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Missiologists gather to celebrate past, contemplate future

CHICAGO (MBM) – The worlds of theory and practice joined hands Jan. 20-21 as mission thinkers and mission practitioners gathered in Chicago for the inaugural meeting of the Association of Anabaptist Missiologists. The event brought together 50 historians, writers, mission workers, agency staff and others interested in exploring how Anabaptists approach mission.

James R. Krabill, Mennonite Board of Missions vice president of Mission Advocacy and Communication, created the association for the purpose of nurturing and bringing together a new generation of people, both North American and international, interested in missions, mission agencies and their future role in the church. (Missiology is the exploration of biblical, theological, cultural, historical and strategic perspectives on mission.)

“There was a high level of enthusiasm for this meeting and strong counsel that something like this should continue,” said Krabill.

The conference featured discussion of four missiological papers presented by Delores and J. Stanley Friesen, of Fresno, Calif.; Wilbert Shenk, of Pasadena, Calif.; Lois Barrett, of Newton, Kan.; and Calvin Shenk of Harrisonburg, Va., and Jerusalem.

- Delores and Stan Friesen presented a paper entitled “Anthropology, Anabaptists and Mission” that celebrated the work of Jacob Loewen, Paul Hiebert, Robert Ramseyer and Don Jacobs. The Friesens have served as mission workers in Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia and Botswana.
- Wilbert Shenk examined various administrative styles and strategies in prominent use in Mennonite missions from 1945-1985. Shenk is a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena.

- Lois Barrett investigated the interdisciplinary and Bible-oriented theology of John Howard Yoder, John Driver, David Schroeder and Marlin Miller. Barrett serves as executive secretary of the Commission on Home Ministries of the General Conference Mennonite Church.
- Calvin Shenk offered retrospective reflections on “A Relevant Anabaptist Missiology of the 1990s,” which he edited 10 years ago. Shenk serves as an MBM worker in Israel for six months of each year, and as a professor at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va., for six months.

The desire to hold together theory and praxis pervaded the discussions. “There was a genuine concern for making our theology and our practice work together,” said Theron Schlabach, emeritus professor of History at Goshen (Ind.) College. Schlabach has done extensive research and writing on the history of Mennonite mission efforts.

Participants discussed the distinctiveness of Anabaptist mission, the role of nonviolence and nonconformity in mission, the impact of religious pluralism, and the future of mission. They also discussed the future shape of the Association of Anabaptist Missiologists and ways to bring international voices into the discussions.

“Another theme that emerged repeatedly was the supposed dichotomy of missions as service and missions as evangelism,” said Chad Mullet Bauman, a graduate student at Princeton (N.J.) Theological Seminary. “Ron Sider asked whether Anabaptists have yet resolved the relationship of the two, and others questioned whether they should be viewed as polar opposites.”

John A. Lapp, former executive secretary of Mennonite Central Committee, said that for theology and practice to cohere, there must be forums such as this one. “There needs to be a place where practitioners and scholars converse,” he said. Lapp currently coordinates the Global Mennonite History project of Mennonite World Conference.

The event also celebrated the work of a generation of people who dedicated years to thinking, living and writing about mission. A closing banquet honored the missiological work of Willard and Alice Roth, John A. Lapp, Theron Schlabach, Melvin Loewen, Don Jacobs and

David A. Shank. Several others slated for recognition were unable to attend the event due to inclement weather. Krabill presented each of the seven present with an award and then invited other guests to reminisce about the honorees' mission accomplishments and adventures.

"Older attendees enjoyed the opportunity to wax nostalgic and roast their colleagues," said Mullet Bauman. "Younger participants appreciated hearing the tales of such legendary figures in Anabaptist missions."

"I have great respect for the younger persons and ... their sensitivity and awareness of the history on which they stand, yet also their commitment and creativity to work in their own situation in the church today," said honoree Alice Roth. "I'm encouraged and hopeful about the future of this work."

"There is an ongoing future for this group in some shape or form," Krabill said. He said the group can serve three functions: look at the big picture of the contribution Anabaptist mission has made to the larger church, conduct research, and provide ongoing recognition of the people who have played important roles in mission thinking.

The conference met at Techny Towers, north of Chicago, in conjunction with Council on International Ministries meetings.

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MBM staff

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