

IN THIS ISSUE

This month, two major events are taking place among Mennonites in North America that seem to encapsulate the promise and challenge of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity in the early twenty-first century. From July 1-5 members of Mennonite Church USA will convene in Kansas City for the denomination's bi-annual assembly. Normally a joyful experience, the convention this year is fraught with tension. On the surface, the debate is focused on issues surrounding sexuality and same sex marriage. But the deeper sources of disagreement and division are differences in understandings of church polity, the meaning of ordination and church membership, and the role of our confession of faith. At an even deeper level are unresolved questions regarding the authority and interpretation of scripture and differing perspectives on the relationship of the church to the surrounding culture. None of these questions are new. But during times of broader social conflict, they are taken on a sharper, sometimes polemical, focus.

Three weeks later, a different gathering will occur. From July 21-26, some 6000 people from 50 countries, representing the 103 member churches of Mennonite World Conference, will gather in Harrisburg, Pa. for the sixteenth assembly of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ church. Although the atmosphere will be festive and colorful, beneath the surface similar questions are lurking. In the face of the myriad cultural, theological, and economic differences separating the global Anabaptist family today, what is the ecclesial "glue" that holds us together? What theological norms, what biblical hermeneutic, what shared practices of faith and life, unify these groups together into a single body? How will the majority churches from the global South respond to the contemporary debates in North America regarding same-sex marriage?

This issue of *MQR* provides a deeper historical context for these questions of diversity and identity that are currently preoccupying our attention. **Martin Rothkegel**, a veteran Anabaptist scholar with an encyclopedic knowledge of sixteenth-century Moravian sources, opens the issue with a groundbreaking survey of biblical hermeneutics among a colorful variety of immigrant Anabaptist groups in Moravia. As children of the Reformation, all Anabaptist groups were convinced of the authority of Scripture (*Sola Scriptura*). But crucial questions soon emerged about principles for interpreting scripture, particularly regarding the relationship between the external, literal word and the living, transformative, spirit-infused inner word. With the possible exception of the Swiss Brethren, virtually all Moravian Anabaptists in the sixteenth century could be described as Spiritualists—baptism, after

all, was a sign pointing to the presence of the Spirit; by itself, the external, ritual act did nothing. But exactly what it meant to prioritize the inner word over the outer word, begged a lot of questions. In the end, formation of distinct Moravian Anabaptist groups Balthasar Hubmaier, Oswald Glaidt, Johann Zeising, Christian Entfelder, Johannes Bänderlin, Hans Hut, Pilgram Marpeck Jacob Hutter, Peter Riedemann, Gabriel Ascherham. Centrality of scripture, challenge of harnessing hermeneutical principles, Hutterites particularly able to assimilate impulses from a broad range of theological traditions. Ability to fuse an understanding of the “living word” with practical spirituality made them ultimately the most successful branch of Anabaptism in Moravia.

Hanspeter Jecker, who brings to Swiss Anabaptism a similar intimacy with archival sources, moves the story of Anabaptist identity formation forward in time to the early seventeenth century. In his biography of Bendicht Brechtbühl, influential leader during time of severe persecution and crisis. Brechtbühl emerges as a crucial intermediary between Swiss Anabaptists and the Dutch Mennonites; learns Dutch, translates spiritualist text into German, keenly interested in the Dutch Martyrs Mirror, serves as an emissary to Prussian Mennonites, and ends his life as a bishop among the émigré Swiss Mennonite community in Pennsylvania. Enormous differences among these various Mennonite communities; brought together by commitment to “bear each other’s burdens” ... threads of unity in the face of difference.

The final essay in this issue of MQR brings the dynamic quest for identity into the present. Timothy Erdel, professor of at Bethel (IN) College, tracks the evolving identity of Egli Amish . Emerged out of the Amish community in Adams County, Indiana, when Amish preacher Henry Egli experienced new birth, began to preach its significance. Initially a delicate balance between traditional boundary markers of clothing, beards and progressive innovations such as church buildings, Sunday

– John D. Roth, editor