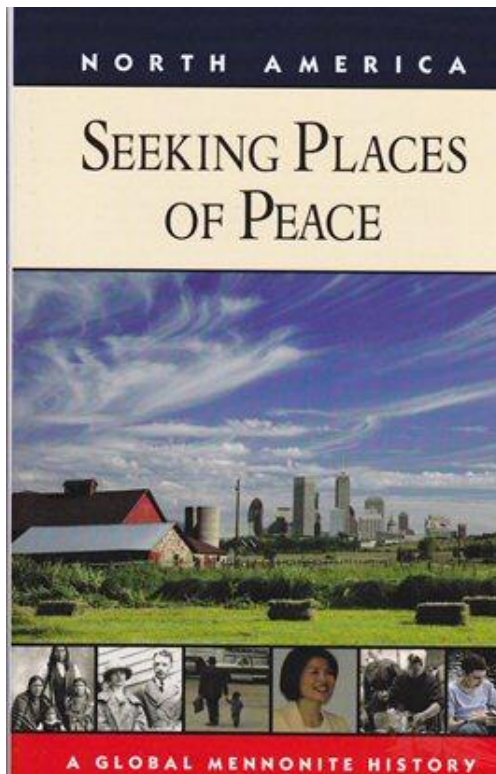


Royden Loewen and Steve Nolt. *Seeking Places of Peace. Global Mennonite History Series: North America*. Intercourse, PA and Kitchener, ON: Good Books and Pandora Press, 2012. 399 pp.

Book review by Robert Martens



By the mid-1990s, the global shift in the Mennonite Church was clearly apparent. The majority of Mennonites/Anabaptists now lived in less developed countries, and churches in the wealthy West were growing slowly or even not at all. Mennonite historian Wilbert Shenk remarked that "a global church requires a global history" (v). Out of this growing consciousness of an international church emerged the Global Mennonite History Project, commissioned by the Mennonite World Conference in 1997. The idea was that regions such as Asia, Africa, or Latin America would tell their own stories, from their own perspectives, new narratives that would reflect a new order. The first volume in the series appeared in 2003, and others in 2006, 2010, 2011. *Seeking Places of Peace*, focusing on North America, is the final book in the series. Interestingly, it is a "social history": that is, a grassroots history, a story told from down below, in which the names of leaders and institutions are radically de-emphasized.

The book begins, though, with a more traditional retelling of the early Anabaptist/Mennonite story. After the initial severe persecution, Anabaptists scattered, but somehow remained connected: wealthy Dutch Mennonites were soon sending relief to Swiss Mennonite refugees. North America, with its limited government and seemingly unlimited lands, attracted thousands of Mennonites, and mass migrations occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to both the United States and Canada. From the start, the border dictated differences. American Mennonites viewed themselves as citizens of a state, with all the rights and responsibilities that entailed; Canadian Mennonites perceived their status as subjects to the Crown. Communities were also shaped differently. While American Mennonites generally lived on isolated farms, their Canadian counterparts preferred to gather in communities.

Because Mennonites stubbornly clung to the ideal of congregational autonomy, disputes and schisms were common. The General Conference was formed in 1860 to provide an umbrella organization for the more progressive churches. But traditionalist groups were also alive and well. Between the 1860s and 1890s, there was a dramatic shift among assimilating Mennonites to conspicuous consumption, and the result was the creation of the Old Order, with its simple lifestyle and detachment from the "world". In the end, though, war and a booming economy profoundly changed the way Mennonites lived. The generation of the 1930s would be the last "in which a vast majority of Mennonites in North America were able to build farm-centered, closely-knit rural worlds in which to live out their Anabaptist faith that answered the great questions about existence, but also provided guidance for their everyday lives" (80).

Mennonites, write authors Loewen and Nolt, have always had a special, even spiritual, relationship with the land. Soil was seen as a divine gift from God, and constant admonitions on humility and stewardship may have helped prevent excessive exploitation of the land. Large families made it possible for Mennonites to work small farms and still make a profit. Nevertheless, the Dust Bowl that coincided with the Great Depression was a tragic indictment of faulty farming techniques. Mennonites subsequently provided leadership in soil replenishment and new methods of farming such as contour strips and crop rotation. At the same time, Mennonites were rapidly urbanizing. Some saw this as an opportunity to create missions for the urban poor, others as simply a better way to make a living. By 1986, the majority of urban Mennonite Brethren were "non ethnic".

Changes were taking place at an astounding pace. On the one hand, fundamentalism materialized as a weapon against excessive legalism; tent evangelist George Brunk was a great proponent. On the other wing of the Mennonite community were individuals like John Howard Yoder and Harold Bender, calling for a life of Christian activism. Mennonite families were changing too. Traditionally, children were meant to be quiet, and even pregnancies went unspoken until the day of birth. Now, however, children were becoming "adolescents", and youth had to be coaxed to remain within the church. Marriages that were once based on "mutual benefit", that is, on roles played within the economy of the farm, became marriages of "mutual love". And where aging parents had historically been cared for by their children, now homes for seniors were being built. It was objected by some that this new development would cause children to neglect their parents.

In general, Mennonites were rejecting the siren song of modernism, but traditions of mutual aid became institutionalized under the pressures and increasing complexity of contemporary North America. Deacons had once served as financial advisers to local congregations; financial advisers now took their place. Life insurance became a popular option, over the objections of traditionalists that this constituted a commodification of human life. And while Mennonites had generally strongly denigrated individualism, entrepreneurship flourished. The rise of Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) was one way to affirm the role of men and women in business.

North American worshipping communities were also in flux. Mostly small, they were amazing diverse, and it remains a challenge even today to state what connects them all. The position of bishop disappeared; salaried ministers became the norm, in place of the traditional lay elder chosen by vote or lot. The charismatic movement became a source of controversy; music changed from hymns in four part harmony to bands and overhead lyrics. And when congregations began to grow beyond the point of intimate community, the "small group" movement was initiated in the 1970s.

After a chapter on the growth of the arts among Mennonites (an interesting chapter but somewhat sketchy, with even a few spelling mistakes of artists' names), *Seeking Places of Peace* addresses the theme of global community. Mennonites began to ask the question: are we citizens of the state or of the globe? Paradoxically, while Mennonites were affirming the transnationalism of the Christian message, they were simultaneously increasing their emphasis on nationalism: Canadians and Americans were quick to distinguish themselves from each other. But it was increasingly recognized that North Americans were no longer at the centre of things. Mennonite world conferences "were occasions for honing a Mennonite transnational identity, a heightened awareness of global poverty, a forceful reminder that the 'Kingdom of God,' for all the Mennonite idealism, had not yet been built" (330).

*Seeking Places of Peace* sets a new standard for the history of North American Mennonites. It is on sale, for a modest price, at the MHS office.