



ARCHIVES NEWS

Respecting the Past | Forging the Future

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Welcome

This year, as we celebrate 500 years of Anabaptism, we will balance looking back with living forward. In this issue, we look back to the Young People's Conference movement of the 1920s and '30s, when young adults prompted churchwide change. We also look ahead to our work with MC USA's Racial Ethnic Council, ensuring that the stories of BIPOC congregations are preserved.



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BIPOC storytelling: The missing link in our Mennonite history

By Camille Dager

The MC USA Archives and the Racial Ethnic Council (REC) are partnering on a new initiative to prioritize BIPOC history and storytelling.

"Just 5% of the materials in the MC USA Archives is devoted to stories of African American, Latino, Asian American or Native American Mennonites," said distinguished Mennonite historian and author Felipe Hinojosa, Ph.D., speaking to the MC USA Executive Board during its fall 2024 meeting. Much of that history is told through the eyes of others, mostly missionaries, he added.

"When [historians] go to the archives to find our stories, it is important that they hear it directly from us and not from the pen of a missionary," Hinojosa said.

The REC invited Hinojosa to join them at the meeting to underscore the importance of integrating diverse narratives into MC USA's historical record.

"My calling to you today is that we get involved in the work of storytelling. To do that, we need help," he said. "The Archives should be central to how we tell this Mennonite story," he added.

In response to the REC's request, the Executive Board agreed to prioritize



Felipe Hinojosa (left) addresses the MC USA Executive Board and Racial Ethnic Council. Photo by Cami Dager.

its support for this initiative.

As a first step, Archives Coordinator Olivia Krall and Wil LaVeist, Ph.D., senior executive of Advancement for Mennonite Mission Network, will co-lead an Archiving 101 workshop at MC USA's Hope for the Future conference, Feb. 28-Mar. 2, 2025, in Goshen, Indiana. Leaders from majority-BIPOC congregations attending the workshop will receive an archival tool kit, funded by The Schowalter Foundation, and instructions to help them preserve their congregation's historical materials.

MC USA will offer a similar workshop at its Follow Jesus '25 biennial convention, July 8-12, 2025, in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Congregations and members can support this initiative by giving to the Archives so that fragile records, such as audio recordings from the 1972 Cross-Cultural Youth Convention, can be digitized and preserved for decades to come.



MC USA Racial Ethnic Council representatives: Sergio Nava, Grace Pam, Juan Montes, Leslie Francisco, III, and Helen Mfwilwakanda. Photo by Sue Park-Hur.

The rise of youth programming in the Mennonite Church

By Olivia Krall

This article focuses on the (Old) Mennonite Church, which merged with the General Conference Mennonite Church in 2002 to form MC USA.

Throughout the history of the (Old) Mennonite Church, young people challenged, engaged and pushed the church in new directions.

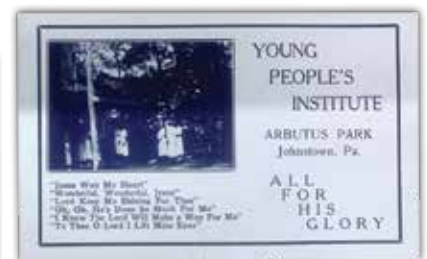
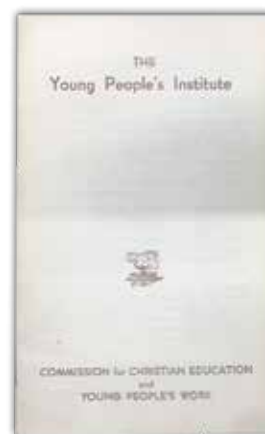
In the 1920s, the Mennonite Church faced a problem: it needed to engage young people. In the post-World War I period, young adults who had survived those turbulent times felt the church had not done enough to support conscientious objectors or to promote peace in the post-war age. Youth and young adults also bristled against ideological differences, particularly as the Mennonite Church navigated a rise in fundamentalism.

Church leader Orié O. Miller commented in a letter that, of young Mennonites between 16 and 25, "large numbers of them are leaving and dropping out" of the church in the post-war period. In response, both institutional and independent organizations formed to address the problem.

The first real call to the Mennonite Church to turn its attention to youth came from the creation of the Mennonite Youth Conference Movement. The first conference was held in Clermont-en-Argonne in France by Mennonite relief workers. Frustrated with the church's lack of support for their work and experiences in the war, the workers felt a need to convene as a generation to discuss their experiences as non-resistors and the future of the church.

The Young People's Conference pressed the church to reform and expand its vision outward – to work on a broader level for peace, engage with other denominations, and to be more missional. However, while members of the YPC intended for their movement to strengthen the church, some denominational church leaders did not perceive it this way, and YPC gatherings faced resistance.

By 1923, YPC no longer existed. Attempts to work with the church had failed, and many of the more progressive leaders left either for the General





Conference Mennonite Church or other denominations. However, as Anna Showalter writes in her 2011 article about the YPC, eventually, though more slowly than youth leaders would have liked, the church carried out many of the reforms the YPC suggested.

In 1924, in response to the YPC and recognizing the need to speak directly to youth, the Mennonite Church created a Young People's Problems committee. By 1929, the church organized its own meetings for young adults, called the Young People's Institute. The first meeting, held in Goshen, Indiana, was a five-day conference that offered Bible courses, worship time and a discussion-and-assembly period, during which young leaders could discuss issues facing the church and provide feedback.

Soon these meetings spread across the denomination. In 1939, Orié Miller wrote in a letter to Bishop A.J. Metzler that the Institutes had served as useful for reaching disaffected youth from WWI and that the "Institute represents one logical outlet for that type of young people's work and interest."

These meetings proved to be powerful in encouraging youth to connect with the Mennonite faith and, during the beginnings of World War II, offered Mennonite youth an opportunity to discuss the tenets of their faith. A 1942 attendee of the Institute wrote of the experience, "I am thankful for an army of young men and women that are interested in the things of God."

The Institutes continued into the mid-1950s, when the proliferation of Mennonite camps and other youth programming, including Mennonite Youth Fellowship, filled the need for youth outreach. The crisis of youth leaving the church eventually led to innovative solutions and an emphasis on the value that young ideas and perspectives offered.

Citations:

Archival Sources:

Laurelville Mennonite Church Center (Mt. Pleasant, Pa.) Records, 1930-2023. VII-24-04. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana. (Includes all photos on this page.)

Young People's Problems Committee Records, 1920-1954. I-03-06. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

Jacob Conrad Meyer Papers, 1888-1968. HM1-044. Mennonite Church USA Archives. Elkhart, Indiana.

Secondary Sources:

*Kauffman, Jason. "The Young People's Conference Movement and the Church of the Future." *Anabaptist Historians*, May 4, 2018. <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2018/05/04/the-young-peoples-conference-movement-and-the-church-of-the-future/>.*

*Showalter, Anna. "The Mennonite Young People's Conference Movement, 1919-1923: The Legacy of a (Failed?) Vision." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85, no. 2 (April 2011): 181-218.*

500th Anniversary of Anabaptism

U.S. Events for 2025

“Unlocking the Past: Immigrant Artifacts & the Stories They Tell”

Exhibit at the Kauffman Museum commemorating the 150th anniversary of the 1874 migration and the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism, Sept. 2024 – May 2025, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

Five Centuries, Five Lectures Series by Shenandoah Valley Historians in Virginia:

- “Restoration or Renewal? Early Anabaptism and its Reformation Context.” Dr. John Roth, Jan. 30, 2025, 7-8 p.m., Eastern Mennonite School, Harrisonburg.
- “Dutch Mennonites in the City and of the City.” Dr. Mary Sprunger, Feb. 6, 2025, 7-8 p.m., Weavers Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg.
- “Farmers in Search of Land, Renewal, and Religious Freedom.” Elwood Yoder, Feb. 13, 2025, 7-8 p.m., Weavers Mennonite Church.
- “Migration, Modernization, and Mission.” Caleb Schock-Hurst, Feb. 20, 2025, 7-8 p.m. Weavers Mennonite Church.
- “Anabaptism Today: Being Reminded of an Anabaptist Vision.” Dr. Andrew Suderman, Feb. 27, 7-8 p.m., Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Martin Chapel.

“Anabaptism at 500: Looking Back, Living Forward”

Pastors and Leaders Conference held at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. Feb. 17-20, 2025.

“Early Anabaptism in Global Perspective”

Conference held at Elizabethtown (Pennsylvania) College by the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, July 22-24, 2025.

Meet Rena LeBlanc, MC USA fall intern

“I was interested to learn more about the broader Anabaptist history beyond my local context,” said Rena LeBlanc, about her fall 2024 internship with the MC USA Archives. Her previous work in the Heritage Room at the Berne (Indiana) Public Library whetted her appetite for Anabaptist history.

LeBlanc is in the first year of a Master of Divinity Program at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, studying Pastoral Ministry. She also holds a bachelor’s degree in Mass Communication from Greenville (Illinois) University and a master’s degree in Strategic Communication and Leadership from Spring Arbor (Michigan) University.

During her internship, LeBlanc worked extensively with the Ed Stoltzfus collection. Stoltzfus was a longtime pastor, professor and leader.

“It was interesting reading letters and discovering what Mennonites were discussing 60 years ago,” LeBlanc said. “I am happy that we have such a valuable historical resource next to our campus.”

LeBlanc attends Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship in Berne. Her internship was generously funded by The Schowalter Foundation.

Photo credit: Abenezer Dejene/AMBS



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Historical Archives

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