

**“The Right Kind of Education and Perhaps Re-education”:
C. Henry Smith, Mennonite Schooling, and the
Lessons of a Usable Past**

PERRY BUSH*

Abstract: Through his long and productive life as a history professor at Goshen and Bluffton colleges, C. Henry Smith (1875-1948) performed a number of critically important functions for the Mennonite Church. He was one of the church’s leading historians and public intellectuals, as well as an energetic peace activist. Yet perhaps his most significant contribution was that of a leading Mennonite educator. In this role, he traversed a remarkable intellectual trajectory: from a view of Mennonite education as outward-looking and expansive to a vision of Mennonite education more inward-looking and defensive. Since Smith’s day, Mennonite education seems to have been following the same path, though very much in the opposite direction. Tracing these two different intellectual trajectories offers fertile ground for reflection on the meaning and mission of Mennonite education today.

In January of 1895, Menno Simon Steiner, the progressive (MC) Mennonite activist and evangelist, received some fan mail and then a small stream of unsolicited articles for *Young People’s Paper*, a monthly devotional magazine for Mennonite youth that he edited. The materials came from a 20-year-old schoolteacher in rural Illinois who identified himself only as Henry Smith from Metamora. The young teacher urged Steiner to offer more pieces in the journal by contemporary Mennonite writers, which, he reasoned, “are more interesting to our people than some other authors long dead might be.” Yet “I like the paper very much as it is,” Smith hastened to add. “It ought to be in the hands of every young man and woman in America who is interested in the welfare of the human race.”¹

*Perry Bush is a professor of history at Bluffton (Ohio) University and author of *Peace, Progress and the Professor: The Mennonite History of C. Henry Smith* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2015).

1. Henry Smith to Menno S. Steiner, Jan. 26, 1895, M. S. Steiner Papers, Hist. Mss I-33, box 4, file 5, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen College, Goshen, Ind. [hereafter abbreviated AMC]. On the *Young People’s Paper*, see Harold S. Bender, “Young People’s Paper (Periodical).” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (hereafter abbreviated

For his part, Steiner liked the articles Smith began to send him, at least enough to begin publishing them in his periodical. They served Steiner's purposes well. As he had proclaimed in the first issue the year before, he hoped that his magazine could help Mennonite young people "learn more about God, about society and about yourself."² Smith's articles certainly furthered this agenda, though Steiner might have wished that Smith would corral his expansive thoughts a bit. In the space of a single, small article, for instance, Smith made meaningful reference to the ideas of Martin Luther, Robert Fulton, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante. Yet what Smith's essays sometimes lacked in terms of focus they made up for in passion and purpose. Through the 1890s, Smith pushed his readers – aspiring young Mennonite intellectuals like himself – toward one overarching goal. "Although we cannot find out the whole truth," he proclaimed in 1897, "let us try to discover as much as we can."³

As a vehicle for such ends, Steiner's paper lasted only a dozen years. Nor was Smith ever able to come much closer to the "whole truth," though it would not be until near the end of his life that he finally acknowledged how elusive the project could be.⁴ He was able, however, to help his fellow Mennonites achieve more prosaic but still critically important goals. Decades before his death in 1948, C. Henry Smith had emerged as perhaps the leading Mennonite historian of his generation. He also had begun to perform in a capacity that few Mennonites could then even envision: a Mennonite public intellectual, speaking repeatedly, in person and in print, to the major social and political issues of the day. More than anything else, though, soon after publishing his first little wandering essay in Steiner's *Young People's Paper*, Smith would go on to launch himself into his most important role: that of a pioneering Mennonite educator. He would spend much of his adult life advocating for Mennonite education. For Smith, education was the central solution to the problems affecting much of Mennonite life. Smith's position – how he came to it, what he meant by it, and its connection to a similar kind of intellectual trajectory that seems to be occurring in our own day – provides useful grounds for reflection on contemporary Mennonite education. Moreover, his vision remains relevant, though not in ways initially supposed.

GAMEO), 1959. Web, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Young_People%27s_Paper_\(Periodical\)&oldid=123072](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Young_People%27s_Paper_(Periodical)&oldid=123072); accessed Jan. 9, 2017.

2. "Salutatory," *Young People's Paper* 1 (Jan. 6, 1894), 1.

3. C. Henry Smith, "Truth," *Young People's Paper* 4 (July 31, 1897), 122.

4. This is a point I develop in my larger book manuscript *Peace, Progress and the Professor: The Mennonite History of C. Henry Smith* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2015), from which some of this article has been extracted; see especially pp. 333-335, 344.

A brief sketch of Smith's biography helps to contextualize these developments. He was born in 1875 to an Amish family in central Illinois, just as the Amish themselves were beginning to split into the Old Order Amish and a more acculturated group called the Amish Mennonites. His father, John Smith, became a bishop in the local Amish Mennonite conference and led the way in adopting what for his people would have been exciting innovations like Sunday schools, revivalism, and education.⁵

John Smith allowed his son Henry to subscribe to a newspaper and attend political meetings in the community. Equally significant in Henry Smith's intellectual development were the important ties his family established with John S. Coffman, the leading Mennonite revivalist of the later nineteenth century and a key figure in the development of Mennonite higher education. In their revivals, Coffman and his allies inculcated a whole younger generation of Mennonite intellectuals in church activism, social concerns, and enthusiasm for missions.⁶ Out of this broad, unformed but palpable movement came the Mennonite push into higher education—which scholars today refer to as a “Quickening” rather than an awakening—that ultimately resulted in colleges like Goshen and Bluffton.⁷

In the later 1890s, Henry Smith would begin to play an important role in these developments. In part because of Coffman's influence, John and Magdalena Smith allowed their third son to do something remarkable for an Amish youth in the early 1890s—attend high school, become a rural schoolteacher, and then continue in his zeal for further education. After two years of teaching at the Elkhart Institute, Smith received his bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois in 1903 and then his master's and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Chicago in 1907. In 1908 he married Laura Ioder from Tiskilwa, Illinois, who remained a steady partner for the rest of his life.⁸

Amid this life trajectory, Smith had a key moment in 1903 as he was working on his master's degree. He was sitting in the library of the University of Chicago Divinity School, leafing through the pages of a book

5. Willard Smith, “C. Henry Smith: A Brief Biography,” appendix II in C. Henry Smith, *Mennonite Country Boy: The Education of C. Henry Smith* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1962), 233-235; Ferne Smith, “Christian Heroes: Chapter I: The Story and the Life of Bishop John Smith,” *Youth's Christian Companion* 17 (Sept. 20, 1936), 303.

6. Susan Fisher Miller, “John S. Coffman's Mennonite Revivalism,” in Stephen L. Longnecker, ed., *The Dilemma of Anabaptist Piety: Strengthening or Straining the Bonds of Community?* (Penobscot, Maine: Penobscot Press, 1997), 97-99.

7. Theron Schlabach, “Reveille for *Die Stillen im Lande*: A Stir among Mennonites in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *MQR* 51 (July 1977), 213-215.

8. Smith, “C. Henry Smith: A Brief Biography,” 236-238, 242.

on Baptist history, when the name “Menno Simons” jumped out at him from lines of print. As Smith read more carefully, he quickly realized that the book’s author identified Simons as “one of the founders of the Baptist faith.” Reading further, he discovered that this was a common claim among Baptist historians and also those from the Congregational church. The notion astonished him. “I had always thought of Mennonites as an obscure, peculiar people, with strange, unpopular practices” and “little influence in the world,” he wrote in 1925. To suddenly realize that others might regard them as founding practitioners of critical aspects of Western religious thought like freedom of conscience and Christian peacemaking “was a revelation to me. . . . I no longer needed to apologize for my humble faith.” As he recalled, two decades later, that was the moment when he decided to spread this discovery in the public sphere. The foundational contributions of his Mennonite people deserved some “wider publicity.” “Before I left the university,” he wrote, “I had decided to make a thorough investigation of their history and, if possible, to write a comprehensive treatise on the subject for publication.”⁹

To a great degree, this discovery and this commitment set the parameters for Smith’s life work. Smith went on to produce the founding corpus of English-language academic work on Mennonite history. Generations of Mennonites were introduced to the history of their people through his 1941 book on the subject, his magnum opus *The Story of the Mennonites*. The book, still in print, and the scholarship that followed was a remarkable accomplishment. Smith lived in a time when his church had no archives and few records besides cemetery ledgers and church membership rolls. Nonetheless he managed to produce a series of books on Mennonite history that came to serve as the lens through which generations of his people came to understand their shared past.¹⁰

Through these academic pursuits, Smith developed a deep and fundamental commitment to education and what it could do for the Mennonite Church. That commitment developed in two overlapping but distinct phases. The intellectual arc traced by those phases is instructive today.

SMITH’S VISION OF EDUCATION: FROM OUTWARD TO INWARD DIRECTIONS

First, from his younger years through middle age, Smith was infatuated with education and with what it could do for the church. This was evident

9. Smith, *Mennonite Country Boy*, 199-200.

10. Robert S. Kreider, foreword, in C. Henry Smith, *Smith’s Story of the Mennonites*, 5th ed., revised and enlarged by Cornelius Krahn (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004, reproduced by permission of Herald Press), xi-xii.

in his first published writings and addresses. Already in 1895, in his first piece in the *Young People's Paper*, he urged readers to lose themselves in the excitement of education: especially college education—if they could afford it—and if not, through intensive reading, self-study, or by learning about the works of God in nature. “With all these advantages,” Smith enthused, “there is no reason and no excuse for any young man or woman to remain uneducated.”¹¹ Or consider his advice as a young instructor at the Elkhart Institute. True education, he told his students in 1902, is found in “everything that makes life worth living.”¹² In an address there in 1897 he called his listeners to liberate themselves from all established ways of thinking, all previously set patterns of thought. “The whole object of education,” he told this first generation of Mennonite college students, “is to break up old habits of thought. The ruts into which we have fallen must be destroyed . . . not because old habits of thinking are wrong (although many times they are) but because without this freedom growth is impossible.”¹³

Smith, along with his friend Noah Byers and a cohort of self-styled Mennonite “educational pioneers,” moved quickly to establish educational institutions where this vision could be expressed and transmitted. In 1903 the Elkhart Institute morphed into Goshen College, where Byers served as its first president and Smith as the first academic dean. In 1913 the two transferred from Goshen to the newly-reformed Bluffton College, where Smith worked until his retirement in 1946 and then his death two years later.¹⁴

Admittedly, Smith’s vision had flaws. In pushing for his church to enter fully into mainstream society, intellectual Mennonites like Smith uncritically adopted a host of assumptions from mainstream American progressivism. In this manner they helped to pull into Mennonite thinking some destructive mindsets they should have rejected. Smith, for example, bought fully into the rampant religious nationalism and racism of the progressive era, ideas that he did not entirely shed until middle age.¹⁵

11. Henry Smith, “Reading and Home Education,” *Young People's Paper* 2 (March 2, 1895), 34.

12. C. H. Smith, “The Meaning of Education,” *Herald of Truth* 39 (Aug. 1, 1902), 235.

13. C. Henry Smith, “Bondage,” *Institute Monthly* 1 (April 15, 1899), 50-51.

14. John S. Umble, *Goshen College, 1894-1954* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1954), 1-2; Susan Fisher Miller, *Culture for Service: A History of Goshen College, 1894-1994* (Goshen, Ind.: Goshen College, 1994), 17-18; Perry Bush, *Dancing with the Kobzar: Bluffton College and Mennonite Higher Education, 1899-1999* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press US), 63-66.

15. James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989), 174-175; Bush, *Peace, Progress and the Professor*, 207-210.

Yet Smith's main thrust was to advocate for education as a critical component of human progress—both for the Mennonite churches and for wider American society. Without education, he said, Mennonites were lost. In an address in 1907, which was published and disseminated widely across the church, he insisted that Mennonites had to drop their traditional hostility to education. "The service of our church schools," he said, "will be to save the young men and women for the old faith. To the schools we must finally turn for the salvation of the church."¹⁶



C. Henry Smith, 1947

16. C. Henry Smith, *Mennonites in History*, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1907), 39-40.

Moreover, Mennonites had much to offer their fellow Americans, especially in the area of peacemaking. The world's leaders are realizing, Smith told Goshen students in 1905, that they must turn toward peace and that education is the preeminent realm in which this transformation will happen.¹⁷ The major contribution that he and his fellow cohort of progressive Mennonite academics would make was to train the church's young people for this task, reshaping rough Mennonite farm hands into cultured, Christian citizens. The institutions they created or revitalized in the first decades of the twentieth century—Goshen (Indiana); Bethel (Kansas); Bluffton (Ohio)—were steeped in the high culture of academia. Students returned to their home communities – if they came back at all – bearing all the hallmarks of a good progressive education. Startled parents found them singing songs of the glee clubs, relating arguments made in debate competitions or the literary societies, and enthused with the technicalities of football.¹⁸

Meanwhile, in his scholarship—a corpus of work that eventually would encompass a half-dozen major books and nearly eighty articles in the Mennonite lay press—Smith laid out a usable past for his church. Mennonites, he argued, were the inheritors of foundational principles of Western civilization passed down to them from Anabaptist ancestors, principles such as the freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and a basic commitment to Christian peacemaking. In his writing and speaking around the church, Smith began sketching what seemed to him an informal but still real and very meaningful possible arrangement between Mennonites and the wider progressive American society they had begun to enter. Mennonites, he said repeatedly, could help the American mainstream more fully appreciate these foundational key principles that Mennonites themselves had pioneered. In exchange, all Mennonites asked was full and complete acceptance as legitimate and respected members in the American religious mosaic.

That arrangement seemed to work until the First World War. Ironically, it was the soaring, idealistic, progressive Woodrow Wilson who led the nation to war; and it was his policies that led the country toward something resembling a police state. In 1917 and 1918 dissenters to the war were mobbed and lynched across the country and ordinary Americans received jail sentences for public criticisms of the war effort. As members of a German-speaking and pacifist religious group, Mennonites were doubly suspect, and they paid a steep price. Across the country, Mennonite churches were daubed with yellow paint, draped with

17. C. Henry Smith, "What Can the Colleges do to Promote the Cause of Peace?" *Goshen College Record* 7, no. 10 (June-July 1905), 548-549.

18. Miller, *Culture for Service*, 33-60; Bush, *Dancing with the Kobzar*, 75-83.

American flags, or even, in two instances, burned to the ground. Mennonites were mobbed and threatened with lynching when they refused to buy war bonds. Mennonite draftees who reported to military training camps but remained faithful to their church's teaching about nonresistance—refusing to don the uniform, for example, or obey routine orders—often faced brutal treatment. They were pummeled with fists, raked raw with brooms, or made to stand at attention for hours at a time.¹⁹

The war changed Smith's outlook dramatically. Not long into the 1920s he dropped his faith in the goodwill of a beneficent state and in the relative attractions of wider American society.²⁰ By the 1930s, he began to view Mennonite acculturation into that society with a much more critical eye, warning his fellow Mennonites of the "disintegrating influence" of "the changing social and economic order." In earlier times, he reasoned, Mennonites could protect their distinct traditions and beliefs through rural isolation and a distinct language, "but all of this is rapidly being changed now."

With the coming of the automobile, rural telephone, compulsory high school attendance, increased contacts with city life, college training, all of these distinctive features of earlier Mennonitism are being ironed out, and . . . some of the fundamentals are in danger of being lost also.²¹

Nor was outside society such a welcoming and hospitable place. The war illustrated this new understanding to Smith in a painfully clear way. So did the US Supreme Court in 1931 in its *Macintosh* decision, which began to assume a central place in Smith's writings and speeches. Douglas Clyde Macintosh, a Yale theologian born in Canada, had applied for citizenship but saw his naturalization rejected because he stated he would only take up arms for his new country if he felt the cause to be morally justifiable. The court affirmed the denial of his citizenship because of that qualifier. The decision met with quick and explosive denunciation in the liberal Protestant press as a dangerous violation of the basic American right to freedom of conscience. The *Christian Century* blasted it as "monstrous" and "incredible," comparable in importance to the Dred Scott case before the Civil War, and told readers that it amounted to an official, national sanctification of the "Cult of the Omnipotent State." To Smith the implications of the *Macintosh* ruling were dire and ominous. Fundamentally they meant that "conscience must give way to the dictates

19. Perry Bush, "Mennonites and the Great War," in *American Churches and the First World War*, ed. Gordon Heath (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 87-106.

20. Bush, *Peace, Progress and the Professor*, 217-218, 242-243.

21. C. Henry Smith, *Christian Peace: Four Hundred Years of Mennonite Principles and Practice* (Newton, Kan.: The Peace Committee of the General Conference of Mennonites, 1938), 30-31.

of the state." Under such reasoning, he pointed out, the Pilgrims themselves would have landed in jail.²² His confident, progressive optimism in the curative powers of democracy had ebbed away. In fact, Smith warned his audiences repeatedly, democratic states are generally less tolerant of minority rights than totalitarian ones, as illustrated by their own country, which was now making the state "the supreme object of loyalty and worship."²³

In the face of such dangers, Smith began to argue, the primary way the church could preserve itself was through education, though he now began to phrase its benefits somewhat differently. To be sure, from the 1920s through the end of his life, Smith never portrayed Mennonite education as totally insular. He repeatedly stressed, as he did before World War I, that peace education was a fundamental means of countering the rush toward war. For instance, in a speech in nearby Pandora, Ohio, on Armistice Day, 1934, he told a group of young Mennonites that war was a matter of intellect, not just emotions; to combat it, he said, we must use our heads as well as our hearts.²⁴ We need to educate our society away from its habitual, instinctive recourse to violence.

Smith threw himself into that task, especially in the last two decades of his life when he emerged as a leading Mennonite public intellectual of his day. He was an incredibly busy and active public speaker. He addressed Mennonite audiences repeatedly, of course, but a tour through Smith's papers reveals how often and how regularly he spoke to non-Mennonite audiences as well—civic groups, high school commencements, ministerial associations, and even, for two years on the eve of World War II, to an audience on regional radio. To such groups he did what he had been doing his entire adult career: subtly but effectively bringing Mennonite commitments to peacemaking and the sanctity of the individual conscience into the public sphere.²⁵

At the same time that Smith engaged in this public advocacy, however, his view of Mennonite education was becoming increasingly defensive in orientation. By the later 1920s, education to him was no longer so much a

22. Ronald Flowers, "The Naturalization of Douglas Clyde Macintosh, Alien Theologian," *Journal of Supreme Court History* 25 (Nov. 2000), 244, 247, 253-256, 258-261, *Christian Century* quoted 247, 160. Smith, *Christian Peace*, 28. It's clear from other contexts that Smith was referring here to the Macintosh case.— Cf. Smith, "Brotherhood Topic for March: Separation of Church and State," *The Mennonite* 53 (March 1, 1938), 2.

23. C. Henry Smith, "War: Its Causes and Cure," speech outline, delivered to Lima Federation of Women's Clubs, March 27, 1935, C. Henry Smith Papers, MS 1, Box 38, folder 4, Bluffton University Archives and Special Collections, Bluffton University (hereafter abbreviated BUASC).

24. C. Henry Smith, "Armistice," speech outline, delivered to Pandora Christian Endeavor, Nov. 11, 1934, Smith Papers, MS 1, Box 4, folder 6, BUASC.

25. Bush, *Peace, Progress and the Professor*, 299-301, 310-314.

Mennonite ticket to full admittance to American society as it was a means of retaining the bonds that had preserved them as Mennonites, and of keeping their young people safely within the folds of the church. Mennonite schools and colleges, where young people could be properly inculcated in their tradition, were to him the single most important means to assure the health and vitality of the church. We need to "train our young people in our own or other colleges where our principles are upheld," he wrote in *The Mennonite* in 1938. "We can keep our young people Mennonite only through education, using that term in its broadest sense."²⁶

Particularly alarming to him was the fact that, with the closure of Witmarsum Seminary at Bluffton in the early 1930s, Mennonite pastors were going elsewhere for their education, especially to "short cut militant Bible schools that do not believe in the peace tradition." "There is no quicker way to drive nonresistance out of the church," he predicted, "than by letting these Bible schools train our ministers and leaders." For nearly two decades he crisscrossed the churches, repeating to Mennonite audiences from Ohio to Illinois the need to maintain their own seminaries in particular and their own schools in general. "Unless the leadership of the church get wholeheartedly back of its training schools," he warned ominously, "Mennonitism is doomed."²⁷

In sum, Smith's view of education underwent a subtle but real transformation: from education as a vehicle for preparing young Mennonites to fully enter into outside society to education as a means by which young Mennonites might be shaped and transformed by the principles of the church. When he began his career as a Mennonite educator, Smith's vision of education focused primarily outward. By the time he was finished, his vision had turned inward.

MENNONITE EDUCATION: FROM INWARD TO OUTWARD DIRECTIONS

Setting Smith's intellectual journey against the larger historical development of Mennonite education in North America reveals that the latter has moved along a similar trajectory, though in very much the opposite direction. Consider, for example, the twentieth-century histories of denominational colleges in general and Mennonite colleges in particular. The historian James Juhnke has argued that Mennonite colleges have undergone a three-stage process of development, paralleling a similar three-stage succession that the historian Thomas Askew has

26. Smith, "Brotherhood Topic for March: Separation of Church and State," 2.

27. Smith, *Christian Peace*, 31-32.

outlined among evangelical colleges in North America.²⁸ Church-related colleges, these scholars argue, began as insular institutions focused on survival. Closely tied to their founding denominations, they tended to be dominated by clergymen presidents and supported by a coterie of veteran, long-serving, and underpaid faculty. But in their very nature, these new institutions jarred the sensibilities of their founding church. Mennonite colleges in particular, Juhnke argues, were “crucibles of contradiction. They stood not only between traditional, German-speaking Mennonitism and progressive, English-speaking Americanism but also in the midst of the double transition from farm to town to city.”²⁹ Colleges were founded by the innovators, the progressives. They tended to be regarded with unease by a less formally educated rural constituency that had traditionally distrusted high-blown intellectualism and associated the farm with spiritual purity. For example, when Halstead Seminary was established in Kansas in 1883, and especially when Bethel College emerged a decade later, many local Mennonites began to voice “suspicions of higher education” because of parallel fears that their young people were adopting “everything American.”³⁰ As far as much of the rural constituency was concerned, the very *raison d’être* of their denominational colleges was to serve the church and to prepare young people for such service. Only through such means could they stem the loss of their young people and preserve the bonds that held them together as Mennonites.

Given the progressive mindset of professors who wielded the chalk in these schools, stressing the values and the worldview that someone like Smith presented, it’s little wonder that Mennonite colleges thus soon found themselves in a deep and pervasive conflict with many Mennonites in the pews. Nearly all of them spent their first decades in a fundamentally defensive posture with their rural constituencies, who exerted subsequent pressure to reorient the schools to protect their young people against further cultural change. This stage, these scholars argue, lasted for three

28. James C. Juhnke, “A Historical Look at the Development of Mennonite Higher Education in the U.S.,” n.p., delivered at Symposium on Mennonite Higher Education, Bluffton College, June 1992, Elmer Neufeld Papers, I-A-G, Box 3, folder “GC Higher Education Symposium Draft,” BUASC; Thomas Askew, “The Shaping of Evangelical Higher Education Since World War II,” in *Making Higher Education Christian*, ed. Joel Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shipps (St. Paul, Minn.: Christian College Consortium, 1987), 127-150.

29. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War*, 171. Also see Paul Toews, “Fundamentalist Conflict in Mennonite Colleges: A Response to Cultural Transitions?” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (July 1983), 244-249.

30. Quoted in Royden K. Loewen and Steven M. Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace: A Global Mennonite History* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2012), 62.

or more decades, in some cases persisting well into the post-World War II years.³¹

About the same time, and for many of the same reasons, a parallel set of movements created many Mennonite elementary and secondary schools. It is clear that these developments began escalating in the later 1930s, accelerated during and especially after World War II, and that most of these schools emerged for similarly defensive reasons.³² The draft census data that Mennonite Central Committee produced during the war clearly revealed the public high school as a major secularizing agent that weakened the commitments of many young men to their church.³³ As a consequence, numerous new Mennonite schools sprang up in the postwar years. John D. Roth notes that fourteen new Mennonite schools emerged in 1940-1949. Most of these schools would have agreed with one of the major advocates for the new Lancaster Mennonite School, which opened its doors in 1942. Only in a Mennonite school, wrote Henry Garber, president of the Lancaster Conference Mission Board in 1940, can "our own brethren . . . instruct and guide our youth to safeguard them from an apostate and pleasure loving world."³⁴

Both Juhnke and Askew outlined two further stages of collegiate development. In a second phase, occurring from the 1940s into the 1970s, colleges sought academic legitimacy, notably through deepening the academic credentials of their faculties and pursuing the gold standard of academic credibility—regional accreditation from the North Central Association and Southern Association. Concurrent with the great postwar expansion of American higher education, both evangelical and Mennonite colleges in these decades busily expanded their physical plants and their student bodies.³⁵ To illustrate the drama of this shift, historians Roy Loewen and Steve Nolt have highlighted two contrasting vignettes occurring at Goshen College less than twenty years apart. In 1923,

31. Askew, "The Shaping of Evangelical Higher Education since World War II," 139-141; Juhnke, "A Historical Look..." 2-3. Take, for example the words of B. J. Braun, the president of Pacific Bible Institute (today's Fresno Pacific University) in 1959. "Unless we can bring our churches to a sudden halt and induce them to preach to our parents that Christian education alone is able to give their children a Christian view of life," he warned, "we as a denomination are headed toward disintegration."—quoted in Brian Froese, *California Mennonites* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 201.

32. John D. Roth, *Teaching that Transforms: Why Anabaptist-Mennonite Education Matters* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2011), 54-57.

33. Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 99-100.

34. Quoted in Donald B. Kraybill, *Passing on the Faith: The Story of a Mennonite School* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 1991), 16.

35. Askew, "The Shaping of Evangelical Higher Education since World War II," 141-146; Juhnke, "A Historical Look..." 3-4.

denominational fundamentalists closed Goshen for a year to purge it of its perceived liberal element. A third of the student body left, along with a substantial number of faculty, and Goshen's future looked tenuous. The college survived, however, and in March 1941 students snake-danced the night away around campus bonfires to celebrate the college's accreditation by the North Central Association.³⁶

The appeal of academic accreditation and the legitimating imprimatur it provided from mainstream American society was irresistible. It exerted a pull across the theological and political spectrum and on both sides of the US/Canadian border. Grace Bible Institute, for example, was founded in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1943 by fundamentalists within the General Conference Mennonite Church as an antidote to the perceived liberalism at Mennonite colleges, especially Bethel.³⁷ It began in all sincere, defensive strictness. Students were prohibited from card-playing, movie-going, dancing, and drinking alcohol, and they were deeply inculcated in premillennialist teaching anticipating the bodily return of Christ. Three decades later Grace Bible Institute had become a nationally recognized, fully-accredited liberal arts college with a lengthy list of alumni, significant numbers of whom had gone out from Grace to achieve a level of professional success that secured them a solid place in the North American middle class.³⁸

Or take the case of Rosthern Junior College in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. Mennonites established the school in 1910 to guard against a "loss of Mennonite identity." To protect their youth against an encroaching outside world, the school's founders deeply imbued them in Germanic culture and, according to Frank Epp, the author of Rosthern's history, a "deeper understanding of the truths of salvation." Within three decades, however, Rosthern had fully embraced the high culture of academia. In the end, Rosthern students and faculty became so enamored with the sweet fruits of academic life that its administration raised its academic standards so as to form an association "at the earliest possible date" with the University of Saskatchewan.³⁹

In the years since the 1970s, a third stage has occurred in which colleges—both Mennonite and evangelical—began to deal with the pronounced and inescapable patterns of demographic and economic retrenchment. These developments have had considerable implications for Mennonite education. In the US at least, one key factor has been the

36. Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, 133.

37. William Vance Trollinger Jr., "Grace Bible Institute and the Advance of Fundamentalism among the Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* 53, no. 2 (June 1998), 4-14.

38. Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, 134.

39. *Ibid.*, 131-132.

increasing dominance of the US economy by its financial sector. In the early 1980s, the US financial services industries—headquartered in Wall Street and major city centers—accounted for nearly 12 percent of the US gross national product. The manufacturing sector—in the words of one analyst, the “traditional pillar of our economy,” with plants rooted in local communities—accounted for about 25 percent. By 2005 these figures had reversed. The financial sector now dominated nearly 21 percent of the gross national product, while manufacturing had fallen to 12 percent. The rise of the financial sector is a complex development whose causes and consequences resist easy summary. Yet two points should be noted. First, this development clearly fed into a concurrent process of the underlying “deindustrialization” of the US and Canadian economies. In the nearly twenty years from 1980 to 1999, for example, while the 500 largest US corporations eliminated nearly five million jobs, their stock prices increased by a factor of eight and they tripled both their assets and their profit margins. Second, the rise to dominance of the financial sector was accompanied by massive financial instability. It ushered in a series of financial upheavals—hyper-consumption; massive consumer debt; the growth of “exotic” financial mechanisms such as securities and derivatives; an out-of-control housing bubble; the rise of an unregulated, “shadow” banking system—that resulted, in the fall of 2008, in the nation’s worst economic collapse since the 1930s. The US reverberated to levels of economic pain that it had not experienced since the Great Depression, though, now as then, some regions were hurt worse than others. Most Wall Street executives received bailout checks instead of pink slips. Meanwhile, the sunshine coasts and spreading suburbs of the Sunbelt, the epicenters of the housing boom like Florida, Arizona, and the housing developments near Las Vegas, reeled through cycles of home foreclosures. At the same time, towns and cities across North America experienced wave after wave of job losses, as manufacturing plants laid off workers by the tens of thousands and old auto-making giants like General Motors and Chrysler teetered on the edge of bankruptcy.⁴⁰

In sum, Mennonite schools and colleges in recent years have had to navigate a much tougher socio-economic-demographic terrain. Askew argues that one of the major ways colleges have responded is by the “increased professionalization at every level” of these institutions: their

40. Kevin Phillips, *Bad Money: Reckless Capitalism, Failed Politics, and the Global Crisis of American Capitalism* (N.Y.: Penguin, 2009), xi- lxx, 1-68, quoted xiii, xxiv; Phillips, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (N.Y.: Broadway Books, 2002), 112; Paul Krugman, *The Return of Depression Economics and the Crisis of 2008*, (N.Y.: Norton, 2009), 139-190, quoted 163; Richard Florida, “How the Crash will reshape America,” *The Atlantic Online*, March 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200909/meltdown-geography> (accessed Feb. 16, 2015).

administrations, their faculties, and their student life staff.⁴¹ It's also clear that one of the major promises they are making to students is to extend that professional participation to them. In a stagnating economy, with levels of economic inequality widening precipitously and access to the North American middle class increasingly precarious, education has become the one reliable doorway of entry into a perceived level of economic security, even as families have massively increased their levels of personal debt to attain it.

The Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam, among other scholars, has documented this well. In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam made a compelling case for the declining bonds of "social capital" that once held Americans together.⁴² More recently, in *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Putnam argues that social capital might be declining because American society is increasingly divided into two different and unequal societies. While the old poisonous barriers of racial discrimination have not disappeared of course, his data shows that the divide primarily falls now along educational lines. People with bachelor's degrees or above tend to enjoy at least some measure of economic security and family stability. Those without such levels of education find themselves locked into less rewarding life patterns, struggling with economic instability and family dysfunction, high rates of divorce, and out-of-wedlock childbirth. In the quarter century between 1989 and 2013, Putnam notes, the net worth of college-educated Americans with children rose 47 percent, while those with only a high school education declined by 17 percent.⁴³

Mennonite scholars have generally not paid much attention to matters like economics and social class,⁴⁴ but what little work they have done suggests that Mennonites are no more immune from the growing patterns of economic insecurity than are other North Americans. In 1997, in one of the few pieces published by an economist in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, James Harder explored the impact of economic stagnation on Mennonite colleges. For decades, he found, these schools remained afloat financially in part through a wide range of smaller financial gifts from a large pool of

41. Askew, "The Shaping of Evangelical Higher Education since World War II," 146.

42. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2000), see especially 31-64, 277-284.

43. Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: the American Dream in Crisis* (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 36, 61-79, 183-190. For a similar, highly-regarded analysis that social class has begun to rival race as one of the most important dividing lines in modern America, see William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2008).

44. Perry Bush, "If God were a Capitalist, the Mennonites would be his Favorite People": Economics, Mennonites, and Reflections on the Recent Literature," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005), 77-90.

comfortable, but not wealthy, donors. Yet over the past four decades, Harder argues, these institutions have come to rely on a smaller number of larger gifts from fewer, very wealthy, donors. This may reflect, he suggested, the increasingly straitened economic circumstances of the Mennonite middle class.⁴⁵

It is also clear that Mennonites are pursuing the same strategies as other North Americans to alleviate this economic insecurity—namely, by increasing their pursuit of education. In extensive surveys of the Mennonite laity by church sociologists beginning in the 1970s, Mennonites have consistently reflected a much higher level of education and corresponding professional participation than has the US population at large.⁴⁶ Conrad Kanagy has shown recently that Mennonites in the United States are more highly educated than neighboring Protestants.⁴⁷ Mennonite colleges are actively speaking to and building from this compulsion. As the pool of young people of college age grows smaller, one of the ways that both Mennonite and wider evangelical colleges have maintained or increased their student bodies is through extensive expansion of their professional programs, many moving from the status of a “college” to a “university” in the process.⁴⁸

Moreover, the trend toward training Mennonite children for professional achievement that will assure them a secure place in the North American middle class is not solely confined to the colleges. Mennonite secondary schools have been surviving, in part, also because they have been able to convince students and their parents that they are the pathway toward professional success. Lancaster Mennonite School may have begun in 1942 with plain dress mandated and a commitment to protect Mennonite young people from the ways of the world. But that vision could only last so long, even in conservative Lancaster County. Thirty years later, the school was advertising itself as a center for academic excellence, and reorienting its curriculum to enable its graduates to achieve professional success.⁴⁹

To be sure, these are not somehow shallow or embarrassing pursuits. Each spring those of us working at Mennonite schools line up in our academic finery to confer degrees on our graduates. These events can be

45. James Harder, “Church-related Institutions: Driven by Member Commitment or Economic Forces?” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71 (July 1997), 377-394.

46. J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991), 239-240; Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties*, 141-142.

47. Conrad Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2007), 60-61.

48. Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, 132-135.

49. *Ibid.*, 132-133.

moving ceremonies for all concerned, occasions of joy, relief, and accomplishment. These young people arrived at our schools in part because they believed what admissions officers had assured them: that they would be prepared for meaningful professional careers that would allow them to gain or retain a foothold in an increasingly tenuous and hard-pressed middle class. If our schools cannot deliver on such promises, then our institutional futures could be endangered. Given the substantial amounts of money that our students or their families are paying to attend, perhaps deservedly so. But there is another dynamic at work, of which students may be unaware. In light of heavy teaching loads, most professors are not teaching at Mennonite schools to churn out publications and rise up the academic ladder. Nor are they doing it for generous salaries.⁵⁰ Instead, vast numbers of the faculty, staff, and administrators at Mennonite schools seem propelled in their work by less pecuniary considerations.⁵¹ Students may sometimes overlook it, but at educational institutions of all kinds something more is going on than a mere transactional exchange of money for academic credits; and in mission-driven schools there is much, much more. Periodically Mennonite educational leaders remind us of this.⁵² John D. Roth has provided a more recent expression of this older conviction—that it is possible to teach to transform, to operate educational institutions deeply rooted in and reflective of Anabaptist-Mennonite values.⁵³ Of course this does not happen accidentally. It takes conscious effort, mutual reinforcement, shared dialogue, and collaboration both at our academic communities and between them. Yet this kind of thoughtful and critically important work is being done at Mennonite schools across the country.⁵⁴

50. Faculty salaries at Mennonite institutions of higher education consistently place them at the lower end of salaries of public and private four-year colleges in their respective states. See comparative faculty salary data published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, <http://data.chronicle.com/category/state/Kansas/faculty-salaries/> (accessed Jan. 17, 2017).

51. As an example of one such administrator, see Roth's account of Barbara Moses, principal of Philadelphia Mennonite High School in *Teaching That Transforms*, 189-190.

52. For examples of collections of college chapel sermons and baccalaureate addresses published by Mennonite college presidents, see Edmund G. Kaufman, *Living Creatively* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1966), and Lloyd L. Ramseyer, *The More Excellent Way*, (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1965).

53. Roth lays out a compelling vision; see, for instance, *Teaching That Transforms*, 93-123, 130-153, 200-212.

54. The conference on Mennonites and Education at Bluffton in October 2015 is only the latest recent example of contexts where such critically important work is being done. Other examples include: graduate courses for Mennonite primary and secondary school educators currently being offered by the Anabaptist Learning Institute.—<http://www.mennonite-education.org/Schools/MSC/Pages/ALL.aspx> (accessed Jan. 24, 2017); the biannual gatherings of the Mennonite Educators Conference.—<http://www.mennoniteeducation.org/Resources/Educators/Pages/MEC.aspx> (accessed Jan. 24, 2017); and a biannual meetings of the Educational Leaders Gathering, which works at professional development for educational

Perhaps the major contributions that the church's historians can offer are to simply furnish reminders of our historical legacy. In this context it might be helpful to turn again to the interesting figure of C. Henry Smith. Through the last two decades of his life he lived in a time of a bewildering and searing national and global crisis. There were ominous trends overseas, with fascism rising across Europe and Asia. Here at home his society dealt with political polarization and economic collapse. American and Canadian societies struggled in Smith's day with the worst economic depression in their histories. Neither country had adequately reached even the beginning of recovery before they were plunged into the massive cataclysm of world war.

In a time of such pervasive and unrelenting crisis, what did Smith do with his time? In his scholarship he continued to lay out a usable past for his church. In article after article and book after book, he reminded his fellow Mennonites of their rich historical legacy, of their Anabaptist ancestors who prized the sanctity of individual conscience, who dared to insist to the states of their day that it was Christ who is Lord, and continued to witness to the ways of peace in a time of rampant violence. In his everyday work Smith taught these concepts to young people in the classroom, insisting that this kind of Mennonite education was critical to the very existence of the church. Consider, for example, a comment he made to Harold Bender in 1943 as World War II raged. "If we are going to preserve the faith of our fathers in these days of the radio, the automobile, rural mail and the centralized high school," Smith insisted, "I am firmly convinced that it will come through a process of the right kind of education and perhaps reeducation in our church schools and colleges."⁵⁵

Finally, Smith did not stop there. While in the latter decades of his life he articulated a vision of Mennonite society that was primarily defensive in orientation, in other aspects of his life he demonstrated to the church the kinds of benefits that such an education could bring to the society around them. For almost two decades Smith repeatedly took a Mennonite message out into the public sphere. He expressed it outwardly and applied it widely, subtly suggesting to all Americans that the same kind of prescriptive values taught in Mennonite schools might also be useful to them. In November 1941, for example, a month before Pearl Harbor, he told his audience on WLOK radio in Lima, Ohio, that "world peace will be assured only when nations will learn to be as generous and unselfish

leaders and members of boards of Mennonite schools. In addition, Mennonite school administrators "meet three times a year for strategic planning, networking and professional development."—Elaine Moyer, email to author, Jan. 17, 2017, in author's possession.

55. "A Communication from C. Henry Smith Concerning the Review of His Book 'The Story of the Mennonites,'" [sic] *MQR* 17 (Oct. 1943), 250.

as individuals are supposed to be.” Reversing this course was “a matter of education. . . . The economic forces back of national policies are constant; and so ideas must change.”⁵⁶

Such a vision is not a bad model for Mennonite educators today. We face national conditions almost as severe and dire as our professorial ancestors faced in the times of Smith and his colleagues. We send students into societies still saturated in racism and seething with the injustices of gender inequity and social class. We busy ourselves with the prosaic task of teaching young people in a world that is shuffling ever close to the edge of environmental collapse. And it is hard to imagine what Smith, Bender, or other Mennonite educators of ages past would say about a future era when mass shootings became accepted as a normal and regular feature of American life, with a political system absolutely paralyzed in its inability to do anything to stop them (in the 274 days between January 1 and October 1, 2015, for example, American society witnessed 295 such killing sprees, which works out to an average of more than one such obscenity per day).⁵⁷

In the face of such terrors, what would a previous generation of Mennonite educators advise us to do? Perhaps their advice would be to simply keep doing what we are doing. Take the young people who come to us, ground them in the best teaching of our shared traditions, and prepare them to serve the church. Then send them, into a society addicted to violence, to witness to the ways of peace and testify to the ultimate victory of the risen Lord.

That is part of the historical legacy that we bear as Mennonite educators. Those are some of the uses of our rich and immensely usable past.

56. Smith radio address, “The Most Important Event of the Week,” delivered on WLOK Radio, Nov. 13, 1941, Smith Papers, Hist. Mss. I, box 39, file 9, BUASC.

57. Christopher Ingraham, “Shooting in Oregon: So Far in 2015, we’ve had 274 days and 295 mass shootings,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 1, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/01/2015-274-days-294-mass-shootings-hundreds-dead/?utm_term=.86aba4a93410 (accessed Jan. 17, 2017).

