

# Foreword

This issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* is devoted to ethnographic papers presented at the historic “Mennonites and Anthropology” conference held at the University of Winnipeg on 25–26 October 2019. As a conference devoted to anthropology and not history, literature, theology, and sociology, our usual fare, it was indeed historic. As a social historian I have employed the discipline of anthropology in cursory fashion. My own understanding has been shaped by Clifford Geertz’s classical quest to locate within a social group that “system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [members] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”

My own appreciation for the discipline of anthropology in understanding Mennonite culture has developed through a multi-year email exchange with Dr. Philip Fountain, the co-editor of the JMS Forum section of this issue. Philip first suggested the idea of this conference to me on 7 December 2011, when he was a post-doc at the National University of Singapore. Philip cited a conversation he had had with Dr. James Urry in 2006 about the dearth of anthropologies of Mennonites. In his 2011 email, Philip noted a range of recently completed PhDs and MAs in the field—by Tomomi Naka, Ling-Ling Fan, Emily Welty, and himself—and imagined nothing short of developing a new field, an “anthropology of Mennonite Christianity,” building on “a growing efflorescence of anthropological studies of Mennonite communities and initiatives.” It was his hope to “bring these disparate studies into conversation with each other.” He was especially interested in seeing this new field link anthropology’s focus on “non-Western others” to include “Mennonite communities in North America,” and to go beyond studies on Anabaptist groups such as the Amish that “fit the ‘exotic other’ slot.” It was his hope that the “anthropology of Mennonite

Christianity could make a significant theoretical contribution . . . by blurring the gap between an anthropology of ‘at home’ and ‘distant’ fieldwork in the Global South.” To my mind the papers in this issue meet this objective. Fortunately, I agreed with Philip that a conference devoted to this idea take place, and through the many years of planning I also developed a strong friendship with Philip.

This issue begins with a guest editorial on the JMS Forum section by Philip Fountain, who situates the field of “Mennonites and Anthropology” within the evolving study of “Anthropology of Christianity.” He finds within it the scholarly tools to understand cultural diversity, employ comparative analysis, and understand evolving identities. His reflection, in turn, is followed by one by Miriam Rudolph, who situates this issue’s cover illustration within her own understanding of Mennonite–Indigenous relations and the natural environment. These reflections are then followed by seven papers that focus on an ethnographic approach to Mennonites and anthropology. Significantly, this issue involves scholars born in or residing in Canada, India, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Paraguay, and the United States. It is a fitting corpus to begin this global conversation.

These papers were merely those which had a particular ethnographic focus; the “Mennonites and Anthropology” conference also featured a number of papers with an historical focus. For the first time since my service as editor began in 1996, we will divide the annual conference papers and publish this second batch in the 2021 issue. Thus expect papers in that issue from a number of other scholars, including James Urry, who presented the keynote address at the conference.

As usual, we also feature works in the “Regular Research Papers” section. James Rohrer takes us on a personal journey in which he opens up the life of his aunt, anarchist Sarah A. Rohrer, who lived from 1843 to 1935. His thick description of her life offers a family-oriented narrative of a woman on the edge of the Mennonite world. Then Ron Jantz introduces us to the “everyday life” of members of the so-called Holdeman People, members of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite. He argues that letters to their church newsletter, the *Messenger of Truth*, suggest changes in Church life from those of earlier parts of the century. In the “Primary Documents” section, Victor Wiebe analyzes a rare copy of *Liedersammlung für die Volksschule in Ziffern*, a songbook published by Mennonites in Imperial Russia.

My sincere thanks, as always, to Brian Froese and Rob Zacharias for their work as book review editors. A further thanks to the untiring work of our copy editors, Muriel Smith and Hans Werner.

Then, a warm welcome to our new managing editor, Jeremy Wiebe, whose deep knowledge of Canadian Mennonite history, communications and ethnic historiography, computer technologies, and sharp editorial instincts will be most welcomed. Jeremy takes over from Andrea Dyck, who has moved to become the full-time senior curator at the Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach, Manitoba, and whose many years of devoted and skilful service as managing editor of *JMS* and executive assistant of the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies are deeply appreciated.

Finally, I wish to add my own profound gratitude for having had the privilege of editing the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* for the past 24 years. I have deeply enjoyed working with the many contributing authors over these years (280 unique authors to be exact), the ever-attentive board (whose only remuneration came in the form of cookies and coffee at the semi-annual meeting), and the selfless book review, copy, and managing editors. It has truly been a privilege. I wish Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, the incoming Chair in Mennonite Studies and editor of *JMS*, the very best and look forward to seeing the fruits of his leadership and gifts.

I trust you will enjoy *JMS* 2020.

Royden Loewen, Editor