IN THIS ISSUE

When did the movement begin to baptize adults on confession of faith, and what relationship does this beginning have to subsequent historical developments of that movement down to the present day? One submission and a research note in this issue address these questions. A second article shifts attention to Mennonite missions in twentieth-century Uruguay.

In the first article of this issue, “The Year 1625, the Dutch Republic, and Book History,” **Michael D. Driedger** begins by highlighting the year 1625, focusing on the seventeenth century and beyond. Driedger’s historical work demonstrates in impressive detail the extent to which the adult baptizers of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Netherlands were involved in the burgeoning Dutch publishing industry and more than two centuries of Dutch cultural history. The significant historical work at the heart of this article raises important questions concerning Anabaptist/Mennonite history and identity.

The question of “dates of origin” has played a large role in Anabaptist historiography. Already in the sixteenth century, the dated “beginnings” of the baptizing movement were said to reveal the essential characteristics of the baptizing movement. Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75), Zwingli’s successor at the head of the Zurich church, succeeded in negatively defining the baptizing movement for centuries to come. In one of his widely read anti-Anabaptist books, Bullinger placed the beginning of the baptizing movement in Saxony in 1521 and 1522, naming the Zwickau Prophets and Thomas Müntzer as its originators. The first adult baptisms in Zurich were described simply as a further seditious development by some of Müntzer’s many disciples, the character of the baptizing movement having been set by its “origins” in Saxony.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The revisionist historiography that defined Anabaptist scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries established the current consensus that the adult baptizing movement as such began not in Saxony (there was no adult baptism under Müntzer) but in Zurich proper after a break from Zwingli’s leadership—something Bullinger would have known perfectly well, since he was present for all the relevant events. As a result of the new scholarship, the beginnings of the baptizing movement have been relocated to Zurich, and 1525 has become the accepted date given for the first adult baptisms.[[2]](#footnote-2)

By focusing his work on 1625, Driedger is not arguing for a new “origin” year. His argument is, rather, that concentration on “origins” (and the “origin year” of 1525) has distorted historical narratives. The focus on normative origins led Mennonite historians in particular to consider early Swiss/German characteristics as also normative for the present-day “Anabaptist/Mennonite” church.[[3]](#footnote-3) What such historical narratives passed over, Driedger points out, were the urban, Dutch-speaking baptizers who were “the largest, most publicly active, and significant community that debated and attempted to define ‘Mennonite’ identity for about ten generations (approx. 1550–1800).” It is worth remembering, as we prepare to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of the beginnings of adult baptism in 2025, that we are celebrating the beginnings of a “baptizing movement” that passed through significant developments in later centuries, visible particularly in the lives of the Dutch “baptizers.”

The question of the adequacy of “Anabaptist” being the best word to identify the movement of adult baptizers comes up for brief discussion in Driedger’s article. This clearly is an issue that calls for wider discussion, resting in part on analyses of how baptizers in different areas named themselves and how this might relate to the names we apply to them. In the research note included in this issue (“‘The Mennonites Are Anabaptists’”), **Cory Davis** adds to this conversation by examining in some detail how seventeenth-century baptizers in the Palatinate in fact negotiated how they were named and how they named themselves.

The second article in this issue turns to Mennonite missions in South America, looking to Uruguay in the 1970s and 1980s. The story of missions in South America must be told in the context of two very different religious and political realities—that is, before Vatican II (1962–65) and the Cuban revolution (1959) and after those events.

In 1919, the first Mennonite missionaries began their work in South America, establishing a church in the small city of Pehuajó, Argentina. The focus of the Argentine Mennonite mission was saving souls through evangelism.[[4]](#footnote-4) Listeners were to be convicted of sin and brought to faith in Christ. Being converted and born again, believers would be led to a new and holy life and membership in the church.[[5]](#footnote-5) The emphasis on saving souls from sin mirrored an important fundamentalist current in Protestant missions generally.[[6]](#footnote-6) When Mennonite mission work was extended from Argentina to Uruguay in 1954, the emphasis on evangelism continued, with a series of tent campaigns beginning in 1956.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Evangelical Mennonite Seminary in Montevideo was established in 1956 to further evangelism through education.

The 1960s brought radical political and religious changes. The religious backdrop to Protestant mission work in South America had been the historical and cultural hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church, whose close partnership with the political authorities dated back to colonial times.[[8]](#footnote-8) By the early twentieth century, the governments of Argentina and Uruguay had distanced themselves from political interference from the Catholic Church and opened their countries to Protestant immigrants and missionaries. Nevertheless, these countries remained culturally Roman Catholic. In the years preceding the Second Vatican Council—that is, when Protestant missions began—the Roman Catholic Church was dominated by the clergy, with Scripture and liturgy both rendered in Latin and available firsthand only to the clergy.

A revolution came with the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), which defined the church not in clerical terms but as the collective “people of God.” The liturgy was rendered in the vernacular, and the laity was empowered further by vernacular Bible translations and encouragement to read and study the Bible directly. Latin American bishops, meeting in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, took these beginnings further, defining unjust economic structures as “sin” that the church should actively resist while siding with the poor and marginalized in society.

While some in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America began organizing cooperatives, leading Bible studies with the poor, and working to improve their living conditions, Fidel Castro’s victory in Cuba in 1959 inspired political movements on the left throughout Latin America. In response, the governments of Argentina and Uruguay (among others) moved to repress “socialist” political expressions. In Argentina, a military coup in 1966 led eventually to the decisive coup of 1976, which resulted in thousands of political prisoners as well as many hundreds of assassinations and people “disappeared.” In Uruguay, increasing authoritarian measures began in 1968, leading to an outright dictatorship in 1973. In this context, those in the Roman Catholic Church who were working with the poor found themselves identified as political subversives and became targets of government repression and violence.

The events of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s fundamentally changed the political and religious context in which Mennonite missions were carried out. When significant elements of the Roman Catholic Church now were leading Bible studies in the vernacular and were increasingly open to ecumenical relationships, an anti-Catholic missiology looked increasingly out-of-date. Likewise, a Roman Catholic focus on the poor and dispossessed challenged a missiology focused on saving souls. How should Mennonite missions respond?

Documenting events in a shantytown in Montevideo, Uruguay, **Coretta Thomson**, in “Holistic Mission in Action,” presents a case study of how Mennonite missionaries responded to the new situation they faced. Of course, this is not the complete story of Mennonite missionary responses to the post–Vatican II reality in Latin America, but readers will discover a notable effort to speak to the new political and religious realities being encountered in Uruguay in the 1970s and 1980s.[[9]](#footnote-9) For all its uniqueness and individuality, this too is a story of Mennonite missions, and it is a story worth telling.

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1. See Heinrich Bullinger, *Der Wiedertoeffern ursprung . . .* (Zürich: Froschower, 1560), 1recto, 9recto–11recto. Available on www.e-rara.ch in PDF format. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a good summary of the Swiss scholarship that established this view, see Fritz Blanke, *Brothers in Christ: The History of the Oldest Anabaptist Congregation, Zollikon, Near Zurich, Switzerland* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961); German original published in Zurich, 1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Harold S. Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” *Church History* 13 (1944): 3–24; also in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (1944): 67–88. Even the “polygenesis” revisions of Bender’s historiography nonetheless continued to focus on “origins” (or “genesis”) rather than continuity. See James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (1975): 83–122. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As is evident in J. W. Shank et al., *The Gospel Under the Southern Cross* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1943). The Argentine missionary D. Parke Lantz underscores in this publication, “The keynote of the Argentine Mennonite Mission is evangelism” (113). The church in Argentina would be built by securing converts “through personal evangelism, tent campaigns, and special evangelistic meetings” (81). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “We teach that, on being born anew, one must discontinue all sinful habits and be separated from all appearance of evil. When this is all accomplished, we have a convert and are ready to prepare him for entrance into the church.” Shank et al., *Gospel Under the Southern Cross*, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Theron F. Schlabach, *Gospel versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863–1944* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), esp. chaps. 1, 4. For analysis of the Argentine mission, see 117–20, 127–32. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jaime Prieto Valladares, *Mission and Migration*, A Global Mennonite History: Latin America (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2010), 76–77. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The early Mennonite mission to Argentina, for example, focused on the failure of the Roman Catholic Church “to carry out her missionary task to all of South America.” Shank et al., *Gospel Under the Southern Cross*, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a fuller rendition, see Prieto Valladares, *Mission and Migration*, chaps. 1, 5, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)