

## STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

# Let's listen to our stories

**IN JUNE**, some 30 historians, archivists and church leaders from 12 countries gathered at Goshen (Ind.) College to discuss the current state of Anabaptist-Mennonite history from the perspective of the global church. Twenty years earlier, a similar gathering at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind., helped 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 their own context.

But two decades later, as participants in the recent “Power and Preservation” symposium acknowledged, many challenges 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 the future, assuming 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 the people of God ignore the past at their peril. From Genesis to Revelation,

the Scriptures are filled with admonitions to remember those who have gone before. Like our Jewish cousins, Christians are a story-shaped people. Our identity and our witness are anchored in a deep narrative.

To be sure, that narrative has always found expression in a remarkable range of cultural contexts, filled with complex subplots, painful mistakes and beautiful surprises. But there is an overall coherence to the

## Our identity and our witness is anchored in a deep narrative.

story. And if we don't tell our stories with commitment and intention, other narratives—usually unacknowledged and unrecognized—will 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 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 preserve digital records and, beyond that, provide greater access to a wide variety of other sources?

In all 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 in the gospel. Every community has its storytellers. If our churches are going to thrive, church leaders will need to recognize the spiritual gifts of the storytellers in our midst and ensure that historical sources will be accessible to future storytellers, 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?



**John D. Roth** is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.