

TMTC NOW



Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre

FROM THE DIRECTORS DESK

BY KYLE GINGERICH HIEBERT, TMTC DIRECTOR



In his oft quoted essay on the development of Christian doctrine, the well-known English theologian, poet, and priest John Henry Newman suggests that “... to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” This past year has certainly borne witness to much change, in part foisted upon us by the global pandemic. Like so many other institutions, TMTC scrambled to move our program online and if there is any silver lining to be found in the multiplicity of virtual forums we have created and lived through this past year, perhaps it lies in the fact that our community grew larger and new connections were forged despite our isolation. All of our online events saw significantly increased participation and this was especially evident at our ninth biennial graduate student conference which drew 24 graduate student presenters from 20 different institutions across North America, Europe, and Africa.

Our Fellows Program is also in the process of the largest turnover in its history. Sarah Johnson, a TMTC Visiting Fellow since 2018, successfully defended her dissertation at the University of Notre Dame and begins a new position at the University of British Columbia this fall and Kim Penner, a TMTC Research Fellow since 2017, began as Pastor of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in February. Sarah and Kim have both added tremendous energy, insight, and wisdom to the TMTC community and we wish both of them well and look forward to keeping in touch with the important work they are doing. We are also welcoming several new fellows. Jeremy Bergen joined us as our inaugural Faculty Fellow in February and continues to support TMTC’s teaching and advising mandate in Toronto. Stella Kayenga Mungbu, who completed her PhD at the University of Pretoria in South Africa in 2019, and Anthony Siegrist, who is no stranger to TMTC having completed his doctorate at TST in 2012, will both join us as remote Research Fellows this fall. And, finally, Hadje Sadjé, a PhD candidate at the University of Hamburg, will also join us as a remote Visiting Fellow.

In cooperation with our friends at the Institute of Mennonite Studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, we relaunched the Anabaptist Mennonite Scholars Network (AMSN). The AMSN aims to facilitate greater awareness of and collaboration between a whole host of Anabaptist Mennonite scholars, centres, and institutions. We invite you to explore the lengthy list of calls for papers, conferences, lectures, employment opportunities, fellowships, scholarships, online resources, and more on our website (uwaterloo.ca/toronto-mennonite-theological-centre/amsn) and to sign up for our email newsletter. We are also exploring links with the emerging Global Anabaptist Higher Education Network, which is being formed under the auspices of Mennonite World Conference (MWC), and are planning for joint meetings and workshops to be held at the upcoming MWC Assembly next summer in Indonesia.

Returning to Newman, I would suggest that the question he presses is about how we receive the change that inevitably comes our way. Do we understand change only or primarily as an obstacle to be overcome or might we also understand it as a gift that invites a deeper examination of who we are in relation to each other and to God? Newman himself gives us a hint about how we might approach this elsewhere in his work in the form of a hymn, which may be more familiar to Mennonite ears because it appears in one of our older hymnals (*The Mennonite Hymnal*, 1969 #316) under the title “Lead, kindly light.” In it, he paints no rosy picture of the world but one that may feel more like I imagine many of us might see our world today; as one plagued by an “encircling gloom.” In the midst of this, Newman invites us to be lead by the light of the world (John 8:12) that will surely lead us “o’re moor and fen, o’re crag and torrent, till the night is gone.” And so as we enter another uncertain year, perhaps we can make Newman’s prayer our own in the hope that we may all be lead by the light that shines in the darkness and is not overcome.

Celebrating New PhDs

BY KYLE GINGERICH HIEBERT, TMTc DIRECTOR

One of the highlights of being part of the TMTc community is celebrating the successful completion of advanced degrees. On average, we usually see about one student graduate per year. However, over the course of this past year, we saw a veritable spate of doctoral degrees awarded to TMTc associates and fellows.



Zac Klassen graduated with a PhD from McMaster University in the fall of 2020 with a dissertation entitled “Theologies of Israel and Judaism After Barth.” As the title suggests, Zac’s work examines the conceptual relationship between Karl Barth’s theology of Israel and Judaism and the theologies of Israel and Judaism in three students

of Barth’s work. In future research, Zac hopes to continue to articulate the importance of developments in post-Holocaust Christian theologies of Israel and Judaism. While academic life continues to be important for Zac, he was called to be Pastor at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church beginning in August 2021.

In March of 2021, **Allison Murray** successfully defended her dissertation, “Building Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: White American Evangelical Complementarian Theology, 1970-2010” at Emmanuel College in Toronto. Since February of this year Allison has been working as a Religious Studies teacher at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate in Kitchener. Allison looks forward to enjoying further teaching opportunities at Rockway, as well as continuing to exercise her scholarly skills in additional research projects. She is also looking to publish her dissertation and is pursuing post-doctoral research opportunities.



Max Kennel successfully defended his dissertation “Ontologies of Violence: Jacques Derrida, Mennonite Pacifist Epistemology, and Grace M. Jantzen’s Death and the Displacement of Beauty” through McMaster University’s Department of Religious Studies in May 2021. This fall he will begin a new project on the relationship between religion

and conspiratorial thinking, as part of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Toronto’s Department for the Study of Religion.



Sarah Kathleen Johnson successfully defended her PhD dissertation in Theology at the University of Notre Dame in April 2021 and was a TMTc Visiting Fellow. Her interdisciplinary dissertation at the intersection of liturgical studies and sociology of religion is titled “Occasional Religious

Practice: An Ethnographic Theology of Christian Worship in a Changing Religious Landscape.” Anchored in ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Anglican tradition in Toronto, this study coins and develops the concept of occasional religious practice to better understand those who participate in religious practices occasionally rather than routinely and often in connection with specific types of occasions such as holidays and life transitions. This summer, Sarah moved from Toronto to Vancouver to begin a new position as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Theology and Worship and Louisville Institute Postdoctoral Fellow at Vancouver School of Theology and St. Mark’s College at the University of British Columbia.



Based in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto, **Isaac Friesen** successfully defended his dissertation, titled “Casual Crossings: The Muslim Attendance of Coptic Spaces in Provincial Egypt,” in April 2021. His dissertation examines overlapping ethics, traditions and histories at four Coptic sites

frequented by Muslims in the provincial Egyptian city of Beni Suef—where Isaac first moved as a member of Mennonite Central Committee in early 2011. Isaac’s dissertation illuminates how ordinary Egyptians have worked for peace in the face of increasing material and sociopolitical hardship. Isaac has recently begun a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Ottawa, working on the multinational John Templeton Foundation-funded project The Transmission of Religion Across Generations and is a Junior Fellow at the University of Toronto’s Bill Graham Centre for Contemporary International History.

I’m sure you will join me in offering hearty congratulations to each of these scholars on the successful completion of their doctoral journeys! It has been a privilege and a delight for us at TMTc to be able to learn from and engage with the important work they are doing and we look forward to keeping in touch as they transition into new opportunities to serve the academy and the church.

2020 A. James Reimer Award Recipients

Sarah Kathleen Johnson and **Maxwell Kennel** are co-winners of the 2020 A. James Reimer Award. Sarah completed her PhD at the University of Notre Dame and was a TMTc Visiting Fellow and Max was a TMTc associate and completed his PhD at McMaster University.

Recent Events

August 14-15, 2020: Co-sponsored conference on “The Christian Left” with Emmanuel College, Trinity St. Paul’s United Church, and EDGE: A Network for Ministry Development

September 29, 2020: Welcome and celebration of research event

October 6 2020: Scholars forum with Emma CW Ceruti on “Doing and Undoing Disability Theology: A Mystical-Liberative Approach to the Cross”

November 4, 2020: Scholars forum with Andy Martin on “Identifying the Sacramental in Anabaptist-Mennonite Spirituality”

November 12, 2020: Gathering to discuss misconduct findings

November 20, 2020: Mennonite Scholars and Friends Forum: Round table on Recovering from the Anabaptist Vision

December 3, 2020: Scholars forum with Sherri Guenther Trautwein on “Remembering Mary and her song: a consideration of Mary and her foremothers in the shadow of the Divine Warrior”

January 7, 2021: Scholars forum with TMTTC Research Fellow Jason Reimer Greig on “Being Received or Being Asserted: The Challenge People with Profound Cognitive Impairments Pose to Mennonite/Anabaptist Practices of Baptism”

February 18, 2021: Scholars forum with TMTTC Visiting Fellow Sarah Johnson on “The Implications of Occasional Religious Practice for Christian Ministry: An Ethnographic Liturgical Theology in a Changing Religious Landscape”

March 10, 2021: Scholars forum with Thomas Reimer on “Docetism and sexual hermeneutics in Eriugena”

March 24 2021: TMTTC public lecture featuring Chris Huebner on “Absent Fathers, Invisible Mothers, and the Irrepressible Dance of Love: A Reading of the Theological Virtues as Epistemological Virtues” and a response from Néstor Medina

April 15, 2021: Scholars forum with TMTTC Research Fellow Kim Penner on “No More ‘Discernment’: Exploring the Practical Implications of a Liberative Feminist Christian Ethics for Congregational Life”

June 17-19, 2021: Ninth Biennial Graduate Student Conference on the theme of “Hope, Despair, Lament”

TMTTC Fellow Spotlight

BY JASON REIMER GREIG, TMTTC RESEARCH FELLOW



In recent years, the Mennonite church has begun engaging Lutherans and Catholics in dialogue about the practice of baptism, raising both historical and theological questions about the practice. These trilateral dialogues inspired me to write a recent article

published in *The Conrad Grebel Review* and lead a Scholar’s Forum last year on what might happen if we took the full membership and personhood of people with profound cognitive impairments in our faith communities seriously. How might our (practical) theologies be interrogated and/or renewed?

Ever since the 16th century, the baptism of people “under the age of accountability” has been anathema to Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and practice. Whether it concerns biblical injunctions to “believer’s baptism,” or more contemporary forms of voluntarism present in free church milieus, the demand for the ability to “truly understand” one’s motivations and ends has set an anthropological limit on baptismal practice.

Yet where does this leave persons highly limited in their cognitive capacities? A popular way to address such an issue currently is through the lens of “inclusion.” While the intention here is certainly sincere in seeking to make the practice “accessible,” it also risks making people with cognitive impairments “exceptions which prove the rule,” or “special cases,” who the able majority to generously “include.” At the same time, the hyper-voluntarist anthropology undergirding much baptismal theology is never reconsidered, and thus offers a potentially skewed theological anthropology for everyone.

What if baptism became less a manifestation of the assertion of individual will than a reception of the gift of being? Baptism is a rite which transforms the identity of the candidate into someone “saved” through being immersed in Christ’s death and resurrection, and thus belonging to a new pilgrim people. In this conception of baptism, one’s identity is not willed into existence by a heroic individual, but received as a gift from a loving God and a renewed community. When the church is ready to let its own theology be transformed, it might be able to baptize persons with profound cognitive impairments not as “special” but as potentially paradigmatic of the ecstatic gift of friendship offered through the baptismal font.

Teaching Note

BY HYEJUNG JESSIE YUM, TMTc ASSOCIATE AND DOCTORAL STUDENT AT EMMANUEL COLLEGE



“Thank you everyone, it’s been one of my favourite courses being with all of you and the rich diversity of the people here.” As this student’s comment highlights, a summer course I taught called “Social Justice and Theology in Context” at Emmanuel College was made up of people of different genders, races, ethnicities, sexualities, disabilities, professions, and religious traditions. I was privileged to teach these inspiring students. As an educator teaching social justice, I prioritized creating a learning environment for every voice to be heard and valued. I wanted the students to be active learning agents, so tried to create an embodied and contemplative classroom, using various experimental teaching methods available online: voluntary student speakers, creative Land Acknowledgment and mindfulness practices led by students, small and large group discussions, debates, and exploratory writing in classes, in addition to lectures, presentations, and papers. To engage in contextual theologies and justice, each class began with voluntary sharing of students’ experiences from 2SLGBTQ+ community, ministry with disability, justice in Islamic tradition, pacifism in Engaged Buddhism, ministry with ex-prisoners, and sacred labour in garden. In the midst of deep sorrow from recent news of Indigenous children buried in unmarked graves and Muslim families victimized by hate crime, we lamented together, expressed solidarity with those in unjust suffering, and created a collective Land Acknowledgement poem entitled “I will not forget.” Through working together, we learned how our differences enriched our knowledge and experience. This is what I hoped my students and I would experience in churches and society. After this course, I have come to understand better bell hooks’ comment that “When students are encouraged to trust in their capacity to learn they can meet difficult challenges with a spirit of resilience and competence” (Teaching Community: Pedagogy of Hope, 133).

About the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre

Founded in 1990, the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTc) is a graduate teaching and research centre administered by Conrad Grebel University College with support from an Advisory Council comprised of representatives from Mennonite educational and denominational institutions in Canada and the United States.

TMTc helps form theological leadership for the church by providing and supporting graduate theological education from a Mennonite perspective within the vibrant ecumenical context of the Toronto School of Theology (TST) at the University of Toronto. TMTc seeks to foster interdisciplinary reflection on the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition, as well as other traditions, by graduate students and scholars working across the breadth of the theological disciplines and those working outside the discipline of theology proper. It encourages graduate students to grow toward wise theological discernment, spiritual depth and maturity, excellent scholarship, mutual and respectful dialogue, and ecumenical and global awareness. TMTc is also devoted to creating an awareness of the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition among scholars, teachers and students from other traditions and is often described as the Anabaptist/Mennonite “hub” at TST.

To make a donation to TMTc, please make cheques payable to *Conrad Grebel University College*, specifying “TMTc” in the memo line. Interested donors may contact Fred W. Martin at fwmartin@uwaterloo.ca or 519-885-0220 x24381.

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