

Rhizome

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“Power and Preservation” Symposium



Power and Preservation Symposium Participants at Goshen College

“The global church,” said Patrick Obonde, director of missions at the Anabaptist Leadership Education Centre in Kenya, “works best when all her parts are engaged in sharing their stories.”

On June 17-19, more than 30 people from 12 different countries gathered on the campus of Goshen College to participate in a conversation about gathering and preserving sources that are crucial to the history of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church.

The group, composed of historians, pastors, archivists and others from Anabaptist churches around the world, shared a keen interest in keeping the history of the global church alive in its congregations and its people.

John D. Roth organized the gathering—called “Power and Preservation: Enabling Access to the Sources Behind Our Stories”—as an initiative of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism (ISGA).

According to Roth, the idea for the symposium was born in conversations with Anicka Fast, a doctoral student whose research on Mennonite missions in Congo was inhibited at various points by limited or restricted access to archives, and by the precarious condition of many documents relevant to the church’s history. Together with Bruce Yoder, who recently completed a Ph.D. on the history of Mennonite missions in Nigeria, the organizers sought to broaden

the discussion regarding preservation and access, as well as the larger question of how historical narratives shape the identity of the global church.

Over the course of three days, participants were able to do just that, as the group listened to presentations from 16 different people about the state of the historical sources and storytelling in various African, Asian, North American and Latin American churches and organizations. Presenters addressed issues of resources, access, and the level of commitment to preserving history that they see in their contexts. Though each raised unique concerns, several common themes began to emerge. (cont. on pg. 2)

Symposium (cont.)

For many groups, a first priority is to focus on oral history. Digitizing sources has great potential for preservation and increased accessibility, but it also requires significant financial resources. Repeatedly, the theme of power arose, with discussions of how the love of power or fear of its loss can, in some situations, make access to historical documents difficult. In many cases, the problem is simply a tradition of localism.

“Everyone feels comfortable with how things are,” said Ursula Giesbrecht, archivist of the Menno Colony in Loma Plata, Paraguay. “It is always difficult to move away from your customs.”

At the end of the symposium, the group drafted a statement that synthesized the themes addressed at the gathering. This statement begins with an affirmation of the importance of historical identity, the urgency of recording stories, and the importance of equal and open

access to sources in creating a healthy church community. The statement also recognizes specific barriers faced by the church in preserving and providing access to historical sources, and concludes with a list of commitments by the participants in working to achieve this goal.

Pamela Sari, a recent Ph.D. student at Purdue University who has done research on the JKI church of Indonesia, is hopeful about the future of Mennonite archives. “The church is truly gifted with leaders, missionaries, members, scholars, archivists who care deeply about its history. I pray that God will continue to increase our capacity to stay planted in the love and truth of Christ and His Word.”

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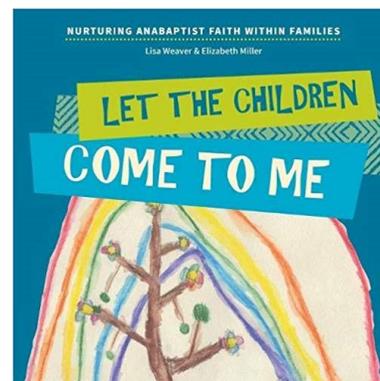
- Pamela Sari

Intergenerational Family Resource

[Let the Children Come to Me: Nurturing Anabaptist Faith within Families](#) is now published and available for [purchase](#). Written by Lisa Weaver and Elizabeth Miller, this resource for families nurturing faith development of elementary-aged children is composed of 12 Anabaptist faith practices with each unit exploring stories from the historical and global Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. These stories are accompanied by scripture passages, discussion questions, prayers, and other options for family activities.

“This resource is an amazing treasure for our families,” says Executive Secretary of Mennonite World Conference, César García. “A great balance of principles and experience, contextual rele-

vance and cultural diversity, historic contemporary challenges, Anabaptist values, and teaching resources.” With the contemporary stories coming from the [Bearing Witness Stories Project](#), the ISGA is excited to see the expansion of this initiative into many different educational and faith contexts.



New Curriculum on BiDA

ISGA staff have recently digitized and posted a Sunday School curriculum, published by Semilla, to the [Biblioteca Digital Anabautista](#). [Enseñanos tus caminos: Currículo bíblico para niños y niñas](#), includes three different levels of four books each, giving users access to 36 total materials. Each course centers on a different theme, while every lesson explores a passage of scripture associated with that same topic. Along with various learning activities, this curriculum provides a wide-ranging educational resource for Anabaptist Spanish-speaking churches around Latin America. The entire curriculum may be accessed through the “Enseñanos tus caminos” [page](#) on the BiDA.

Statement of Affirmations and Commitments

As historians, archivists, and church and mission leaders from around the world, we gathered in Goshen, Indiana (USA), from June 17-19, 2019 for a symposium convened by the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism. Together for the first time, we gained a new recognition of each other as allies in the effort of preserving the sources behind our stories.

As a group, we affirm the following:

1. As followers of Jesus Christ our history connects us, reminds us of the Spirit's activity among us, and calls us forward into the future.
2. The task of telling and preserving our stories is urgent because of the deterioration of records and the loss of oral memory.
3. We share rich resources: a deep commitment, vision, and desire to promote preservation and access; a wide variety of technical skills and expertise; imagination and creativity; broad networks and established relationships; individual spheres of influence; records, stories and experienced storytellers; human, institutional, and financial resources
4. Archives play a crucial role in helping us to understand the inseparability of the stories of church and mission.
5. Equitable access to sources is necessary because we share the ownership of our stories. We recognize the various significant barriers to preservation and access: borders; financial constraints; language; limited skills in preparation and the management of historical resources; lack of information; difficulty of international collaboration; restrictions on access by those in power; institutional weaknesses and lack of commitment

We commit to the following:

1. To foster habits of preservation throughout the global Anabaptist-Mennonite community.
2. To look for new ways to deepen our collaboration across continents.
3. To engage in new and continued efforts to preserve sources and to promote access.
4. To nurture enthusiasm within our communities for the tasks of collecting sources and sharing stories.
5. To make space for diverse narratives that are well-researched, well-sourced, and justly told.
6. To mitigate the barriers of language.
7. To encourage our leaders to dedicate resources for institutional support for this task.
8. To encourage the continued writing, rewriting, and publishing of the history of the church.

We call on our leaders to support us in these commitments.



Pastor Calixte Bananzaro presents



(L-R) Bock Ki Kim, Abe Dueck and Pamela Sari share ideas



Above: François Tshidimu presents while Anicka Fast translates. Left: (L-R) Lawrence Yoder, Bruce Yoder, Danang Kristiawan, and Calixte Bananzaro discuss while Salomé Haldemann translates.

LET'S LISTEN TO OUR STORIES

By John D. Roth, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism

Twenty years before the “Power and Preservation” symposium this past summer, a similar gathering at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary helped to launch the Global Mennonite History Project, a remarkable initiative that has resulted in five volumes—each focused on a different region—written by local historians and storytellers from the perspective of their own context. Historians of the global church have hailed the project as a landmark initiative, particularly to the extent that it moves beyond a focus on Western missionaries as the primary point of reference for telling the story.

But two decades later, as participants in the recent “Power and Preservation” symposium acknowledged, many challenges still remain. Despite the fact that the Global Mennonite History series is now available in English, French, and Spanish, the books are not well-known or widely distributed. Church leaders around the world tend to be strongly oriented to the present and to the future, assuming that history is an impediment to missions or irrelevant to the pressing concerns of the moment. Few of our churches are ready to invest time, energy, or financial resources in the preservation of historical sources. In some settings, access to sources is jealously guarded. And for several groups, a history of conflict means that any attempt to narrate the past is almost certain to resurrect tensions that have gone dormant.

Yet even though many Anabaptist-Mennonite churches are not attuned to their own history, the people of God ignore the past at their own peril. From Genesis to Revelation, scriptures are

filled with admonitions to remember those who have gone before them. Like our Jewish cousins, Christians are a story-shaped people. Our identity and our witness is anchored in a deep narrative. To be sure, that narrative has always found expression in a remarkable range of cultural contexts, filled with complex sub-plots, painful mistakes, and beautiful surprises. But there is an overall coherence to the story. And if

we don't tell our stories with commitment and intention, other narratives—usually unacknowledged and unrecognized—will quickly fill the vacuum.

In a statement formulated at the “Power and Preservation” symposium, participants reaffirmed their commitment to work collaboratively as custodians of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite story. Among other things, this will entail a new enthusiasm for preserving the sources that are vital for historical memory and ensuring that all groups have equal access to those sources. In the West we have traditionally thought of archival sources in the form of paper. Yet in many settings, historical memory is preserved orally. “When an elderly person dies,” according to a traditional African proverb, “a library burns to the ground.” What strategies for the future can ensure that these libraries of knowledge do not disappear? In other contexts, sources are accessible primarily in digital format. How can modern technologies help to preserve digital records and, beyond

that, provide greater access to a wide variety of other sources?

In all of our settings, historical sources and narratives are closely linked to power. How can we ensure that diverse narratives are well-researched, well-sourced, and justly told? Can we tell complex stories—filled with nuance and the reality of human frailty and failure—that nonetheless inspire hope in future generations?

Healthy, mature, growing churches in the global Anabaptist-Mennonite family must be attentive to their history if they are going to be rooted deeply in the gospel. Every community has its storytellers. If our churches are going to thrive, church leaders will need recognize the spiritual gifts of the storytellers in our midst and ensure that historical sources will be accessible to future storytellers, not yet born, whose task it will be to rewrite that history for their own generation.

What is your congregation doing to ensure that our story will go forward?

A version of this editorial was originally published in the December 2018 issue of The Mennonite.

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