these preachers want their youth to absorb? Holding fast to the faith was the day's most obvious theme. Indeed, the hypothetical question that martyr books inevitably raise—What would you do in the face of persecution?—was voiced on multiple occasions. More significantly, however, the ministers pointed to less bloody dangers, including the danger of abandoning church-sanctioned forms of nonconformity. The two preachers did not leave the application of this principle to chance. Carrying cell phones, accumulating material possessions, nursing anger, and more generally running after anything that “the church forbids”: all of these they identified as worldly traps to avoid. In sum, they used *Martyrs Mirror* to help reinforce traditional forms of nonconformity, a reinforcement that in their view was secured by introducing adolescents to the bloody sacrifices of young people who went before them.

This afternoon was no ordinary time in the life of an Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite young person. In Lytch's words, the rhythms of their religious lives were being “disrupted and intensified” as they found themselves in a packed auditorium, in full view of their parents, surrounded by their closest friends, staring straight across the platform at similarly aged adolescents of the opposite sex. Both literally and figuratively they were being set up to hear the stories of people their age who had been willing to give up their lives for the sake of Jesus. In the coming years, many of these same youth would attend “Winter Bible School,” a three-week intensive experience that brings together young adults for fellowship and learning. These Bible Schools, again no ordinary time in the lives of EPMC young adults, are prime settings for meeting potential spouses, and it is not surprising that one frequent course offering focuses on creating a Christian home. Neither is it surprising that another course centers on *Martyrs Mirror*, giving young adults the chance to ponder the gruesome stories of Anabaptist martyrs and measure their own level of commitment against that of their spiritual ancestors.

Given the relatively privileged standing of contemporary North American Mennonites, including those in EPMC, outsiders may wonder about the strong emphasis placed on the Anabaptist martyrs. For the

Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites, these martyrs are truly the fathers and mothers of their specific form of Christianity, which they believe is superior to other forms of North American Christianity, including other Mennonite forms. Kenneth Auken's recently published history of the EPMC bears the title *Keeping the Trust*, and his introduction notes that the book's purpose is to help "the rising generation" value "the steps by which God has led us to where we are today."<sup>43</sup> A primary theme in his book is the spiritual decline of other North American Mennonites, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, when even the Lancaster Mennonite Conference could not withstand "the apostasy that was engulfing much of the Mennonite Church."<sup>44</sup> Thankfully, the EPMC came along to rescue the "time-proven biblical principles and practices" being jettisoned by mid-20th-century Mennonites who enjoyed mixed-gender seating on Sundays, wore modern clothes every day of the week, and pursued college educations when they graduated from high school.<sup>45</sup>

If Auken's book assumes the apologetic task necessary to securing next-generational loyalty, the EPMC emphasis on the martyrs, particularly in settings such as Annual Bible Meetings, provides young people with religious experiences needed to reinforce their congregations' socializing work. By imagining the martyrs' suffering and by imagining themselves as the best hope for preserving the martyrs' faith, many EPMC youth find spiritual resources to live outside the mainstream of North American life. They realize that the trials they face today are not as deadly as those the martyrs faced five hundred years ago. Like their parents, however, many of them will eventually find solace in their marginality, which in their view aligns them with the faithful Christians memorialized in *Martyrs Mirror*. Just as van Braght's teenaged martyrs paid the price for their odd practices, EPMC youth will "pay the price of being considered strange," a feeling of marginality that not only binds them together as young people but also increases their loyalty to the church the martyrs birthed—their EPMC congregations.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Auken, *Keeping the Trust*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>46</sup> This quotation comes from page 64 in *The Price of Keeping the Faith*, an undated, unattributed

**Martyr Stories, Assimilated Mennonites, and the Virtue of Marginality**

The use of *Martyrs Mirror* as a means of securing young adult loyalty makes more sense in conservative Anabaptist circles than it does in more assimilated Mennonite churches, where the virtue of cultural marginality is complicated by iPhones, hip-hop music, and prom dresses. Moreover, the impact of van Braght's bloody stories may be attenuated in communities where youth have easy access to Hollywood movies, first-person shooter games, and the daily news. Still, if Dean is right in claiming that martyrdom is inherently captivating to young people, one would think that this interest could be leveraged even in more assimilated Mennonite youth. Their churches' ministers may not be urging them to abandon their cell phones, but they are almost certainly hoping to instill in them some degree of cultural marginality. Can the 16th-century martyrs be helpful in advancing that marginality? Or might their invocation do more harm than good?

It is difficult to get a measure on the use of *Martyrs Mirror* in assimilated Mennonite churches, but its impact in the first quarter of the 21st century appears to be minimal. In *Thank You for Asking*, Sara Wenger Shenk reports on interviews she and her research assistants conducted with fifty-six Mennonite young adults in the early 2000s. Despite the project's focus on the narratives that shape young people's spiritual lives, *Martyrs Mirror* and Mennonite martyr stories more generally barely merit a mention. One project informant who does reference *Martyrs Mirror* notes that the stories it contains "are my stories and they aren't [my stories]," an observation she elucidates with the comment that her privileged middle-class existence seems far removed from the book's grisly contents.<sup>47</sup> In a different setting, another young person wondered about van Braght's inclusion of adult baptism as a criterion for true martyrdom, adding that placing such a high priority on baptismal practices was "silly."<sup>48</sup> Some may accuse this latter commentator

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text used in an EPMC Winter Bible School.

<sup>47</sup> Sara Wenger Shenk, *Thank You for Asking: Conversing with Young Adults about the Future Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 49 (emphasis in original). In contrast, Shenk's research team looked at the writings of her grandfather, A.D. Wenger, who kept a travel journal as a young man at the turn of the 20th century. They found that Wenger held *Martyrs Mirror* in high esteem.

<sup>48</sup> Jared L. Peifer, e-mail message to author, March 24, 2011. For similar perspectives, see Weaver-Zercher, *Martyrs Mirror: A Social History*, 261.

with a failure of historical imagination, a lack of theological seriousness, or both, but the fact remains that the historical distance between 16th-century Europe and 21st-century North America presents a serious challenge to those who would use *Martyrs Mirror* for adolescent faith formation. More recent martyr stories may be more effective in this regard, but for these potential beneficiaries at least, the stories in *Martyrs Mirror* lack the immediacy needed to make them potent.<sup>49</sup>

A second obstacle to using *Martyrs Mirror* in adolescent settings moves beyond the martyrs' seeming irrelevance to qualms about highlighting their suffering. Rooted in a more general concern about teenagers' mental health, this critique has been leveled most pointedly at the use of Jan Luyken's imagery as a shock-and-awe pedagogical technique.<sup>50</sup> Added to *Martyrs Mirror* in 1685, Luyken's images show the martyrs enduring many things, including various forms of torture and death. Captivating in their gruesomeness—burnt bodies, spouting blood, and decapitated heads—they have in some circles eclipsed the text itself as the most scrutinized feature of *Martyrs Mirror*, for they are easier and more interesting to absorb than van Braght's loquacious text. Still, while it could be argued that these images are singularly apt for illustrating the cost of discipleship, some critics have cited their potential to violate the sensitive imaginations of those viewing them.<sup>51</sup> Some Mennonite and Amish parents have decided the images are inappropriate for young children. Still others have suggested they are inappropriate for teens, catalyzing needless nightmares and (potentially, at

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<sup>49</sup> This, of course, was the impetus for *Bearing Witness: Stories of Martyrdom and Costly Discipleship*, eds. Charles E. Moore and Timothy Keiderling (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2016), which complements narratives from *Martyrs Mirror* with more recent martyr accounts.

<sup>50</sup> Stephanie Krehbiel, "Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior," *Mennonite Life* 61, no. 4 (December 2006); <https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-61-no-4/article/staying-alive-how-martyrdom-made-me-a-warrior/>, accessed September 10, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> In addition to accepting Krehbiel's testimony, I base this claim on letters and e-mails I received while researching the reception history of *Martyrs Mirror*. "It scared the shit out of me," wrote one respondent, recalling her youthful encounter with the book. The book was "terrifying," even "R-rated" in its depiction of violence, said another. "I remember crying that night," wrote yet a third, who admitted to reservations about exposing his own middle-school-aged children to the book.



least) advancing the notion that suffering is to be embraced, not avoided.<sup>52</sup>

These reasons for bypassing *Martyrs Mirror*, when combined with the book's user-unfriendliness, contribute to a general lack of interest in assimilated Mennonite settings. Still, some assimilated Mennonites have not given up on using its contents to secure the next generation of Anabaptists, and in doing so they almost always incarnate Dean's notion of an invitation to oddity. Perhaps the most obvious example of this invitation is a lesson plan produced for middle and high school students by the Mennonite Board of Education in the early 2000s. Titled "To Die For" (a title that more likely played on a popular expression about desirable dating options than it did on Erik Erikson's work), the lesson introduced teens to the stories of a few Anabaptist martyrs, then encouraged them to think about situations in which they, like the martyrs, would risk their social status by holding to their convictions. One of the suggested activities asked students to complete this sentence: "I could see myself making difficult choices because of my belief in . . ." an open-ended activity that, unlike the directive sermons at Churchtown Mennonite Church, allowed teenagers to imagine for themselves what it might mean to live lives of nonconformity.<sup>53</sup>

This invitation to oddity has also been extended to youth through Luyken's images, most notably through the image of Dirk Willems rescuing his pursuer from an icy pond. This image, which received relatively little attention in Anabaptist circles before 1950, has become something of an Anabaptist icon in the last fifty years, effective because even a child can grasp its unambiguous message of helping a person in need. Of course, Dirk's rescue image is popular for another reason: it sidesteps the problem of using violent imagery to teach Christian values. There is no blood in this particular image, nor any intimation of death—except for the death thwarted by Dirk's act of rescue. One of the more prominent iterations of Dirk in a youth-oriented context, a wood carving by Amish craftsman Aaron Zook, is found outside the cafeteria at Lancaster Mennonite High School, where students pass by

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<sup>52</sup> The danger of sanctifying suffering is a key component of Krehbiel's critique, a criticism with enough resonance that proponents of *Martyrs Mirror* have found it necessary to address it. See, for instance, John D. Roth and Elizabeth Miller, "Introduction," *Bearing Witness*, xiv.

<sup>53</sup> This lesson is on the Mennonite Education Agency website: [www.mennoniteeducation.org/Resources/Educators/Pages/JWGSeventheighth1.aspx](http://www.mennoniteeducation.org/Resources/Educators/Pages/JWGSeventheighth1.aspx), accessed September 13, 2018.

it every day. The custodians of this image, who have titled it “A Tradition of Love,” seek to remind its viewers that a Christ-like commitment to love will almost certainly be odd, for it will extend beyond persons who are easy or convenient to love.

Still other Mennonite youth leaders have used *Martyrs Mirror* to advance an even stranger lesson, the practice of nonviolence. In his “Onward Martyrdom Rap,” Philadelphia Mennonite youth leader and hip-hop artist Cruz Cordero urges his listeners to consider the nonviolent example of Dirk Willems and other 16th-century martyrs as they navigate America’s eye-for-an-eye culture.<sup>54</sup> According to Cordero, it was the martyrs’ witness that attracted him to Anabaptism in the first place, for the martyrs demonstrated the Christ-like faith that he “wanted to experience” for himself.<sup>55</sup> Sensing the difficulty posed by the martyrs’ cultural distance from his black and Latino listeners, Cordero moves back and forth in his rap from the 16th-century martyrs to “my man Tom Skinner,” a former gang member who, after his conversion in the 1950s, devoted himself to evangelism and nonviolence in his Harlem neighborhood.<sup>56</sup> While insisting that the “historical records [from *Martyrs Mirror*] are not just for the experts / they’re there for those who want to learn without lectures,” Cordero’s rap also seeks to update van Braght’s centuries-old martyr record by citing the suffering witness of contemporary Christians, including members of Ethiopia’s Meserete Kristos Church.

The context in which Cordero seeks to instill Anabaptist values in young adults could hardly be more different from that of Churchtown Mennonite Church. Still, whether their churches are situated in North Philadelphia or in the rural hills of central Pennsylvania, these Mennonite ministers agree that many forces are pulling 21st-century youth away from the faith. They may not be aware of Erik Erikson’s work on youth identity formation, but they share his sense that a vital force in adolescents is the search for something or someone to devote one’s life to. They are less

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<sup>54</sup> Cordero’s rap is found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIImiokalAVE&t=189>, accessed September 13, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> An interview with Cordero about the genesis of his martyrdom rap can be found at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIHhNmyrh4c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIHhNmyrh4c), accessed September 13, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Tom Skinner, *Black and Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968).

concerned about the psychological damage martyr stories might do to young people than about offering a tepid, culturally conformist message.<sup>57</sup> Most important, they share the conviction that the martyrs' examples, if rightly packaged, can potentially provide a spark that takes young people beyond a cognitive knowledge of the Anabaptist faith to an actual commitment to it. In that sense, these 21st-century Anabaptist ministers share much in common, not only with one another but with many previous generations of Anabaptist church leaders. Like Myron Augsburger, Gerald Studer, and a host of others, indeed, like Thieleman van Braght himself, they believe that the witness of the martyrs can help young people "forsake the vanities of this world" in favor of a more satisfying passion.

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<sup>57</sup> An exposition on the proper and improper use of Anabaptist martyr stories in adolescent Christian educational settings is beyond the scope of this essay. That said, appropriate pedagogy would almost surely include: a youth leader's knowledge of and sensitivity to the students in his/her care, plus an acknowledgment that living for a godly purpose is far better than dying for one, that living an authentic Christian life sometimes leads to hardship, that Christian martyrdom is not the exclusive preserve of Anabaptists, and that Christians have a long history of oppressing others, sometimes in God's name.