

IN THIS ISSUE

During the past forty years, the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) in Ethiopia has undergone an astounding epoch of growth. In 1974, when a Marxist-led coup overthrew the longstanding emperor Haile Selassie, the church numbered approximately 800 baptized members. In the years that followed, the church struggled to redefine itself in a context that was increasingly hostile to all expressions of religious faith, particularly evangelical Christians. Indeed, from January 1982 until the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam's regime in 1991, the MKC church was forced to go underground. Key leaders were imprisoned and ordinary members faced ongoing threats of harassment, arrest, interrogation, fines, torture, and extended prison sentences. Yet when the Marxist government was overthrown in the spring of 1991, the number of baptized members had increased to around 30,000. Today, the church has grown to include 295,500 members—meeting in 961 local congregations and 1,016 church planting centers—with regular attendance of well over 500,000. Together with the Amish, who number some 310,000 adults and children, the MKC is among the largest bodies in the global Anabaptist-Mennonite family of churches.

The story of the survival and remarkable growth of the MKC between 1974 and 1981 has been frequently told in its general outlines. The extended essay by **Brent Kipfer** that opens this issue of *MQR*, however, offers the first careful analysis of the church's leadership during the Derg, as the revolutionary government was known. Distilled from Kipfer's recently-completed dissertation at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, the article draws on extensive oral interviews with twenty-four MKC leaders to argue that even in the face of persecution, the church's leaders remained consistent in their goals, demonstrated integrity under pressure, practiced sacrificial love, and responded to challenges with remarkable creativity. Under their direction, the church became financially self-supporting, restructured its organization around local cell groups, expanded its reach into new parts of the country, integrated women into positions of local leadership, developed an extensive curriculum to instruct new members, and successfully trained other evangelists, pastors, and church leaders to respond to the challenges of growth. Kipfer concludes with some reflections on what the findings from the study of MKC leadership in the context of persecution might mean for churches in settings of relative freedom and security. The next challenge for scholars will be to explore how a subsequent generation of MKC leaders has nurtured ongoing church growth in the period since then.

If he is known at all today, Pieter Jansz Twisck (1565-1636), an elder and theologian of the Old Frisian Mennonite Church, is generally identified as a leading voice for the conservative faction in the Dutch Mennonite fellowship. Many of his best-known writings promoted traditional Mennonite doctrine and practice, often in polemical debate with representatives of the more liberal Waterlander church. Yet when it came to defending religious minorities in the broader struggle for diversity and religious freedom, Twisck adopted a quite different rhetorical tactic. As **Gary K. Waite**, professor of history at the University of New Brunswick, demonstrates, Twisck crossed significant theological lines to adopt the arguments of well-known spiritualists, including Caspar Schwenkfeld and Sebastian Catellio, in making the case for religious liberty. Most surprising was his readiness to secretly draw on the work of David Joris—a spiritualist infamous for his association with the Münster debacle and a sworn enemy of Menno Simons. As Waite demonstrates, Twisck carefully disguised his dependence on Joris; but his use of the Joris writings reveals a surprising flexibility of thought and the pervasive influence of spiritualism among Dutch Mennonites in the early eighteenth century.

We conclude this issue of *MQR* with an essay by **Maxwell Kennel**, a doctoral student in religious studies at McMaster University. North American Mennonite theologians have traditionally been suspicious of the discipline of philosophy, wary of its bias toward the authority of reason over revelation, and its tendency to favor abstract thought over ethics and the life of the community. In his essay, Kennel challenges these assumptions by tracing the implicit philosophical references in the work of Mennonite theologians John Howard Yoder and A. James Reimer. He then reflects on the more explicit efforts of recent Mennonite scholars to engage the thought of contemporary philosophers, particularly in discussions of pacifist epistemology and in the debate with Radical Orthodox theologians on questions around ontology. Kennel affirms these developments, arguing that critiques of violence must bridge the divide between Christianity and the secular, and that a conscious engagement with philosophy offers a helpful step in that direction.

On the surface, the distance between the growing church in Ethiopia, the writings of Pieter Jansz Twisck, and arguments about pacifist epistemology might seem vast. But all of these essays reflect the efforts by various groups in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition to respond creatively to the challenges of their distinctive contexts. As such, they are part of a much larger dynamic throughout the history of the Christian church to which *MQR* seeks to contribute a small voice.

– John D. Roth, editor