

Maple Scholar to catalog interviews with Latin American Anabaptists

Every year, the Maple Scholars Summer Research Program offers student researchers the opportunity to work with Goshen College faculty on research projects across various disciplines. This year, the Maple Scholars cohort includes a student who will be working on a project with the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism (ISGA).

Montce Martinez (*right*), a senior history major from Goshen, Ind., will work alongside ISGA Director **Elizabeth Miller**, to process a collection of more than 200 oral history interviews conducted by Costa Rican historian Jaime Prieto. The vast majority of these interviews were recorded on cassette tapes in the 1990s and early 2000s, when Prieto was engaged in primary source research for the Latin American volume of the Global Mennonite History project; they represent dozens of Anabaptist denominations throughout Latin America.

"Prieto is an incredibly skilled historian," recounted Miller. "These interviews happened during a particularly crucial period, when many of the early church leaders and founders in Latin America had reached their elder years. Today many of the interviewees whose stories are collected in these interviews are no longer with us, making them all the more precious."

As cassettes are prone to deterioration over time, the interviews were digitized in 2021 with support from the ISGA—an important step in preserving these primary sources. The recordings have yet to be used by researchers, however,



because very little metadata has been gathered on the interview contents and characteristics.

As a Maple Scholar this summer, Martinez will be listening to each interview before cataloging and indexing them in a database that will make these recordings more easily accessible to researchers and scholars. "I am thrilled for the chance to work with Montce this summer," said Miller. "She brings both historical and Spanish language expertise that will greatly benefit this project."

Martinez expressed that she is especially interested to learn a new skill in her field. "I have never worked with oral history before," said Martinez. "I want to try new routes to tackle historical projects and hopefully with the Prieto Interview Database, I will learn more about oral history and the importance of this type of primary source gathering." ✍️



Baptism study guides distributed across Mennonite Church USA

In 2022 the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism (ISGA) published "*Believe and Be Baptized: Conversations on Baptism in the Anabaptist Mennonite Tradition*," written by John D. Roth in collaboration with Thomas Yoder Neufeld. This study guide is now being distributed to conferences and congregations across the United States. The ISGA has so far distributed 200 copies in English and 130 copies in Spanish to regional conferences and local congregations including Pacific Southwest, Indiana-Michigan, Illinois, Central District, Iglesia Menonita Hispana, Allegheny, New York, Ohio, and Mountain States Mennonite Conferences. If your congregation or conference would like copies, please order them through the form found at the QR code above or contact isga@goshen.edu.



ISGA welcomes new administrative assistant

In January 2023, the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism (ISGA) welcomed **Isaiah Friesen** in the role of administrative assistant and communications coordinator. Friesen is a Goshen College graduate and has participated in Anabaptist communities in the United States and Latin America, including Casa de Paz (Guatemala) and Iglesia Menonita Celebra (Colombia). He has significant experience in Central America, including Study-Service Term in Nicaragua and teaching creation care courses at the Latin American Anabaptist Seminary (SEMILLA) in Guatemala. He has also worked in ecumenical creation care ministries in the U.S. Friesen is currently a graduate student at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Friesen is the primary voice of the ISGA Facebook page and assists with administrative tasks related to the ISGA website, the French- and Spanish-language digital libraries (BiNA and BiDA), and the AnabaptistWiki. "Being part of the global church has become an important part of my Anabaptist identity," said Friesen. "My ISGA work includes many great opportunities both to stay connected to Latin American churches and to continue to learn about the stories and gifts of Anabaptist communities in other parts of the world." Friesen's contributions will strengthen the ISGA's vision to enhance Anabaptist scholarship through global connection and storytelling.

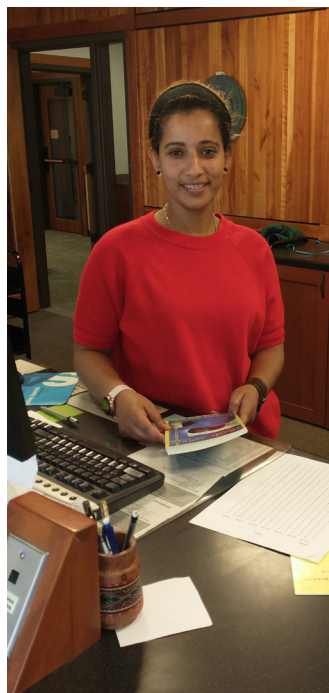
Students gather metadata on materials from Ethiopian church

As the Ethiopian student body has grown at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), an innovative collaboration has emerged between the AMBS library and the Mennonite Historical Library (MHL) at Goshen College. The MHL holds a number of resources published by the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)—the largest Mennonite national conference in the world—but it has not had the Amharic-speaking staff to properly catalog them. Amharic is the most widely-spoken language in Ethiopia and one of the main publishing languages for MKC.

With the support of Karl Stutzman, director of library services at AMBS,

Ethiopian students from AMBS are working to gather the necessary metadata for Amharic-language materials from the MHL, so that these resources can be properly cataloged.

Workineh Yami, an MKC church leader and Master of Arts in Theology and Peace Studies student at AMBS, believes it's important to make these resources more accessible as he and other MKC students continue their seminary studies at AMBS. "Ethiopian students are flooding to [AMBS]. Especially as an Ethiopian student who sometimes works on research papers on our context, it is so important to have those Amharic books." 🌿



Left: Ruth Gelane, AMBS Master of Arts: Theology and Peace Studies student and AMBS library assistant, prepares to generate full cataloging data for the Amharic translation of John Paul Lederach's *The Journey Toward Reconciliation*. Ruth noticed in her research for an AMBS course that MHL's Amharic materials were not fully cataloged, prompting AMBS Library to contribute Ethiopian students' linguistic expertise to cataloging unique MHL holdings. PHOTO BY KARL STUTZMAN

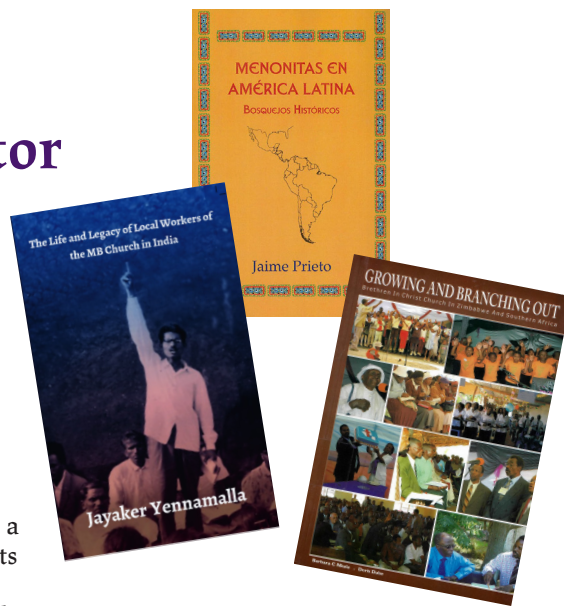
Right: Items cataloged as a result of this project will include this Amharic translation of C. Arnold Snyder's *From Anabaptist Seed* and a video recording of an MKC church choir.

From the Director

This past semester, I tried an experiment. Rather than asking students for a traditional research paper in the Anabaptist history course I teach, I required them to study and reflect on biographies of 20th century Anabaptists. We spent a few weeks immersed in the richly-detailed lives of Anabaptists from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Congo, and Zimbabwe, using biographies as a way to better understand the contexts in which these individuals lived and their motivations for baptism, church membership and ministry. For the final assignment, some students rewrote a previously published biography, shaping it for publication in the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO); others assessed the broader significance of Mennonite biographies published in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB).

The biography assignment was inspired by ISGA Research Fellow Anicka Fast's work with biography in the context of West and Central Africa, where Fast leads history-writing workshops focused on the creation of new biographies. These workshops have been profoundly meaningful for both students and instructors. After a recent workshop with Congolese Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren participants led by Fast and Michèle Sigg, executive director of the DACB, Fast shared one participant's reflections on the role of biography in the Congolese context:

One morning I was chatting at breakfast with Dr. Josué Selemani, a participant from the CEFMC (Mennonite Brethren Churches of the Congo) church in Bukavu. He shared that he was excited to write a biography of Zihindula Pierre, a Mennonite Brethren witness for peace in Eastern Congo, because it felt like this story would make Zihindula live again. He quoted Hebrews 11:4 to emphasize that remembering and writing down the stories of faithful believers from the past is a way to allow them to still speak, even though they have died....Josué explained to me that writing down such stories was



a way to maintain continuity with the past and to overcome the ruptures that occur when oral tradition stops being transmitted.

For church communities, biography is a vital way of both remembering what has come before, as well as understanding the present more fully. While in academic circles biography has sometimes been looked down upon as a lesser form of history, Dr. Josué Selemani's reflections reaffirm biography as a legitimate historical form and method, particularly in contexts that value and cultivate oral tradition.

Biographies are expanding the corpus of published Anabaptist history

The DACB is one of the more extensive collections of Christian biography, but other examples abound, even within the Anabaptist tradition. Students in my course this spring worked through the biographies collected in *Growing and Branching Out: Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe and South Africa* by Barbara Nkala and Doris Dube, adapting them for wider publication in the GAMEO. Mennonite Brethren scholar Jayaker Yennamalla's recent publication, *The Life and Legacy of Local Workers of the MB Church in India*, seeks to make more visible the contributions of 42 "teachers, preachers, evangelists, bible women, health workers, and social workers" to Mennonite Brethren history



In the upcoming academic year Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary Master of Arts: Theology and Peace Studies student **Workineh Yami** will join the ISGA for a year-long internship. Workineh, a member of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) in Ethiopia, will help develop a module focused on the history of MKC for Goshen College's Anabaptist history course, and he plans to research and write five biographies of MKC leaders for inclusion in the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*.

in India. "Though local workers played a decisive role in all that took place, their contributions have not so far been given the attention they deserve," writes Yennamalla. Costa Rican historian Jaime Prieto's work has prioritized biography for Anabaptist history in Latin America, using it as a way to explore how Mennonites navigated socio-political realities in Latin America and simultaneously constructed multifaceted identities as Anabaptists.

Biographies are expanding the corpus of published Anabaptist history, and although they may hold the deepest meaning for the communities from which they originated, they are accessible points of entry for outsiders as well. In the process of studying biography this semester, students in my course found themselves engaging more deeply with regional church histories and reflecting on their own lives in the process. As one student wrote in their final assessment, "Biographies teach more than historical information, you are left with emotion, a new sense of respect for these communities... and [inspired to] go out in your own region and make a difference." 🌿

The Benefits of Historical and Contextual Research

I have been engaged in research for the last six years. As a former research coordinator of Marturia, the Research Center of the Instituto Bíblico Asunción in Paraguay, I had the opportunity to cooperate with two projects: *Memoria Viva* and *The History and Legacy of EVEX*. Both were contextual and historical research projects that had the purpose of keeping alive the memory of the pioneers who founded churches and evangelized the first Christians in the context of the Mennonite Brethren churches in Paraguay. As a doctoral student, my current research is also connected to the Paraguayan context, with the purpose of offering principles for the development of pertinent theological education in Anabaptist perspective.

As I researched the legacy of our brothers and sisters in the history of our Paraguayan Anabaptist church, I was inspired by the dedication and commitment of those who came before us. In addition, as I learned about the founding history of several Mennonite Brethren churches in Paraguay, I was able to appreciate the faith and work of brothers and sisters who believed, therefore they spoke (2 Corinthians 4:13) and cooperated with the extension of the Kingdom of God. Thus, not only did I value the loving service of those who preceded us, but I also saw myself in the stories of the brothers and sisters who “paved the way for us.”

After these opportunities I have had to serve the church and my community in research, I have found that this task of researching issues relevant to our contexts blesses and encourages us in at least three different ways.

First, historical and contextual research **is a bridge to the past that leads us to consider our present and to look to the future with hopeful eyes**. Looking back is an exercise that involves looking to the future. For those of us who love history, it is not enough to consider the past as a fact detached from

our present and future reality. For the people of Israel, to live in a relationship with God was also to live in connection with their history, with the story of God’s marvelous works in the past. That history nourished their present faith and future hope.

We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders. So each generation should set its hope anew on God, not forgetting his glorious miracles and obeying his commands. Psalms 78:4,7 (NLT)

Secondly, historical and contextual research **is an audible voice from the past that invites us to value the legacy of the pioneers**. Thus, research leads us to consider those who went before us and paved the way for us to be part of a community of faith today. We are the result of God’s work through brothers and sisters who trusted and acted. Connecting with their stories inspires us to imitate their example of faith and value the blessings we possess in the present because of the efforts of brothers and sisters in the past.

Finally, historical and contextual research **invites us to look at the bigger picture of God’s work in our faith communities**. In this way, we understand that we are part of something bigger, of God’s work in past generations and of the sure hope that moves us in the present and carries us into the future. We understand our identity from a broader perspective, so we praise the God of life, who worked for us yesterday, works today, and will continue to work tomorrow.

Historical and contextual research should arise from the questions and doubts of our people, our contemporary challenges, and our current reality. Thus, research is relevant because it speaks to us in “our language.” It is an invitation to record God’s work in our history, inspiring our communities to praise



The **Memoria Viva** project (archive.org/details/memoria-viva) narrates the founding of 60 Mennonite Brethren churches throughout Paraguay. The stories are filled with testimonies of God’s work in the lives of the first Christians and missionaries who served over the last 65 years among the Mennonite Brethren in Paraguay. Available as an online documentary, **The History and Legacy of EVEX (Evangelism by Extension)**, see above QR code, features interviews with missionaries who founded Mennonite Brethren churches in Paraguay between 1973 and 1987.

God for His wonders of yesterday and to “pave the way” for those who will come tomorrow.

Let this be recorded for future generations, so that a people not yet born will praise the Lord. Psalms 102:18 (NLT) 🌿



David Irala began as a Research Fellow with the ISGA in 2021, with an interest in contextual theological education from a Latin American Anabaptist perspective. He is a member of the Evangelical Conference of the Paraguayan Mennonite Brethren Churches.