

# Shalom!

A JOURNAL FOR THE PRACTICE OF RECONCILIATION

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## Celebrating 500 Years of Anabaptism

I DON'T REMEMBER ever being specifically taught about Anabaptism when I was growing up in the Brethren in Christ Church. I knew we were different from other churches (e.g., my mother and most of the other women at church wore a head covering while the rest of the world didn't), but I didn't really understand why. The settings in which I grew up placed far more emphasis on personal salvation, evangelism, and holiness. Not until I was at Messiah College (now University) did I learn from various professors like Martin Schrag and Carlton Wittlinger that the denomination I had been in my whole life had Anabaptist roots and what that meant..

I came of age in the 1960s and early 1970s, amidst the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. I finally owned my Anabaptist heritage of conscientious objection to war, nonviolence, and peacemaking. In the late 1970s, I began to read books by Anabaptists, such as *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* by Ronald J. Sider and *The Upside-Down Kingdom* by Donald Kraybill, both of which were extremely influential in my life and helped to propel me into a lifetime of advocacy for the peacemaking and service heritage of the Brethren in Christ. In 1981, I started editing what became the publication you're now reading.

Around the same time, I was invited to co-write a book for the Foundation Series adult Sunday school curriculum—a cooperative venture of two Mennonite denominations, the Church of the Brethren, and the Brethren in Christ. The common theological denominator was Anabaptism. That

book, *Called to Stewardship*, included a chapter called "The Anabaptist Vision of Discipleship" that described four principles: the centrality of Scripture, the importance of obedience to Jesus and his commands (including the ethic of nonviolence), the view of the church as a community of believers, and the doctrine of nonconformity.

As I look back, I believe that helping to write that book solidified my commitment to the Anabaptist part of Brethren in Christ theology in a way that might not have happened otherwise. I still resonate with the concluding sentences of the chapter on the Anabaptist vision:

Our historical beliefs in the Bible as the only authority, the necessity of obedience to Jesus's commands, the church as a voluntary gathering of believers, and our separation from a hostile world are as relevant now as they were in sixteenth-century Europe or eighteenth-century America. We do well when we work at ways to recover the vision for a discipleship based squarely on biblical truth.

This edition of *Shalom!* celebrates the five hundredth anniversary of Anabaptism, which began on January 21, 1525 in Zurich, Switzerland. The writers tell their own stories of how they embraced Anabaptism and how and why it is such an important aspect of the Brethren in Christ story as a whole.

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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# Owning Our Anabaptist Heritage: An Invitation

By David Flowers

**DUE TO THE** the decline in the Brethren in Christ Church in the 1940s and 50s, there was concern that our Anabaptist heritage was repelling our young people and hindering growth. But I think the problem wasn't Anabaptism; it was legalism, strict separatism, and biblical literalism (e.g., head coverings, avoiding jewelry, playing cards, etc.). The best of Anabaptism has sought to take Jesus far more seriously than many "Christians" often have within mainstream Evangelicalism.

What we need now is not to turn our backs on our original stream. Rather, we need to hold to the core convictions of Anabaptism that are built on the grace and truth of Jesus, and give space to folks who are in

different places on their journey, while simultaneously safeguarding our heritage, our original theological stream, and the values that make us unique as a denomination. This must happen at all levels of the church.

We have often used the metaphor of "streams" in a river to think about the merging of our theological influences. But I'd like to propose another visual—a tree.

Our denomination was born from the roots of Christ and his Spirit at work in our ancestors. Anabaptism is not merely one "stream" of thought; rather, it is the "trunk" of the Brethren in Christ tree. The major limbs are Pietism, Wesleyanism, and Evangelicalism. I worked on a tree farm one summer when I was in college. Many of you may be aware that the trunk of a tree

needs to be cared for, to be sure, but at other times the limbs need attention. Also, the smaller branches coming off the larger limbs of the tree must be trimmed off for the overall health and vitality of the tree. In other words, I think we've got some trimming to do in the Brethren in Christ U.S. (and perhaps elsewhere).

For example, what about Evangelicalism? Are we Evangelical today or should we trim that limb? Obviously, the limb of Evangelicalism is very much a part of our tree, whether we like it or not. I'm not proposing that we deny Evangelicalism's influence and impact on the Brethren in Christ. After all, the limb of Evangelicalism (the best of that tradition) does not compromise the integrity of the tree, and I believe it would be compromising the tree to cut off that limb entirely. I don't even think it is possible at this point. But there undoubtedly needs to be some trimming of the unhealthy branches (John 15:1-2). For starters, we are Wesleyan and not Calvinist, we are a peace church in the Anabaptist tradition, and we affirm women

in ministry—in stark contrast to many evangelicals.

We should keep recognizing "historic" Evangelicalism. But the challenge, as Luke Keefer Jr. said many years ago, is to be Evangelicals with a difference, just as we have been Anabaptists with a difference, Pietists with a difference, and Wesleyans with a difference. If this is to happen, Keefer believed, and so do I, it will require leadership and denominational commitment. We need the courage to look at the loss of our heritage—or the deterioration of our trunk—and the negative effects that white American Evangelicalism, with its quest for political power and apparent lack of concern for some of Jesus's basic commands, has had on the denomination in the US.

Having read Carlton Wittlinger's history of the Brethren in Christ, and others who've written on the subject, I see that the greatest strengths of the Brethren in Christ in the past have been: (1) our commitment to the best of Anabaptism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism; (2) our willingness to include outsiders (non-cradle BICs) and incorporate new ways of being the church on mission, and (3) our passion for world missions, seeing that the vast majority of the Brethren in Christ exists outside of North America.

Furthermore, I've been impressed by how the Brethren in Christ, in the past during times of challenge to our beliefs, have shown a resolve in our convictions and even revitalization of the church when it desperately needed it. Even though Evangelicalism has had a negative impact in some ways, we know there was a mighty move of God within the Brethren in Christ during the resurgence in the 1950s.

With the increasing divisiveness and polarization in our society, and after theological erosion and mission drift within the Brethren in Christ U.S., I'd say that we are at a crossroads as a denomination. We must choose which way we will go. Will we be able to affirm our Anabaptist heritage, history, and values, or will we devolve into a bland American Evangelicalism that has lost its wit-



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ness and prophetic power in our secular age?

Like many of you, I believe that our Anabaptist heritage, as well as the best of Wesleyanism and Pietism, equips us to be a faithful witness in these troubling times. Our history and values are unique, and they can be used to guide us into a new era of ministry and growth. We desperately need to own our heritage in a post-Christian culture where consumerism, individualism, authoritarianism, racism, bigotry, greed, and violence reign supreme; and in an angry and polarized society that is rejecting Christianity, especially Evangelical Christianity.

What if we rediscovered a “third way” in this unique cultural moment in American history? What if we said we’re not going to be pawns of this earthly empire? What if we said we’re going to stop putting our trust in

horses and chariots and kings and kingdoms? What if we truly valued all human life (womb to the tomb) and promoted forgiveness, reconciliation, and nonviolent resolution of conflict (our eighth core value)?

What if we reached into our past to discover the history, values, and tools that we need to navigate our challenges? What if we saw, as the first Anabaptists did, that Christianity is discipleship? Is there any greater need today than this?

Now is not the time for the Brethren in Christ U.S. to shy away from our Anabaptist heritage, our theological distinctives, and our core values and convictions. Those outside the church, as well as those who’ve been hurt by the church and have left, don’t want to know how we’re the same; they want to know how we’re different as the Brethren in

Christ. Now is the time to rediscover our Anabaptist roots and own the heritage that goes to the heart of who we are.

Therefore, I invite all of our denominational leaders, bishops, pastors, and congregants of the nearly 250 churches within Brethren in Christ U.S. to own our original theological stream with passion and conviction, so that we might believe in and embody a more Christ-like Christianity in America, for the sake of the gospel and for the glory and fame of the God who looks like Jesus.

*David Flowers is senior pastor of the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. This article is excerpted from the April 2025 edition of Brethren in Christ History and Life. You can read it here: <https://bic-history.org/journal-articles/anabaptism-then-and-now/>.*

## Looking Back, Living Forward

By Hank Johnson

**MY BEST FRIEND** is also good friends with Joe. Joe went to Messiah College with us but was always more of an acquaintance to me. A few years ago, Joe and I reconnected at a mutual friend’s funeral and promised to stay in touch, like all good Anabaptists do at those sorts of things.

So, a few weeks later when my phone rang and I looked to see Joe calling me, I was mildly surprised. We are a tribe within the faith that is built on fellowship, and our fellowship is founded on our connection to Jesus and one another. So, I curiously answered, intrigued to find out why Joe had decided to call.

The call was for more than staying in touch. Joe wanted to invite me to serve on the Advisory Group for Menno Media’s Anabaptism at 500 project. I was humbled, overwhelmed, and confused as to why I would be included in this group. Nevertheless, with some encouragement from Joe and later from people on my support team as well, I agreed to serve on the team.

The genesis of the project was to help commemorate the five-hundred-year anniversary of the birth of Anabaptism. On January 21, 1525, a small group of Christians secretly gathered in Zurich, Switzerland, for

a worship service. There, they renounced their baptism as infants in favor of voluntary baptism as adults. They made this bold step of faith fully committed to Christ and knowing that it could lead to imprisonment, torture, and even death. This gathering marked the beginning of the Anabaptist movement that continues today in the form of the Amish, Hutterites, Mennonites, Church of the Brethren, Brethren in Christ, and many other related groups around the world.

The goal of the Advisory Group was to provide resources to churches and to the greater Anabaptist community. We wanted to make these tools available to tell our story to and for different age groups, people from different places, and in different ways. The tools we worked on and gave leadership to include several books and devotionals, a toolkit for churches (available free online), and the very heart of the project, the Anabaptist Community Bible.

One goal of the Anabaptist Community Bible was to connect readers to the biblical story from an Anabaptist perspective. To do so, the Bible includes more than 7,200 marginal notes alongside commentary and essays from Anabaptist scholars, historical notes from the tradition, and the insights of nearly

six hundred Bible study groups. The intentionality in pairing scholars and small groups and communities alongside the biblical text is a sweet reminder of our community-based approach to reading Scripture and calling readers to follow Jesus.

The success of the Anabaptist Community Bible is that it really helps tell our story as Anabaptists through how we have engaged with Scripture in the past and how we are engaging with Scripture today. This is a blessing for those of us born into this faith tradition, and a blessing to those of us who have been graciously grafted in. It will be a blessing for us going forward because we have all our voices at the table in a new way.

Accomplishing our goals and finding success was a journey paved with dedicated and dutiful service. Our team represented different voices and experiences from across our faith tradition. We worked to find resources that would challenge and inspire our people and that would also possibly move beyond our communities of faith. We prayed for people to be inspired, to feel seen and heard by God and their churches, and to grow in their faith.

Our Advisory Group was led diligently by John D. Roth and Mollee Moua. Their

dedication to working as a team was evident as they made sure our voices were welcomed and valued. This model not only encouraged us to do the same with one another, but also with all the teams and sub-groups and committees with whom we worked.

This was especially necessary when we worked on the Anabaptist Community Bible. With over six hundred Bible study groups providing commentary on chapters of the Bible, the editing process was rigorous. We were invited to continue our culture of grace with the scholars and historians, the study groups, and each other. Sometimes there was disagreement in understanding the text and grace toward each other was necessary.

I would love for every family to have this Bible because it is a worthy investment. I've mentioned the notes and commentary from

scholars and groups from all over the world. I also want to highlight the essays that offer opportunities to engage with challenging topics and passages from both historic and contemporary lenses, helping to prepare us for the next five hundred years. In addition, the unique and original art throughout brings to life biblical concepts and characters in creative and imaginative new ways.

For churches, the obvious use of this Bible would be group studies. Some churches will find the communal and conversational studies new—and there are steps for study groups in the free online toolkit. I believe that the most helpful way for churches to use this Bible is simply to read it together. The Scriptures have guided us in our faith. This Anabaptist Community Bible is an opportunity for us to continue our formation by looking at the Scriptures with a

Jesus-centered focus on every page.

I have always loved that the Brethren in Christ maintain multiple streams in our theology. This highlights our willingness to see how God is moving within us and our world, and where we can join in. All our streams have made us a more faithful church and people. Even so, our Anabaptism is what brought me to the Brethren in Christ and it is this stream that gives me the most life. I pray this Anabaptist Community Bible can help us hold on even stronger to our foundational stream.

*Hank Johnson is senior pastor of the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and represented the Brethren in Christ Church U.S. on the Anabaptism at 500 Advisory Group.*

## Interpretive Communities

By Joshua Nolt

**IN ANTICIPATION OF** the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Anabaptism, an invitation went out to various Anabaptist denominations to participate in creating an Anabaptist Study Bible. The invitation was to participate in the study of Scripture as the early Anabaptists had done. Little did I know that accepting this invitation would transform my pastoral ministry and the church where I serve.

The task was simple: form a small group of people to discuss three scriptures. The discussion was guided by five simple questions. A scribe would take notes and send them back to be summarized and included in the community comments section of the bible. The questions were:

1. What does this verse or passage suggest about God?
2. What might/does Jesus have to say about it?
3. What does the verse or passage suggest about humans—our possibilities and mistakes?
4. How do you live differently because of this verse or passage?
5. What questions remain with you?

A group of six of us gathered over the course

of several one-hour meetings, using these questions to discuss the assigned scriptures: Leviticus 13:1-59; Proverbs 6:20-29; and Mark 12:28-44.

Admittedly, I entered into our first discussion on Leviticus 13 (a passage on skin diseases) with little excitement. The conversation, however, was more than I expected or hoped for. Each subsequent meeting was just as meaningful as the first. At the end of our time together, one of the group members asked me: what would it look like for our church to take this up as a regular practice?

We began with a pilot group in the summer of 2023. I invited sixteen people representing a cross section of the congregation to be a part of the group. We would meet for one hour on Monday nights via Zoom. Because our church uses the lectionary as its source for preaching, the passages would be available well ahead of time. Each person would be assigned one Monday night of the month to take part for a “semester” of four months.

Each Interpretive Community since has begun with an orientation. The following are discussed in this orientation, and what we have experienced with every group since,

with over thirty-seven people participating up to this point, in a little less than two years.

### Personal engagement with Scripture

At an annual meeting, one of our original members shared how participating in the Interpretive Community helped her in personal study of the Scriptures. The questions helped guide her and give her structure. The interaction between the assigned passages of the Lectionary helped her connect the overall story of the Bible.

Pastors are always looking for ways to help their congregation engage scripture, and this has become a simple, accessible way for us to engage scripture.

### Community engagement

These groups have built community between members of our congregation. People are intentionally put into groups with people they don't know. This not only helps them meet new people, but it gives them the opportunity to hear perspectives of people with whom they might not normally engage. New relationships are built on the foundation of studying scripture together.



## Creating a culture of generosity

Not everyone reads or interprets the Scripture the same. We come from different contexts, life experiences, exposure to theological traditions and ideas, and so on. We live in a time in history where differing opinions or insights divide us into echo chambers of our own beliefs. Interpretive Communities have encouraged us to be generous to one another. No one is the “theology police,” but everyone has been generous toward one another as they listen to each other’s thoughts and insights. They’ve encountered ideas and angles that didn’t come from individual study, but by listening in community.

## Community hermeneutic

The conversation in Interpretive Communities informs the sermon for the upcoming Sunday. The pastor who is speaking is always the one who facilitates the Interpretive Community. As they do so, they hear from the congregation. It helps us, as pastors, understand what a representative few are hearing from the Scriptures, and how they’re thinking. It helps us know our congregation and engage what they’re thinking about

God, life, faith, and Scripture!

Barely a meeting goes by where the members of the group don’t go away with a sense that the Holy Spirit brought things together. It is typical for the thoughts that are shared to lead to a “thread”—something we feel the Holy Spirit is bringing together for us to hear. And there have been several times when we walk away being ministered to as a result of receiving what the Holy Spirit has for us as we discuss the Scriptures together.

Pastorally, Interpretive Communities have transformed the way I pastor. I am no longer the voice of the congregation, but I am the one given the responsibility and opportunity to represent the voices of the congregation. Preaching has become simpler. I often find that the insights I receive in one hour of conversation with my congregation are more insightful than some of the commentaries I spend hours reading (to be fair, I still read the commentaries!).

Our congregation is more connected to what is said, partly because a handful of them have taken part in conversation about the Scriptures for the week, and partly because a good percentage of our congregation inter-

acts with the Scriptures from the perspective of a community. Our home churches also pick up on the same Scriptures and the same sermon, fleshing it out even more, another practice of early Anabaptists.

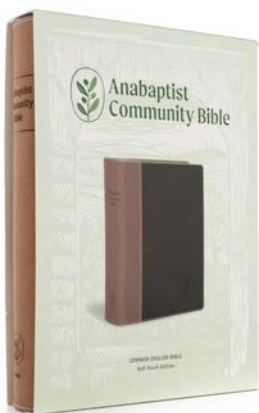
Anabaptists have historically practiced a community hermeneutic—reading the scripture and interpreting it together (the second Brethren in Christ core value!). This practice is a gift, and its presence is prophetic. What would it look like in our current moment if we would lay aside finding the “right answer” and learn to listen to the Holy Spirit through one another as we gather around the scriptures? What would it look like if we allowed the Holy Spirit to shape our communities by practicing a community hermeneutic?

Before each Interpretive Community I pray something like the following, which is also my prayer for the Church:

Speak to us through the presence of your Holy Spirit in each one of us as we gather around your Scriptures. Amen.

*Joshua Nolt is senior pastor of the Lancaster (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.*

# “Anabaptism at 500” Resources



**Anabaptist Community Bible:** “I would love for every family to have this Bible because it is a worthy investment. I’ve mentioned the notes and commentary from scholars and groups from all over the world. I also want to highlight the essays that offer opportunities to engage with challenging topics and passages from both historic and contemporary lenses, helping to prepare us for the next five hundred years. In addition, the unique and original art throughout brings to life biblical concepts and characters in creative and imaginative new ways” (Hank Johnson). Order here: [www.mennomedia.org/anabaptist-community-bible/](http://www.mennomedia.org/anabaptist-community-bible/).

You can find resources for celebrating Anabaptism’s anniversary at [anabaptismat500.com](http://anabaptismat500.com). Among the resources you’ll find there are:

- A 365-day Bible reading plan for the Anabaptist Community Bible
- A tool kit designed for churches, conferences, historical societies, and schools. It provides a rich set of free resources.
- New children’s books
- A product catalogue:

## Editor’s Notes

### 2025 subscription renewals

Many of you have renewed already, and/or given extra contributions. If you haven’t yet renewed, you can do so online at [bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/](http://bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/) or send a check payable to Brethren in Christ US to the address on page 2).

### Upcoming topics:

*Living simply:* Our doctrinal statements have moved from clear instructions about separation from the world to much less specificity. This core value is the only one that is “instrumental”—a means towards an end. We value uncluttered lives *so that* we are free to love, give, serve. What does it look like to “unclutter so we can love, give, serve?”

*Communication:* New and old ways to communicate our message (written, oral, social media, video, podcasts, etc.).

Contact the editor if you’re interested in writing.

# Home Churches and the Anabaptist Model

By Luke Embree

**RECENTLY, OUR LITTLE** community in Lexington, Kentucky started a new home church. As is common when we organize a new church, the group met to discuss some of the essential dynamics of the new community. We discussed practical items like when/where we would meet, who would host, and who would lead our discussions. We also discussed some “big picture” items like our involvement in God’s mission in our city and ways we could share the Gospel with our neighbors. As the conversation drifted toward the topic of community, we expressed a desire to support and encourage one another throughout the week, not just on Sundays. We wanted to be a community that carries life’s highs and lows together and shows up for one another in practical ways, a community of mutual aid and support. One of the members summarized this well: “one mower, many lawns.” No one was thinking about it in these terms but it was a very Anabaptist thing to say. (Later, and I’m sure unrelated, this same member asked if he could borrow our car for the week!)

There is a lot packed into that phrase. “One mower, many lawns” expresses a desire to cooperate, to share, and to look after each other. It describes the kind of culture we wanted to build. In his book *Culture Making*, Andy Crouch argues that culture is more than the context we inhabit; it’s the environment Christians are called to cultivate and to create (47-53).

As I’ve reflected on the “culture” our home churches are cultivating, I can’t help but notice the influence of our Anabaptist heritage. Ideals like community and mutual aid, the priesthood of all believers, and a desire to live distinctly from the world’s politics and values are all present. These are, of course, fundamentally Christian principles, but Anabaptism has emphasized them in unique ways, insisting they become normative for Christian community.

Stuart Murray, a Mennonite scholar in the U.K., has distilled Anabaptist principles into three overarching themes: belonging, believing, and becoming (*The Naked An-*

*abaptist*, 101). I’d like to share how I’ve seen these themes at work in Lexington.

## **Belonging: Community and mutual aid**

Historically, Anabaptists organized their lives around an ideal of intentional community where members shared material, spiritual, and emotional support. This helped sustain the movement during times of persecution and economic hardship. It also attracted outsiders. In periods of economic strain, the security and solidarity of these communities became havens of hope in times of despair. This resulted in a curious phenomenon Murray describes as “belonging before believing” (60).

We’ve seen this dynamic in our own churches as well. While there are certainly examples of people receiving material aid, just as poignant is the longing for authentic friendship. One example is my friend Alice. Alice was a Buddhist who had some, let’s say, interesting views on spirituality. She was a single mom raising two children and trying to help her boyfriend overcome addiction. She was getting by, but she needed support. She found help in our community and was intrigued by the stories of Jesus she heard in our meetings. Alice eventually moved away and we lost touch, until recently.

I received a message over Facebook from Alice inviting me to her baptism. After leaving our community she found a church near her home. Since her time with us she came to embrace Jesus as her savior and the Gospel of his Kingdom. She wanted us to be part of her celebration because our community was a part of her journey toward Christ.

For folks like Alice, belonging sometimes precedes believing, and in a world full of connection but starved for community, it becomes a Spirit-led step toward salvation.

## **Believing: A believers’ church**

Belonging is a critical part of the journey, but it’s only a step. After all, we are a believers’ church. In Anabaptism, the church is made up of individuals who freely and consciously commit to following Jesus after per-

sonal conversion, evidenced through Christian service. Anabaptists have always carried the conviction that every Christian is called to ministry, not just a clerical few. In our experience, we have had the privilege of witnessing membership and leadership arise organically from real transformation.

Our recovery churches are a prime example of this. Just south of Lexington, pastor Ron Davis is leading a group of churches serving men in substance abuse recovery. It is remarkable to see lives transformed, relationships restored, and men owning their pasts. It is also remarkable to watch these men begin to serve others with the hope of the Gospel.

Pastor Ron and his team’s central focus is empowering these men to lead, teach, and pastor one another toward recovery in Christ. To that end, he’s developed a “deacon team” among the guys to help oversee care and support, allowing Ron to pastor “co-vocationally,” earning much of his income from work outside the church. It’s a model that empowers believers and reflects the Anabaptist conviction that everyone is called to serve.

## **Behaving: Holistic discipleship**

Ron’s co-vocational work reflects a broader conviction in our network. The very nature of home church ministry spills God’s mission into the places where we live, work, and play. To reference John Wesley, the world has become our parish.

Anabaptists saw faith as more than belief; it was as a way of life, a call to follow Jesus daily. We might call this “holistic discipleship.” Home church members have a knack for transforming coffee tables into communion altars and front porches into outreach centers. Daily life becomes a canvas for the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God in the world.

## **Conclusion: Additional principles**

There are many more ways Anabaptism shapes our ministry. Principles like servant leadership, evangelism, interpreting Scripture together, separation from worldly sys-

tems, suffering, and the cross each deserve their own reflection. But belonging, believing, and becoming give us a brief snapshot of how Anabaptist faith is forming our life together.

I often use the table as a metaphor for the

church. It's the place where God meets a broken humanity with grace, and where we meet one another as God intended. The church is the table where belonging, believing, and behaving meet, where they become one, to the glory of God, and for the life of the world.

*Luke Embree is an entrepreneurial church planter with the Great Lakes Conference of Brethren in Christ U.S. He serves in Lexington, KY with his wife Christina and a team of other excellent pastors.*

## How I Became an Anabaptist

By Zach Spidel

**SOMETIMES YOU READ** a book (or have a conversation) that changes your whole outlook and even redirects your life. I read such a book and had such conversations in a class at Messiah College in, I believe it was, my freshman year, 2004. I had come to faith in a Brethren in Christ congregation. There was such a warm love for Jesus and such a focus on him in that congregation—Fairview Brethren in Christ in Englewood, Ohio. There was also a profound focus on serving one another and those around us in Jesus's name. I still remember how the whole church showed up one summer to rebuild my family's roof from the rafters up when we ran into trouble and couldn't afford a roofing company. I didn't know it then, but that weekend of joyful work and shared meals resembled nothing so much as an Amish barn raising!

I learned a Jesus-centered faith at Fairview. I also absorbed, through the generation above me but younger than the elders, a certain sort of cultural politics. I remembered debating with friends at school, arguing that George W. Bush was God's candidate and that it would be a sin not to vote for him in the 2000 election. I remember denouncing affirmative action and tying that position explicitly to my faith in Christ. I remember, with even more chagrin, arguing in favor of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and thinking of America as a Christian nation. I thought of America as, at least partially, a sort of modern Israel, called by God to fight—physically fight—evil by killing evil people.

I did not know then that nearly all the oldest men in my congregation had been conscientious objectors in wars past. They were quiet, unassuming people—not proud or superior about that choice and not want-

ing to argue with some in the congregation who had embraced a different perspective. I became a member of Fairview when I was thirteen and left for Messiah at age eighteen. When I left, I was ignorant of the fact that the Brethren in Christ Church was “Anabaptist” in its roots (I don't think I knew the word) and I certainly did not know we were a peace church.

Then I got to Messiah and I took a class with E. Morris Sider. Forgive me if I've told this story before in these pages, but it is a consequential story in my life and a fitting one to tell at this moment particularly. In that class we read *Quest for Piety and Obedience* and I learned the Brethren in Christ had Anabaptist roots. I also learned what that meant. To aid in that task, we read Harold Bender's *The Anabaptist Vision*. On purely historiographical terms that book (it has been recently noted) is a simplification of the varied, wild history of Anabaptist communities. Duly noted. As a call toward an identity (even if that identity is never anywhere pure in history), that book is and remains a blessing. I was convinced and convicted by it. I saw in it all that was best in my Christian formation at Fairview—the love for and focus on Jesus. At the same time, I came to see how all that good stuff just didn't fit with my enthusiasm for war or my belief in America as a Christian nation. I became an Anabaptist Christian in that class—not because I have an allegiance to Swiss radicals from the sixteenth century, but because I believe that some of the core ideals those radicals rediscovered are true to Jesus, often overlooked, and desperately needed in this and every age.

I remember what I thought and felt like reading *The Anabaptist Vision* for that class. It's a short booklet, not a full book, and I read it breathlessly in one sitting. I under-



lined nearly every sentence, filling up the margins with exclamations and notes and questions. It struck something deep in me and while I have come to think more deeply or differently about any number of things, I remain fundamentally committed to the three elements of the Anabaptist Vision described by Bender. Christianity is not a theological system or an institutional polity; it is discipleship. Our faith is a way of life, specifically a life lived with and for Jesus, following him along with others, and being transformed as he remakes us and then trains us in his way.

The church, secondly, is a voluntary community of such disciples, called out from the world to embody for the world the character of God's in-breaking reign. It is a community of equals in which all are ministers. It is a community set apart, making exclusive demands on those who join. We seek no “dual citizenship” with the world.

Finally, a core component of the way of life we learn in this community is the paradigm of the cross of Jesus Christ—the way of nonviolent, self-giving love. We do not kill, we die. By imitating and extending Jesus's own embrace of suffering we overcome the world and its violence. Or rather, it is better to say, Jesus goes on giving himself up for the world in and through his body, the church. Jesus continues overcoming by the blood of his saints and the word of their testimony! We are his, as is the victory effected when we pick up our own crosses and follow after him.

I am so glad that these values were redis-



covered from the study of the Scriptures by those radicals five hundred years ago. They are not exclusive to them or their descendants. May they be continually rediscovered whenever and wherever they are forgotten

until Jesus himself returns and sets all things right. Maranatha, Lord!

*Zach Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.*

## A Forum on Anabaptism Today

**FOR THIS EDITION** of *Shalom!*, I asked a number of people to reflect on a series of questions about their experience with Anabaptism. They were invited to address one or more of the following questions, and their responses are excerpted below. Here are the questions:

1. How is the "Anabaptist vision" still relevant in our world today? (The vision has been described as consisting of four elements: the centrality of Scripture, the importance of obedience to Jesus, the church as a community of believers, and nonconformity/separation from the world. And of course, the Brethren in Christ "peace position" comes directly out of Anabaptist readings of Scripture.)
2. How do our ten core values reflect our Anabaptist heritage? You might refer to all ten, or you might pick out one or two.
3. How do you see Anabaptism being lived out in the Brethren in Christ Church? On the other hand, in what ways do you see the Anabaptist stream of our theology being diminished and what advice would you have to reclaim the best of this stream?
4. Do you have a relevant personal story or story from your congregation to tell—perhaps, for example, related to nonconformity or peacemaking?

*Editor's Note*

### **FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE ANABAPTIST MODEL**

*by Matthew Peterson*

The early Anabaptists placed a strong emphasis on "Following Jesus." Such is evident throughout the Schleithem Confession of 1527 and other early Anabaptist literature. It is also prevalent in the earliest known confession of the Brethren in Christ, which declared that "the Lord Jesus Christ has become a Redeemer, therefore He will be and is to be a pattern."

Similar language is reflected in our current denominational literature. "Following Jesus" exists as one of our denominational core values and has been prominently featured in the *Manual of Doctrine and Government*. Anabaptist themes are also found in our Accents & Issues position statements and in the pages of this journal.

My present concern is how well this value, especially in the Anabaptist understanding, is integrated in our congregations. Is "Following Jesus" in the Anabaptist model actually "lived out" in our churches or is it more of an aspirational value?

I suspect that "Following Jesus" means very different things across our membership. In the sort of generic evangelicalism in which many of us are (or have been) catechized, to

follow Jesus means to adhere to a core set of beliefs about his divinity and the nature of the scriptures, to regularly participate in church events, and to adopt attending conservative social values.

While not exclusive of these, the Anabaptist framework is more expansive. To follow Jesus means to embrace the totality of his life as the authoritative model for what it means to be a member of God's family. It is a discipleship of obedience to his teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount, more so than of theological beliefs. To follow Jesus means to receive him as Savior by responding to him as Lord.

The counter-cultural nature of the Anabaptist framework, especially within the broader evangelical community, means that it does not come without concerted efforts in preaching, teaching, and practical discipleship. Additional print and video resources are of course always helpful in this regard (and those who know my story will know how highly I value them). Yet the Anabaptist life is fundamentally one of orthopraxy. As a result, I suggest that in addition to producing more resources, we prioritize opportunities for our churches and their members to experience the Anabaptist mode of "following Jesus." This can take the forms of targeted workshops on peacemaking, small group op-

portunities among immigrant populations or along the US-Mexico border, firming up congregational relationships with Anabaptist groups like MCC, and building stronger relationships between churches and the down-trodden and poor in their local communities. Such experiences can show the sorts of concrete realities that Jesus' teachings addressed, and why our obedient response to those teachings is such a vital part of the call to discipleship.

*Matthew Peterson serves as theologian in residence with the Great Lakes Conference of Brethren in Christ U.S., and as director of The Shalom Society!, a ministry that promotes reconciliation, peacemaking, and justice within BIC US.*

### **I DIDN'T KNOW**

*by Marian Musser*

Even though I grew up in the Grantham Brethren in Christ Church, attended two years at Messiah College before transferring to Wheaton, I first heard the words "Anabaptism" and "Anabaptist" my senior year at Wheaton when Professor Merold Westphal and his wife invited me to dinner one evening during fall break when I couldn't go home because of student teaching. When Dr. Westphal learned I was Brethren in



Christ like his friend Ronald J. Sider, he asked me some questions related to Anabaptism, and I had to confess that I knew about practices in my church, but I didn't know about "Anabaptism." Of course, I felt foolish that I was ignorant about this stream of our denominational theology.

I've learned a lot about the Anabaptists and Anabaptism in the years since, much of it from serving on various boards of Mennonite Central Committee, watching the film *The Radicals*, reading biographies of some of the founders of the Mennonite denomination, and reading current books written by Mennonite, Church of the Brethren, and Brethren in Christ authors.

*Marian Musser attends The Meeting House Carlisle (PA) and was one of the founders of New Hope Ministries. headquartered in Dillsburg, PA.*

## THOUGHTS ON ANABAPTISM

by Perry Engle

### Relevance of the Anabaptist Vision

I think that after close to forty years in church ministry, in many ways I have grown weary of trying to understand and explain and exposit the different "isms" within the church today—Anabaptism, Evangelicalism, Calvinism, Wesleyanism, Christian Nationalism, etc. In many ways I have found myself in retreat from even talking about the nuances of theological and denominational distinctives, partially because they tire me out. But mostly, in the end, they don't seem to result in the life change that I have come to understand as being at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

To the extent that the "Anabaptist vision" retains Jesus as the center of our lives and examples, our teaching and preaching, it is of great relevance to the church today. Following Jesus should always be at the very heart of every person who calls themselves a Christian. Being a follower of Christ should be the sum of our individual identities—not conjoined with any political, national, cultural, ethnic, or sexual selves. Being a follower of Jesus should never be just a part of our identities as Anabaptists. It should always be, first and foremost, who we are, through and through.

**How Anabaptism is being lived out**

I had to pause and consider this question. Since I have returned to local church ministry as a pastor, I don't get out and around the denomination much anymore. But one of the ways I hope to live out my heritage is to be faithful in promoting a Jesus-centered life through my preaching and teaching.

Yesterday, for the first time in my pastoral career, I spoke on Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel story. It's the story of how the Babylonians sought to make a name for themselves by building a tower to the heavens. I told the congregation plainly, "There is an idolatry of power, money, and sex in our country today; we see it in politics. We see it in Hollywood, and we even see it in churches. People of power and wealth seek to be served rather than serve others. They seek to gain glory and wealth rather than to give glory to Jesus. They seek to gain riches on earth rather than laying up treasures in heaven. They are given a pass when they are unfaithful in marriage, have children by multiple partners, or abuse others. . . ."

In many ways, I felt like my Anabaptist heritage, in all of its counterculture-ness, as directed by the Holy Spirit, rose up within me to remind my fellow Jesus-followers and the church-at-large that ours is a higher prophetic calling than much of the Christianity that surrounds us today. To the extent I was faithful to my prophetic role this past Sunday, I would hope that our Anabaptist heritage is being lived out in the Brethren in Christ today.

*Perry Engle is the teaching pastor at the Upland (CA) Brethren in Christ Church.*

## ANABAPTISM: A PERSPECTIVE

by Ruth Pawelski

I was a teenager, finished with high school and looking forward to going to Messiah College after taking time off to work. My parents had promised to pay for the first year, but even though I would work minimally during the school year, and had saved what I could during my growing up years, I knew that would not be enough to take me through college. Since I had graduated at an early age (sixteen) I took two gap years to earn "college money."

The first year I worked in a Bible book

store, but the second year I applied for work at a factory, and was offered the job which would give me even more savings for future college years. Success! But alas, I learned that the factory in which I would be working would be making military weapons or parts. I knew that my Anabaptist upbringing called for consistency, so if I did not believe in war, it would not be consistent to help to make military weapons. I knew I could not take that job. In spite of the sacrifice, it made me feel good to refuse. It gave me a peaceful feeling to realize that in a very small way I was sharing the sacrifice made by our conscientious objector fellows that had served so faithfully during the war.

Incidentally, God rewarded me with an even better job in the Personnel Service Office of the Frigidaire factory, and I was able to graduate college with money still in my savings!

So I am pleased to claim my Anabaptist beliefs. They are based on the centrality of the Bible and obedience to Jesus along with the church being a community of believers and nonconformity/separation from the world coincides with the Brethren in Christ belief. I have found them satisfying throughout my life.

I am so thankful that so many in our denomination still practice the "peace position." I believe it is scriptural and should be practiced both in peacetime as well as wartime. One thing has concerned me though. I have noticed that in emphasizing this belief, some of the rhetoric I hear and read seems almost militaristic in its approach, or at least peace disturbing. I believe that we should not compromise the peace position, but I also believe we should be loving and peaceful in defending it.

*Ruth Pawelski serves with her husband John as the pastoral couple at the Dayton (OH) Brethren in Christ Church.*

## THE RELEVANCE OF ANABAPTISM

by Robert Verno

Since taking my first pastorate and becoming Brethren in Christ in 1977, my appreciation for our Anabaptist heritage has grown immensely. It is the coloring of our faith that most distinguishes us in the mod-

ern religious world. Three tenets in particular illustrate its continuing pertinence in our time.

First, our perspective on kingdom theology is of vital importance today. The recognition that the kingdom of God stands in stark contrast with the kingdoms of the world is fundamental to a rightful perception of New Testament teaching. From the Reformation on, Anabaptists have maintained this understanding even as churches in the other mainstreams of Christendom united with the various nation states and engaged in violent behaviors. While our country's separation of church and state has been a basic constitutional precept, today the present political scene is overshadowed by a Christian Nationalism that joins church and state and seeks to employ worldly power to advance the work of God in our nation and the larger world. This is a dangerous aberration of New Testament faith. The Anabaptist witness is desperately needed as a viable and Biblical alternative to this expression.

Second, our emphasis on peace and peacemaking is something that must not go by the wayside. We follow the One who is known as the Prince of Peace and who will eventually usher in the kingdom of peace. In the meantime, the New Testament is clear in its directives:

- Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy (Heb. 12:14).
- If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Rom. 12:18).

On a personal level, such teaching for me has meant working to keep all my interpersonal relationships right—even when I've had strong differences with another person. This has required three things: apologizing when I've been wrong, forgiving when I've been wronged, and care-fronting when this has seemed in order. On a broader level, I am grateful to be associated with a church that is part of agencies like MCC that facilitate harmony and reconciliation among conflicting people groups.

Beyond that, the questions we raise for those who are seeking to follow Christ and yet considering military service often go unheard in other Christian contexts. It behooves us to continue speaking on this matter—forthrightly but gently—as we

teach the ways of Jesus.

Third, the historic accent on simple living needs to be reaffirmed in a culture where materialism, commercialism, and waste are rampant. This is undoubtedly one of the most challenging values to live out today, especially for those of us who have never known anything but the abundance of North America. Most of us, to more rightfully align with the teachings of Jesus, can afford to scale down so as to better live “more uncluttered lives.” Only then are we truly free “to love boldly, give generously, and serve joyfully”—as our core value says.

*Robert Verno is the sanctuary campus pastor at The Meeting House, Carlisle, PA.*

## **ANABAPTISM DREW ME IN**

*by Julie Weatherford*

The Anabaptist stream of the Brethren in Christ drew my community of believers—Madison Street Church of Riverside, California—to become a Brethren in Christ church in the late twentieth century.

We were a group of a dozen or so twentysomethings, raised in different churches—Catholic, mainline, evangelical—who had come to experience God's love through Jesus in our teen or college years. Working together in youth ministry in a local Baptist church for several years, we studied Scripture, worshiped, and prayed together regularly. In doing so, we became convinced that faith in Jesus meant taking seriously some of his central teachings that weren't commonly taught in Baptist churches. We became convinced that loving the “other,” adhering to nonviolent conflict resolution, and pursuing peace were Jesus's ways.

The church's teachings about faith mirrored the secular culture's allegiance to individualism, but we sensed in Jesus's teachings a call to invest ourselves—our time, energy and resources—in belonging to and serving him within a community of faith, witnessing for Christ via self-sacrificial love in word, action and lifestyle. The church's teachings did little to counter the rampant materialism and consumerism that plagued the nation, while we felt called to live simply in order to give ourselves to love, share with the poor, and serve with generosity and compassion.

We'd never heard of Anabaptism when, serious about following Jesus, we pooled resources to purchase a house and began an intentional Christian community. Over time, sensing the importance of joining with other Jesus-followers whose calling resonated with ours, we received the blessing of friends and leaders of the Baptist church to part ways and plant another faith community.

We came to know that there were Christians, called Anabaptists, who had sensed God's call to a closer following of Jesus and whose answer to that call resonated with us. We learned about the Brethren in Christ, whose Anabaptist roots, strengthened by Pietist and Holiness streams, encouraged theological understandings and faith practices that were and continue to be ours.

Former bishop Don Shafer warmly welcomed us into the Brethren in Christ fold, saying that we reminded the denomination of their original stream, Anabaptism. I learned that the Anabaptist roots and inclinations had of late been “swept under the carpet” as US churches prioritized numerical growth, under the influence of the twentieth century's dominant Christian stream, Evangelicalism. Through the years, this somewhat exclusive “evangelical” focus has been puzzling since it has been our experience that the Jesus-centric, Anabaptist strain of faith is both true to Jesus's teachings and very compelling to people searching for God in current Western contexts.

Four decades later, the Anabaptist stream, joined by its Pietist and Holiness streams and finding expression in the core values, has never seemed truer, and never more compelling than it is now. In this moment, God may be calling more Brethren in Christ churches to rebirth by reconnecting with our Anabaptist roots.

*Julie Weatherford is one of the founding members of the Madison Street Church (Brethren in Christ), Riverside, PA.*

## **THE IMPACT OF ANABAPTISM**

*by Paul Pawelski*

### **The role of Scripture**

I experience Scripture as an authoritative but warm way for me, and us, to understand how to live and interact. It is something uni-

versal and concrete in its call, that we can discuss between us and build our lives around. Unfortunately, sometimes our enthusiasm for having a scriptural basis can motivate us to stretch the application beyond reason or use verses out of context to give our cause authority instead of submitting ourselves to the authority of scripture.

### **The joy of obedience**

Sometimes our other streams help balance our Anabaptist stream by restraining extremes; other times they give the Anabaptist ideals ways to express themselves. Obedience is one example of our streams working together. My Anabaptist heritage declares the importance of radical obedience while my adjusted version of the Wesleyan holiness stream gives me a way to fulfill the Anabaptist call. It gives me the perspective of how to be perfect in motive and desire even if not totally perfect in real behavior and outcomes. Some of my Anabaptist friends seem to be stuck in a frustrating cycle of requiring absolute obedient behavior that can lead to a works religion or to giving up on actual accomplishment as they are driven to pursue an unobtainable goal.

### **Nonconformity and separation from the world**

Nonconformity and separation from the world have been favorite messages of my heritage. I love these values when they are in solidarity with something of value beyond this world. They call me to live a life with more meaning and visionary impact on this world. They let me consider my, and our, preferred future without being limited by my current surroundings.

Sometimes they show up as “the world does this, so we have to do the opposite for no other reason.” While that reasoning resonates with my nonconformist personality, it has not led to the long-term strength of personal character I see demonstrated by early Anabaptists. I don’t want the world to define me, either through conformity or opposition. I want to be conformed to the Kingdom of Heaven no matter what the world is like at the moment.

Humility and listening to others help us avoid having our confidence in Kingdom values come across as arrogance or elitist. I feel myself wanting a little more room between me and mainstream Anabaptists when they

try to control other people or make condemning statements about situations they are not a part of nor understand completely. While I resonate deeply with many Anabaptist values, I rarely appreciate simple political statements made in the name of Anabaptism. They feel shallow, manipulative, and a cheap application of timeless truths for pointless temporal gain.

### **A balanced view of self**

One major approach to life that was not uniquely articulated but that was very strongly modeled was a view of self that allowed for the Anabaptist way of life. “Don’t get too big for your britches” was a way to express an attitude that allows me to participate in life without taking myself too seriously or demanding other people serve me as someone deserving special treatment. This allows me to function within community while serving compassionately, living simply, and pursuing peace. As a member of the community myself, I have a level of responsibility to care for myself and to resist being so compliant to the community that I open myself up to abuse.

### **Global view**

I also appreciate my Anabaptist world view and the way it helps me interact more meaningfully as an international trainer. My interaction with others is impacted not only by being a missionary kid but also from my Anabaptist view of the world and my place in it.

*Paul Pawelski works for One Mission Society as an international trainer. He and his wife live in Dayton, OH.*

### **THE ANABAPTIST VISION TODAY** *by Lynn Thrush*

The Brethren in Christ Church may well be the best group in the Church of Jesus to promote the Anabaptist vision in our world today. What a bold statement! How so? While I have your attention, allow me to drop the name of Dr. Dennis Edwards, a friend of mine, and the dean of North Park Theological Seminary. He and I wrote an endorsement on the back cover to Cody Cook’s (another friend of mine) 2025 book, *The Pocket Anabaptist: A Concise Systematic Theology of the Radical Reformation*, published by

Wipf & Stock (see the review on page 12)..

The Anabaptist vision is relevant today because it is full-orbed. Cody Cook demonstrates that Anabaptism may not legitimately be reduced to merely a biblical rationale for social action. No, like the Brethren in Christ Church, Anabaptism understands that the gospel, to be rightly understood, includes sins forgiven and kingdom of God identity (Rev. 1:5-6). I observe that common usage of the term Anabaptism is reduced to social action, in the same way that common usage of the term gospel gets reduced to a private verbal assent to a proposition.

Cook quotes an Anabaptist hymn written for a commissioning service for Anabaptist missionaries:

As God his Son was sending  
Into this world of sin,  
His Son is now commanding  
That we this world should win.  
He sends us and commissions  
To preach the gospel clear,  
To call upon all nations  
To listen and to hear (Wilbert  
Shenk, *Anabaptism and Mission*,  
Herald Press, 1984, 63).

At the 2025 annual meeting of the Great Lakes Conference of the Brethren in Christ Church, the Shalom Society! was formally launched. The Shalom Society!, with fresh vision, reflects the true breadth of Anabaptism. Director Matthew Peterson’s inaugural speech provided a clarion call to the full-orbed gospel of Jesus Christ. Truly, not only is the Anabaptist vision still relevant today—it is necessarily relevant today!

*Lynn Thrush is bishop of the Great Lakes Conference of Brethren in Christ U.S. and the denominational liaison for Shalom!*

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## BOOK REVIEW: *The Pocket Anabaptist: Short and Useful*

By Lois Saylor

**THE POCKET ANABAPTIST** by Cody Cook lives up to its name. This short ninety-six-page volume gives succinct encapsulations of early Anabaptist thought and theology using direct quotes from early Anabaptist writings. Cook also compares and contrasts Anabaptist views with contemporaneous Roman Catholic, Protestant, Lutheran, and Reform ideas with a little Eastern Orthodox thought too. In addition, he contrasts the differences between early Anabaptist positions which were not uniform, but varied by leaders, places, and times.

Conveniently, the book is divided into four main sections then divided into sub-sections. The main sections are Scripture; God; Salvation; and Last Things. The reader can read the book straight through or pick and choose a particular subject. For example, in the section on Salvation one can read about Life Together or Simplicity or Baptism or Nonviolence and Non-participation in the state, to name a few of the numerous subjects in this section. Within the main subject areas, the author also includes some personal “Reflections” as well as introductory and concluding chapters. There is also a helpful reference section titled “Abbreviations” that lists the various resources quoted throughout the book.

Cook covers Anabaptist distinctives such

as believer’s baptism and the voluntary nature of belief. The notion of voluntary belief is set against the idea that one’s religious beliefs were based on one’s state affiliation. This decoupling resulted in the idea of the separation of church and state. He also speaks to community and discipleship as developing Anabaptist ideas rooted in Scripture, which moved away from a merely creedal or doctrinal assent that did not require altering lifestyles to follow Jesus. He further notes that Anabaptism was and is influenced when truths are found in other traditions. For example, in the Reflection section on holiness he writes,

... the Brethren in Christ denomination added to their Anabaptism a conscious effort to include Methodist teaching about Spirit-enabled sanctification to complement and enforce the Anabaptist emphasis on holy living.

He notes and appreciates that Anabaptism can learn from and adapt to truth from various biblical/theological teachings while maintaining its own understandings with integrity.

*The Pocket Anabaptist* will be helpful to those beginning to explore Anabaptism and to those more engaged who would like an accessible resource. The book would also help facilitate a study on the theological under-

pinnings of Anabaptism for small groups, or membership or introductory classes for those new to this important stream in Brethren in Christ theology.

The abundant use of actual quotes is most helpful in hearing the voices of the early Anabaptists. His quotes reveal truths we still hold onto today and ideas we have rejected. In most of the writing, Cook does not step into the discussion except, of course, in his reflections, and obviously he had complete control over what to use and where to focus as any author would. But for the most part he serves as a guide through the writings of early Anabaptist thinking, a helpful guide both the newcomer and the well-informed can use as a handy resource. And it won’t take up much space on your bookshelf.

*Lois Saylor* is a member of the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church and is an editorial advisor for *Shalom!*.