

# Foreword

This year's *Journal of Mennonite Studies* begins with papers from the October 2007 conference, "Family and Sexuality in Mennonite History," held at Conrad Grebel University College and sponsored by the Divergent Voices of Canadian Mennonites (DVCM) Committee, a sub-committee of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. For the past decade the DVCM committee has sought to give voice to subjects on the margins of Canadian Mennonite history. Ideas of sexuality and family relations have often been controversial topics, and the papers within this volume, range from offering new insights into the private sphere of Mennonite history to those which have produced conflict within the Mennonite community. The twenty nine contributors at the conference, both those published here and those whose papers will surely appear in other venues, met the mark of adding a "divergent voice to Canadian Mennonite" history.

The first of the papers published here, describe ideas on sexuality. Brenda Martin Hurst shares a chapter from her forthcoming book on a history of the theology of sexuality: in this paper she analyzes the personal correspondence between Evangelist Menno S. Steiner and his wife Clara (Eby) Steiner during the 1890s, showing a subtle but sustained exchange on the ascending idea among some "progressive" Mennonites that sexuality in marriage hampered spiritual growth. The prevalence of this idea is apparent in Tracy Penny Light's article on the Canadian Mennonite minister, C.F. Derstine, who wrote two booklets on sexuality and youth during the 1940s; he used science, albeit one outdated for his day, to support the widespread concern that urban ways were undermining sexual "purity" among war-time Mennonite youth.

These papers are followed by several on women on the margins of a heterosexual or patriarchal society. Doreen Klassen reports on an oral history project that focused on four Low German-speaking “singlewomen” in an Old Colony Mennonite community in Mexico; she asks how these women constructed a distinct adult identity, one that simultaneously contested gendered norms, but sought a meaningful integration in a communitarian and agrarian society. M.J. Heisey provides another perspective on singlewomen identity by analyzing the letters and diary of a US relief worker in post-war France; Elsie C. Bechtel’s commentary on sexual practice and physical appearance of men and women around her indicates the importance of the “body” in her lifeworld. Jan Braun offers a personal narrative of her search for acceptance as a “queer Mennonite” in a Saskatchewan community and then in the wider community of Mennonite Church Canada; she shares a painful story of a search for voice and agency within the context of a history of the GLBT movement among Canadian Mennonites.

The next two papers (both based on recent Ph.D. dissertations) provide a perspective on Mennonite family culture as exhibited in materiality, specifically in so-called traditional artifacts. Roland Sawatzky applies the theory Pierre Bourdieu to the southern Manitoba Mennonite housebarn, an architectural feature transplanted from Europe; much more than a stolid quaint building, it was a dynamic, culturally-informed social space that ordered a gendered family lifecycle in an agrarian Mennonite household. Lynette Plett uses the material artifact of women’s dress in the small, conservative Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite community in Meade County (Kansas) and the Interlake district (Manitoba) to illuminate the everyday lives and worldviews of those women; she places herself in that account, as daughter and granddaughter wearing “worldly” clothes.

Finally, two papers touch on the ways sexuality plays itself out in the everyday. Paul Tiessen reviews Rudy Wiebe’s earliest and most recent works, that is, his 1962 *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and his autobiographical 2006 *of this earth: A Mennonite boyhood in the boreal forest*; Tiessen ponders why sex seems to be portrayed differently in the two works, but concludes that apparent differences may be exaggerated as, through the lens of the 2006 work, “lyrical rejoicings” become apparent in the first. Hans Werner brings his skills in social history to ask questions few historians hitherto have, and that is, the teaching on and extent of premarital sex in conservative, agrarian Mennonite communities; he examines over 1000 marriage records and several diaries in 19th and early 20th century South Russia and Manitoba and observes specific times in history when the practice was rather widespread and, given certain conditions, considered merely a mild form of social deviancy.

In the research section, the *Journal* opens with a curious piece by Hildi Froese Tiessen that itself could have been part of the ‘Family and Sexuality’ conference, but more fittingly brings to light a lost chapter in Mennonite literary history, Ephraim Cressman’s unpublished novel on “three Mennonite maids” in southern Ontario. The article interweaves the contents of the novel, the artistic pursuits of the author bent on finding freedom from traditionalist Mennonite cultural restraints, and the recent search for and discovery of the manuscript.

A *JMS* tradition, a focus on the crucially important story of Mennonites in Russia, concludes the essay portion of this issue. The sequence of promise and suffering in this part of the world has left an indelible imprint on the Mennonite imagination. The first article in this section is a report by Peter Letkemann on his painstaking research into the “fate” of Mennonites during Stalinist Soviet Union; he presents both numbers and a narrative in sketching a story of exile, suffering and forgiveness among the Mennonites of the Volga-Ural district. Erwin Warkentin presents and analyses the reports of Dr. Otto Auhagen of the German Embassy in Moscow during the crisis of 1929 when some 6000 Mennonites gathered near that city in the vain hope of obtaining exit visas; Warkentin argues that Auhagen’s notes indicate that it was not religious persecution that drove the refugees but the catastrophic social upheaval linked to the early stages of collectivization. Aileen Friesen takes the reader back to the 19th century when the state also interfered in the religious lives of the Mennonites, but in quite a different manner than later regimes: here in the 1860s government officials debated rigorously the right response to the rise of the Mennonite Brethren and eventually concluded that although they marked a disruptive religious force in the Mennonite colonies they must be tolerated unless they actually broke a civic law.

The *Journal* concludes with 22 book reviews on the best of Mennonite literature, history, religious studies and social sciences in 2007. The question of home seems especially prevalent in the literature section with several of the books dedicated to personal writing and autobiography. The history section is especially eclectic as the range of books reviewed take on the entire range of Mennonite history, from the Anabaptist times through Prussia to Canada and the US, and then from New York City, to Manitoba, to China. The religious studies section highlights the theological contributions of John Howard Yoder and A. James Reimer. Among books defined here as social science are two on the complex and evolving worlds of the Amish. The contributions of Kathleen Venema and Brian Froese in making the book review section a dynamic one are deeply appreciated.

Royden Loewen, editor

