

IN THIS ISSUE

When I first assumed the editorship of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* some fifteen years ago, the masthead included a list of nine “honorary editors,” all of them luminaries in the field of Anabaptist-Mennonite studies. By then, many of them had retired from active scholarship, but their ongoing visible association with *MQR* instilled in me a sense of sober responsibility and a comforting awareness of their continued interest in the well-being of the journal. With the death of Franklin Littell at age 91 on May 23, 2009, the last of these nine revered scholars has now passed from the scene. Littell was best known in the academic world as a pioneering scholar of the Holocaust who challenged his fellow Christians to recognize their complicity in the anti-Semitism that ultimately led to the concentration camps. Early in his career, however, Littell made his mark as a student of Anabaptism. His most famous publication in the field, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*, appeared in 1952 as a revised version of his doctoral dissertation at Yale. In the book, Littell described the Anabaptists as Christian primitivists intent on recovering the purity of the Gospel message and defending the principles of religious liberty by returning to the model of the apostolic church. The argument supported the emphasis of the Bender school on the theological creativity of the early Anabaptist movement and helped to lend broader visibility and credibility to the emerging field of Anabaptist-Mennonite studies. Although he published little on Anabaptism after that, Littell remained an enthusiastic supporter of Anabaptist scholarship for the remainder of his life.

It is fitting that this issue, which marks the formal retirement of our “honorary editors” list, should also feature the work of several very promising young scholars. **Richard Klinedinst**, a recent graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, opens the issue with an essay that brings the “agrarian political vision” of Wendell Berry, well-known farmer, poet and essayist, into conversation with Anabaptist theology. Berry’s commitment to the cultivation of local, concrete, embodied relationships critiques the modern political tendency toward abstractions and offers a creative variation on recent Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings of “the politics of Jesus.”

Essays by two recent graduates from Goshen College shift our attention to contemporary themes in the Mennonite church. Building on extensive oral interviews, **Lydetta Assefa** traces recurring motifs in the conversion narratives of nearly forty members of the Meserete Kristos Church, a Mennonite group in Ethiopia, in the transition from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to their new fellowship. Assefa situates

these stories within the larger political, economic and religious context of Ethiopia during the second half of the twentieth century. Clearly, the impact of modernization and Westernization played some role in the Meserte Kristos renewal movement; but the stories also reflect deep currents in traditional African religious life and bear witness to the surprising movement of the Spirit. **Matthew Harms**, another recent Goshen College graduate, follows with a detailed history of three short-term Mennonite voluntary service programs: SWAP, DOOR and Youth Venture. In recent years, short-term service programs have come under criticism from some quarters as being paternalistic, expensive, a drain on the resources of host communities, and superficial in their approach to poverty and racism. Harms takes all of these charges seriously. But he also convincingly argues that the founders of SWAP, DOOR and Youth Venture anticipated and addressed all of these criticisms. Although these short-term service programs were far from perfect, the evidence suggests that their benefits outweighed the potential problems.

Andrea Dalton, who recently completed her studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, takes on an enduring theme in Anabaptist hermeneutics: the relationship of the Old and New Testaments. Focusing on the writings of Pilgram Marpeck and his colleagues, Dalton demonstrates a pattern of exegesis that situated Old Testament passages within a larger overarching theological context of “witness” and “providence.” Echoing recent arguments by Arnold Snyder and Martin Rothkegel, Dalton’s conclusions further underscore the differences between Marpeck and the Swiss Brethren, whose approach to the Old Testament was far less nuanced.

Finally, we conclude with an interpretive analysis by a veteran scholar, **Calvin Redekop**. During the past four decades, Mennonite groups in North America have invested heavily in several large-scale sociological studies of faith and practice, with the Church Membership Profiles of 1972, 1989 and 2006 being the most visible among them. Redekop helpfully summarizes these surveys and offers a critical analysis emphasizing especially their limitations in identifying the causes of specific behaviors or pointing toward useful solutions.

Although the “honorary editors” have now disappeared from our masthead, the essays gathered in this volume provide ample evidence that interest in Anabaptist-Mennonite studies is alive and well among the next generation of scholars, representing an impressive range of disciplines, time periods and topics. We at *MQR* are pleased to be part of this intergenerational conversation.

– John D. Roth, editor