

# In Memoriam

## Leo Driedger (1928–2020)



Mennonite Studies has lost one of its preeminent scholars with the passing of Prof. Leo Driedger on December 28, 2020, at age 92. He was also a friend who offered support to his colleagues, a leader generous with his time among Mennonite institutions, and a relentless champion of a socially engaged Mennonite community.

Like so many Mennonite scholars who came to the fore in the second half of the twentieth century, Leo had rural roots, growing up in Osler, Saskatchewan, and he was the grandson of Old Colony Mennonite farmers. His academic trajectory took him to the University of Chicago for his MA (1955) and Michigan State University for his PhD (1964), before settling in for a long and distinguished career, 1966–1999, at the University of Manitoba's Department of

Sociology. Here he came to be centrally associated with the sociology of ethnic relations in multicultural and urban Canada. His sojourn at the University of Chicago, the birthplace of the so-called Chicago School of sociology, which celebrated the city over the frontier as the place in which old customs were broken, and new energies arose from interaction with other cultures, was significant.

Those of us who knew Leo recall how he emphasized the connection between Mennonite sociologists and Chicago, often citing how he had been in the company of Winfield Fretz (PhD, 1941), J. Howard Kauffman (1960), Donovan Smucker (1957), Calvin Redekop (1959), and likely other Mennonites, in undertaking graduate work at the University of Chicago. Leo was relentless in pushing the idea of the great U-turn in Mennonite history, that is, that sixteenth-century Anabaptism was urban spawned, that it had settled in for a stultifying rural peace, and that four centuries later, in the second half of the twentieth century, it had come back home to urban milieus.

At the height of his career—from 1988 to 1991—Leo published four books in quick succession that captured the germ of his academic mission. In his *Mennonite Identity in Conflict* (1988) he republished a series of essays that advanced the idea of “middlemen,” a concept by Pierre van den Berghe which placed Mennonites not simply as an ethnoreligious minority but as one that stood between the masses and government. This position, while culturally distinct, allowed Mennonites a particular social power. The twentieth-century city, wrote Leo, was the Mennonites’ “middleman” moment, a time for social engagement and cultural relevance.

This was the crux of Leo’s analysis. His collection with Leland Harder (who had his own Chicago ties), *Anabaptist-Mennonite Identities in Ferment* (1990) reported on an historic Goshen college conference that featured Mennonite social scientists considering the historical evolution of Mennonites using a sophisticated array of theoretical analyses teeing off of the church-sect continuum theory and homing in on the dialectical process of social change. It was a fervour made apparent again in his *Mennonites in Winnipeg* (1990), a small book produced for the Mennonite World Conference. Perhaps it was highly narrative but its conceptual foundation was a 1975 essay in which Leo, in his own words, “proposed a typology of Ethnic Villagers and Metropolitan Remnants” and concluded that this approach marked not only a “sophisticated” understanding of the Mennonites’ arrival in the city, but was based “on a New Testament model of the church [that] was more likely to help Mennonites survive in the city.”<sup>1</sup> Then in 1991 he produced *Mennonite Mosaic* with J. Howard Kauffman, a report on a survey of some three thousand Mennonites in more than 150 congregations in five conferences,

measuring the impact of modernization, but insisting that the urban world was not synonymous with assimilation and secularization.

My own encounters with Leo highlight many of these moments. I first laid sight on him when as a young graduate student attending a MCC Canada AGM I observed this crusty, engaged, and slightly intimidating chair who had a fierce commitment to social justice. Later, when I was doing my own doctorate at the University of Manitoba I encountered Leo as a mentor, an exuberant endorser of young scholars, who was thrilled to learn of any University of Chicago connections. Then, as a post-doc he encouraged me to engage with the wider ethnic world in Canada's Metropolis Project, in which I came to know the Prof. Driedger of Canadian ethnicity fame. My next encounter with him was as the new editor of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* in 1997, where I recall this board member's passion for the integrated, socially relevant modern Mennonite. The proposed cover for that particular issue of the journal featured drawings of two Holdeman Mennonite dresses lifted from an article by anthropologist Linda Arthur. Leo, as I recall, was indignant, suggesting that this image was reminiscent of an earlier, stagnant time of Mennonite history, and more appropriate would have been one reflecting the issue's focus on T. D. Regehr's new book, *Mennonites in Canada: A People Transformed*. From Leo's perspective the subtitle was not only an apt description of the mid-century decades, but a prescription for a truly engaged person of faith, and member of an ethno-religious community.

Leo Driedger will be missed. He set an example as a scholar with a heart and vision for the relevance of religion within a modern context. His energy was infusive, his interest in academic analysis keen, and his mission relentless. Rest in peace.

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### Note

- <sup>1</sup> Leo Driedger, "Sociology of Mennonites: State of the Art and Science," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1 (1983), 33-63, p. 40.