



# Shenandoah Mennonite Historian

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## A Heritage Center on a Hill

Sam Funkhouser ran errands at Sing Me High in August 2021, he brought his family to the music event, and visited vendors. Sam began as Executive Director at the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center, Harrisonburg, Va., in January 2021. The annual two-day Sing Me High event includes musical performances, craft sales, and food. And lots of visiting. The music ranged from a *Harmonia Sacra* singing in the outdoor amphitheater to Honeytown, a fun four-man rhythmic band with snap and a beat, coming all the way from Kidron, Ohio. Read Sam Funkhouser's vision for the Heritage Center in this issue.

Mennonites have often migrated from one place to another. James L. Hershberger, pastor at Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church, has written the account of two Ethiopian Mennonites who migrated to the United States in 1996, and who have been members at Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church since then.

Please note that the [Historians Annual Meeting on November 13, 2021 has been postponed](#). The reason for the postponement is the current high community transmission rate level of COVID-19 in Rockingham County, Va.

Above, Sam Funkhouser, Executive Director of the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center, Harrisonburg, Virginia. Photo by Editor



Mennonites Meseret Endeshaw (left) and Asrat Gebre, a married couple, at their home in Harrisonburg, Va. The offices of Hope Community Builders, Inc., are in the basement of their home.

Photo from James L. Hershberger

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## A Heritage Center on a Hill

by Sam Funkhouser

*As the new Executive Director of the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center, one of the first tasks assigned to me was to give an address at our “virtual” Annual Meeting on March 5, 2021 in which I was to articulate my vision for the Center. Having only started the job on January 1, and not being accustomed to online presentations, I found this to be somewhat of a daunting challenge; nevertheless, I managed to share some remarks at the virtual gathering that seemed to be well received. After the meeting, Elwood Yoder asked if I would share with him the manuscript of the address for publication in the fall issue of the Historian. I confessed to him that I did not have a manuscript, as I gave the address extemporaneously, but I promised him that I would submit a summary of my address that he could print.*

*It’s now been nearly six months since I spoke at the Annual Meeting. During this time, I’ve had the opportunity to learn much more about the Heritage Center, build relationships with its constituents, and reflect more on its mission. Through these experiences, however, the vision for the Heritage Center that I shared earlier this year has only been confirmed and deepened. I hope you will find our vision for what the Heritage Center is—and can become—an inspiring one, and will join us in our mission of sharing Christ through the stories of Brethren and Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley!*

Each day that I come to work at the Brethren & Mennonite Heritage Center, I’m confronted anew by the sheer physical reality that is “our hill.” I see our buildings on the hill as I pull in the driveway, and once I park at the Welcome Center I’m greeted by the beautiful view that it offers overlooking the city of Harrisonburg and the greater Valley. This hill looms large in our identity; so many of our visitors and volunteers have also commented on the vista that it provides, and folks in the

community identify us by it as well: “Oh, so you’re the place up on the hill behind the high school!”

Our mission at the Heritage Center is to share and to celebrate the story of Jesus Christ as reflected in the lives of Brethren and Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley. As I’ve reflected on this mission, and as I’ve continued to be confronted day after day by our hill, a biblical image has often come to mind. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says:

*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16, ESV)*

Here, in his “Sermon on the Mount,” the image that Jesus is painting is clear: like a city on a hill, shining its light to the darkness around it, he is calling his disciples to live in such a way that others may see the good that they do, in order that God may be glorified. I can think of no better vision for the Heritage Center than this one. My vision is that our Heritage Center on a hill would be like the biblical “city on a hill,” reflecting the light of Christ through our heritage ever more brightly to the world around us.

In this article, then, I’d like to briefly explore three questions. What is our “light” at the Heritage Center? How is that light already shining? And, how could our light shine even more brightly?

### Our Light

First, what is our “light” at the Heritage

Center? In other words, what is it about our heritage as Brethren and Mennonites that is worth sharing with the world around us? For me, there is a clear answer to this question, as it ultimately is the reason that I was so excited to join the Heritage Center earlier this year: I believe that the historical core commitments, and compelling stories, of Brethren and Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley uniquely reflect the light of Christ, and are just as relevant today as they've ever been.

Unfortunately, a full discussion of what makes Anabaptist theology unique is well beyond the scope of this article, so I'll instead offer a very brief overview—my “elevator pitch,” so to speak. To me, there are three interrelated core commitments that distinguish traditional Anabaptist thought. First, Brethren and Mennonites historically had a unique approach to Scripture. They considered all Scripture to be inspired, but read the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, and the new Testament from a center in the teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, they took the New Testament at “face value” and with a praxis-based approach, seeing the Scriptures more as a guide for living than as a source for abstract doctrinal theology. This unique approach to Scripture was reflected in all aspects of traditional Anabaptist living, but perhaps most clearly in their observance of the ordinances and in their practice of nonresistance (which historically was more than mere pacifism). Second, Brethren and Mennonites were committed to nonconformity—that is, to the idea that followers of Christ can and indeed must live differently than the world around them. This second commitment has been most closely associated over the years with simple living and plain dress, but it is also reflected in their historic articulation of the “two kingdoms,” in their rejection of slavery,

and in their practice of service and care for their neighbors, among other examples. Finally, the third unique and interrelated commitment of Brethren and Mennonites is a commitment to community. This commitment was traditionally expressed as “church discipline,” or the practice of holding the members of the covenant community accountable to the teachings of the New Testament through fraternal admonition. The Anabaptist commitment to community also saw the church as a body as primary in the practice of discernment, making a powerful witness against the prevailing individualism of Western culture.

Furthermore, while these core commitments were shared historically by all Anabaptists, for the Brethren and Mennonites who lived in the Shenandoah Valley the working out of these commitments in their unique historical and cultural context gave rise to unique and compelling stories that we are able to share with others at the Heritage Center.

However, our “light” at the Heritage Center is not only backward looking, but also forward looking. I'm not interested in doing history just for history's sake. You see, I believe that our heritage gives us the resources, and challenges us, to shine our light more brightly today.

When I look at the world around us, it can feel at times as if darkness has the upper hand. We live in a society that is increasingly politicized, polarized, and tribal. Despite decades spent in peace building efforts, violence continues around the world. Closer to home, our communities are disintegrating; depression, anxiety, and loneliness are at an all-time high. We're trapped in a destructive, global consumer economy that thrives on individualism and

greed, exploits the vulnerable, and is contributing to an impending environmental crisis. And to make matters worse, many feel that typical expressions of Christianity neglect these concerns, or are ineffective or hypocritically misguided in the solutions that they offer.

But this is precisely where we have an opportunity to let our light shine—we have the resources in our heritage for a powerful and robust witness and response! We can show the world a different way of being and believing, the living out of Christ’s teachings in community. So, our “light” at the Heritage Center is the light of Christ as it has been reflected by Brethren and Mennonites, not only in the past but also shining forth into the future.

### **How our light already shines**

With this brief description of what constitutes our “light” in mind, we will proceed to our second question: how is that light already shining at the Heritage Center? In other words, what are the Heritage Center’s strengths?

Undoubtedly, our greatest strength at the Heritage Center is our people. Even in the short time that I’ve been here, I’ve met so many wonderful people who have helped to make the Heritage Center what it is today—and there are still more that I have yet to meet! The depth of commitment to our mission among our constituents is truly remarkable. We have only one paid staff person at the Heritage Center, which means that almost everything the Heritage Center has accomplished has been done by volunteers. We are also a financially independent nonprofit without any official ties to a larger parent organization, which in light of how the Center has grown

in twenty-two years also says much about the commitment of our donors. Clearly, then, our light at the Heritage Center already shines brightly through our people.

Another way in which our light shines is through our stories. The Heritage Center has chosen to focus primarily on telling stories—and rightly so. Stories inspire us; stories change hearts. And, as we mentioned earlier, we have such powerful and compelling stories to tell. The experience of Brethren and Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley has been unique, and there is a rich repository of stories that have been preserved that we can share with visitors and with the community.

A third way in which our light shines is through our campus. While our focus is on stories, our facility is a tremendous aid in our telling of those stories. Our well-designed Welcome Center, historic buildings, interesting artifacts, spacious fields, wooded amphitheater, and even our beautiful view all contribute to a memorable experience for visitors and enable us to host a variety of events. I had only been on the job for a few weeks when a visitor remarked, “I’ve been to plenty of Heritage sites in the Commonwealth, but this one ranks at the top”—and I’ve heard similar comments from other visitors many times since then.

A final way in which our light shines is through our programs. Our field trips, considered by many teachers to be the best off-site experience that their students receive each year, touch hundreds of local children, many of whom have no faith background at all (much less familiarity with Brethren or Mennonites). They are provided with engaging, hands-on learning opportunities, but just as importantly they get to hear our stories and interact with

our people. Our Sing Me High Music Festival is another way that we reach our community, celebrating music and faith in a family-friendly atmosphere. Our lecture series each year allows us to encourage ongoing scholarship and explore a variety of special topics in a more in-depth and critical way. And our community worship services—our Easter sunrise service and our summer “Worship in the Woods” vespers series—bring together a diversity of Brethren and Mennonite perspectives in the collective worship of our Lord.

Clearly, then, there are many ways in which our light is already shining at the Heritage Center!

### **How our light could shine more brightly**

Our third and final question now remains: how could our light shine even more brightly? I think that the best way for us to grow is to build upon the Heritage Center’s strengths that are described above.

One way in which our light could shine more brightly is to expand our existing programs. Our field trips, for example, could attract more school districts, and include different programs for additional age groups. Our lecture series, as another example, could also be expanded. The Heritage Center could be a “neutral space” to bring together differing viewpoints within our communities for conversation on topics that have the potential to be controversial or divisive—and do so in a way that fosters respect and understanding, minimizing the defensiveness and animosity that often derails such dialog.

Another way in which our light could shine more brightly is through the continued de-

velopment of our campus. One way in which our campus could be further developed is by enhancing the materials and exhibits in the buildings that we already have. The upstairs of the Weaver-Brunk log house on our campus is currently empty; two of the rooms are slated to have permanent exhibits, but the other two could house temporary or rotating exhibits. These exhibits could allow us to share a diversity of interesting stories and artifacts, and to attract a greater variety of visitors and volunteers to the Center. Our library could also be expanded to a larger collection that would be of greater usefulness to visitors and volunteers. Soliciting book donations could be another way to get more people involved, and any excess used books we receive could be sold in our gift shop as a fund-raiser.

An additional way in which our campus could be further developed is by expanding the campus itself. In some ways, the Heritage Center is a twenty-two-year-old work in progress: we’ve built or moved a number of buildings, but many more remain to be added if the Center’s Master Plan is to be realized. Work is currently underway on a replica turkey brooder house that will be used to tell the story of Brethren and Mennonite involvement in the Valley’s poultry industry. Future projects could include moving the Hildebrand Mennonite Church building, moving or building a wagon shed and a bank barn, and building a picnic pavilion and a new Visitor’s Center. Continuing work on projects like these are a great way to tell additional stories and to generate interest and excitement at the Heritage Center. Such work will not come without challenges, however. In addition to raising funds for the projects themselves, there are infrastructure upgrades that have been mandated to us by local officials that must be completed before

we can commence work on the larger buildings (things like widening our driveway, paving parking lots, and installing storm water management systems) and the Center already has a significant amount of debt. Despite these challenges, though, we are hopeful that our work in progress will continue!

A final way that our light could shine more brightly—and perhaps, the most important one—is simply to involve more people in the Heritage Center’s work. The more people we involve, the more work we will be able to accomplish, the more new ideas we will develop, and the more excitement we will generate. As mentioned above, the commitment of our constituents to the Heritage Center’s mission is very deep, but our constituent base represents only a small fraction of local Brethren and Mennonites in terms of total population, congregations, and denominations. Our local constituent base could grow significantly in both size and diversity. Additionally, we could raise awareness about the Center among Brethren and Mennonites in a larger geographical area. There are large numbers of Anabaptists who live within a day’s drive of the Center; while these folks would be unable to get directly involved in the Heritage Center’s day-to-day work, they could come as visitors and provide financial support. Finally, we could attract more visits from tourists and involvement from persons in our community who are neither Brethren nor Mennonite. Our outreach at the Center is only a fraction of what it could be with a more robust marketing campaign.

Ultimately, if our people are our greatest strength, then involving more people as visitors, volunteers, and donors will be our best way forward.

## Conclusion

In the introduction above, I stated that my vision for our Heritage Center on a hill is that it would be like the biblical “city on a hill,” reflecting the light of Christ through our heritage ever more brightly to the world around us. We’ve explored briefly how the Brethren and Mennonite tradition uniquely reflects Christ’s light, how that light already shines at the Heritage Center, and how it could shine more brightly. This article, like the address on which it is based, is intended to be merely a conversation starter. I welcome any feedback that you may have on that thoughts that I’ve shared. I also welcome you, if you find this vision to be compelling, to join us at the Heritage Center as we seek to live out our mission!

*Sam Funkhouser (pictured here at the sixth annual Sing Me High Music festival, August 27, 2021) is the Executive Director of the Brethren*



*& Mennonite Heritage Center in Harrisonburg, Va. He is a member of the Old German Baptist Brethren Church, New Conference, a native of Shenandoah County, Va., and a passionate advocate of Anabaptist history and theology. He lives in Edinburg, Va., with his wife and two sons.*

### SHENANDOAH VALLEY HISTORIANS ANNUAL MEETING

Jo Anne Kraus had agreed to deliver a lecture at the Historians' Annual Meeting, Saturday, November 13, 2021. Jo Anne Kraus recently finished writing a major Herald Press history book about the Warwick Colony, Newport News, Va. Kraus' book is entitled *Holy Experiment: The Warwick River Mennonite Colony, 1897-1970*. You can purchase a copy of her book at amazon.com.

Because of the high community transmission rate for COVID-19 in Rockingham County, the Annual Meeting has been postponed until a later date, yet to be announced.

A reader of *Historian* sent the Editor an alert about a short note in *The Budget*, June 9, 2021. David J. Fisher, a deacon at the Pleasant Valley Mennonite Fellowship, a Nationwide church in Mt. Crawford, Rockingham County, wrote the following on page 8:

*"Monday evening our family took a little scenic drive. A highlight for me was to stop by what I believe is the oldest Mennonite church building in Augusta County, VA., and finding the tombstone of Joseph Harshberger in that church's cemetery. Brother Harshberger had the distinction of being the man who was "mistakenly" ordained when the bishop, at his ordination, mistook a jelly recipe in his book for the lot slip. Even though this was discovered later, and he became known as 'the jelly recipe preacher' he went on to faithfully serve the church for many years."*

Harry A. Brunk wrote about Joseph Harshberger (1855-1906) and confirms this "jelly preacher" account in *History of Mennonites in Virginia*, Volume 1, page 419.

## History Book Update

by Elwood Yoder

In four years, we will recognize 250 years since Jacob Brunk I (1734-1787) purchased sixty-nine acres of land in 1775, just west of Trissels Mennonite Church. In 1978, the Brunk family placed a marker in a field near Trissels, indicating the original Jacob Brunk I homestead.

A hope for completing the new Mennonites in Virginia history book is to release the volume in 2025, on the 250th anniversary of Mennonites settling in the Linville Creek area of Rockingham County, Va. To finish the book by 2025 also means that it will be the 500th anniversary since the beginning of the Anabaptist movement in Europe.

Beginning September 1, 2021, the history book has a new start. After ten years of development, coauthors Steven Nolt and Elwood Yoder are working on the history book about Mennonites in Virginia, focusing on the Virginia Mennonite Conference.

The book, however, will include the history of most Mennonite groups in Virginia. As revealed in the Summer *Historian*, many churches and groups of Mennonites in Virginia are not associated with the Virginia Mennonite Conference.

Our resources to write the book are the materials stored in the Virginia Mennonite Conference archives, books and articles, and interviews. We still need to raise money to pay the costs of writing the book. If you are willing to contribute, please send a check to the Virginia Mennonite Conference, 601 Parkwood Drive, Harrisonburg, VA, 22802, and put "History Book" in the memo line of your check. Thank you.

## Mennonite Immigrant Stories: Asrat Gebre and Meseret Endeshaw

by James L. Hershberger, with Asrat Gebre

The story of the Christian faith is an immigrant story and Mennonites are certainly part of that story. Since the first decade of the Mennonite story in the 1520s, men, women and their children have fled their homes and possessions, fearing for their lives, seeking a safe place to live. Of course Mennonites in the sixteenth century were not the first or the last people to flee persecution or be drawn to places of greater opportunity. Mennonites have continued to migrate around the globe for various reasons including evangelistic efforts. In the 1940s, Mennonite missionaries from the U.S. went to Ethiopia in church planting efforts. Over the next decades they successfully planted several churches as well as educational and medical programs. In the 1990s the Ethiopians who had joined the church and who now in fact were administering these programs had to make hard choices about their own safety after the political revolution there. The church had grown exponentially after Ethiopian believers assumed control even in spite of the revolutionary government crackdown on leaders after 1974. But that is another story.

This is an account of life in Ethiopia of Asrat Gebre and Meseret Endeshaw and their immigration to the Shenandoah Valley as a result of the death threats they faced. As teenagers they had joined the small Mennonite church in the 1960s. They were attracted to the teachings of Jesus according to the Scriptures; Jesus who had come from God and who was willing to suffer for us rather than do harm.

Asrat sat in his office of Hope Community

Builders in Harrisonburg during an interview on a warm August day. Asrat is looking for an entrepreneur to take his place after building about 170 modest affordable homes for other immigrants and residents of the area. He reflected on his teenage years sitting in history and Bible classes taught by missionaries in the 1950s. Ethiopia has a 1600-year history of Orthodox Christian faith but Asrat was attracted to the new active dynamic Christian faith he heard from these missionaries. When he was eighteen, he was recruited to attend officers training in the army but soon realized that army persons he knew had moral behavior that went against his newfound faith. It also brought him face to face with the basic method armies use to achieve their goals; killing people. The message of Jesus; that he died rather than hurt people made him decide to not enter officer training school in the army.

Asrat loves to learn. By the age of twenty-six he graduated from business and law school. He had a banking management job, and along with Meseret had started the Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) program in Ethiopia and was involved in the family trucking business. And he was an executive officer in the growing Mennonite church, Meserete Kristos Church.

Meseret Endeshaw had grown up in the coffee growing area west of Addis Ababa. She met Asrat Gebre in a Christian youth center and they married in 1969. Besides mothering their four small children she provided important ideas and energy for their families growing involvement in the church's spiritual and social ministry.

Asrat and his wife Meseret and family had found a natural niche in the church and local

economy for their many gifts. The 1974 Marxist revolution brought increasing opposition to all church groups and the church stopped meeting openly. They continued to meet as small home groups and grew rapidly but under great duress. Government agents hunted and captured church leaders, jailing them for long periods of time. Some church leaders died in government hands. Meseret provided important leadership for the underground church as it met in small home groups during this time as male leaders were sought out and captured. She and other women provided training in how to worship together in home groups of 6-10 persons in ways that would not attract attention of the authorities. These small, quiet home groups focused on Bible study and prayer together. They prayed for each other, for their brothers and sisters in jail and for their daily needs. She organized Bible distribution for personal and group study.

Asrat and his wife Meseret were partners in these activities. For instance they started the MEDA program together. In the early years it focused on small business development loans for men. But it was only when Meseret developed the program into the area of extending loans to women who were looking to either start small businesses or expand existing ones that the program really took off. "You know, it is women who are the dependable ones," Asrat says. Meseret understood women were more dependable than men in supporting their families with the necessities of life, and with creating a practical business plan and sticking to it. Meseret expanded the program into credit and business skills for female entrepreneurs.

In 1976, Asrat and Meserete left Ethiopia for a year to work and attend Mennonite colleges in Kansas. This was assisted by the Hesston Foundation of the Hesston corporation.

The persecution of the church became more intense and despite that fact they returned to Ethiopia a year later in 1977. They began an income generation, primary health care and women's literacy and children's basic education nonprofit with international funding that focused on poor women in the capital city.

Their nonprofit became more involved in the human rights movement because of their human development philosophy. This philosophy stressed women's empowerment for self-reliance through informal education and group discussion. They analyzed their situation and proposed concrete steps to better their family and community's health and wellbeing. This process encouraged women to attend the neighborhood meetings the government sponsored to petition for projects that benefited the local community. This caused problems for the women as the government had created these community meetings not to solve problems but to create political support for their policies. So the women as well as the nonprofit were seen as subverting the government.

Except for the health services given to the women, the nonprofit operated on a credit basis with the women. The nonprofit assisted the women to open bank accounts as a group and then as individuals as their businesses succeeded. The Marxist government saw these programs as a threat since it was based on principles of absolute control of all human activity. (Recently in 2018 the Marxist government has lost power which in turn has led to the present war).

By 1995 the government began active measures against their nonprofit and Asrat began receiving credible death threats as before. They were given political asylum by the U.S. government in 1996. They settled in the Shenandoah Valley because of the high population of Men-

nonites. “In Ethiopia we belong to tribes,” Asrat says, “Mennonites are my tribe. We share a history of martyrdom and faith in Jesus.”

In 1996, Mennonites in Harrisonburg welcomed the family and Asrat attended graduate school and Meseret went to college for two years. After graduate school Asrat worked at Walmart for three months. Asrat remembers the feeling of unsettledness and asking God, “What can I do here? Isn’t there something better for me?” About that time an opening opened up in a new organization, Hope Community Builders, (HCB) that had as a goal to build affordable housing for low-income people. In the early days, VM Missions assisted him in the survival stage of the organization. Asrat took on the challenge of growing the organization, creating the relationships with builders, bankers and real estate brokers beyond the Mennonite community. In the early days he helped out on the building crews, learning plumbing and electric wiring and building codes in Virginia. The main obstacle was finding affordable land. In the early days HCB built about twenty houses on lots scattered around Harrisonburg. Grace Covenant Church had about twenty acres north of Covenant street and was willing to sell it to HCB. Since 1998, HCB has developed this land into a community called Covenant Heights where 150 units of decent housing was built for low to moderate income persons of the area.

During these years Meserete has created her own ways of contributing to the local church community in Ethiopia. She created NEW (Nurturing and Encouraging Women), a local organization that supports Ethiopian women. NEW provides ongoing business training and seed money for women to develop and expand their businesses in various communities in Ethiopia.

They settled into Mount Clinton Mennonite Church where they found Christian friendship and fellowship. They have served on committees and are an important part of the church. Mount Clinton Mennonite Church is part of their tribe.

What advice does he have for other immigrants to the area? “Find your tribe! Asrat says.” Find people who understand you and can help connect your skills with the needs of the community.

Asrat and Meseret have had much adversity in life. They worked hard in Ethiopia to build the church and its spiritual and social ministries. Facing persecution and likely death they immigrated to another place, the U.S., where they found their tribe. They continued their commitment to building the church with lives of faithfulness and integrity. The Shenandoah Valley is a better place because of them.

## Recovering a Rockingham Mennonite Geography

E. K. Knappenberger<sup>1</sup>

Charles A. Heatwole, who retired in 2013 after a prestigious career as professor of geography at Hunter College, New York, was not a native of Virginia, nor was he born into the Mennonite religious tradition. That did not stop him, however, from developing a healthy professional interest in the geography of Mennonite religion in Rockingham County. At a time (1979) when the field of cultural geography was expanding to include religious geography, Dr. C. A. Heatwole published a study<sup>2</sup> which cov-

1. E. K. Knappenberger is a local historian and graduate of Eastern Mennonite University and Seminary.

2. Heatwole, Charles A. “Mennonites’ Changing Attitudes Toward the City: A Virginia Example.” *Southeastern Geographer*, vol. 19, no. 1, University of North Carolina Press, 1979, pp. 1–12, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44370682>.

ered Virginia Mennonite history in a unique way, which has until now been forgotten by Virginia Mennonite historians. This is of interest for both historical and historiographical reasons; here I will briefly review the methods, conclusions and possibilities for ongoing investigation raised by Dr. Heatwole's geography.

Heatwole's thesis consists of the following points: Anabaptism was first an urban phenomenon; religious and state persecution forced Anabaptism to leave urban centers and into a rural, agrarian lifestyle; in America, twentieth-century urbanization caused a crisis among Mennonites; late nineteenth-century Virginia Mennonites were split on religious interpretations of the city, among other topics; contemporary (1970s) progressive Mennonites have once again resolved themselves to urbanization, while Old Order traditionalists remain skeptical.

Heatwole's historical interpretation is fairly solid. He cites the available sources of the time, and goes further, interviewing Virginia Mennonite historian Harry A. Brunk and VMC Bishop Glendon Blosser. Brunk interestingly leads Heatwole to a conclusion that he himself never discussed in his writings, claiming that much of the denominational turmoil of the late nineteenth century--Mennonites leaving the church--was due to the urbanization dynamic. Blosser locks this conclusion into Heatwole's thinking on the issue, confirming his theory. Heatwole



Singing from the *Harmonia Sacra* songbook at Sing Me High, August 27, 2021 Andrea Early photo

builds on a (ca. 1900) survey of progressive and Old Order Mennonites used by Brunk; he himself repeats the survey in rural Rockingham County, in order to assess attitudes toward urbanization on the part of those Mennonites living outside of the suburbs.

Several critical responses can be raised. Heatwole's reliance on Brunk and Smith, while unavoidable at that time, present a historiographic blind spot: both sources have flaws and cannot fully explain many of the problems they present. Furthermore, Heatwole is led to gloss the full impact and cause of the Old Order schism of 1904--to claim that it was about modernization may be technically correct, but misses the spirit and complexity of the conflict, which few insider historians have even fully

grasped.<sup>3</sup> Heatwole, as a geographer, should not be expected to offer a full account of the Mennonite troubles of Rockingham County, yet the gloss here remains insufficient except to cover his thesis.

Heatwole's brief exploration of Rockingham Mennonites a generation ago raises the possibility of a fully-critical exploration of the Mennonite geography of the valley. Questions arise: what exactly are the mechanisms of geographic Mennonite expansion? What religious, family, historical-identity or ideological factors have shaped the spread (and loss!) of Mennonite culture and church? What is the next-generation impact of urbanization on local Mennonites? These and more issues lurk behind this interesting and now-recovered find.

3. Much of my work since 2013 has centered around understanding that conflict and its causes.



Gospel Hill Mennonite Church, located about ten miles northwest of Harrisonburg, Va., along Hopkins Gap Road. The Church is located on a hill in the Hopkins Gap region of Rockingham County. The church has a children's playground, a large pavilion, and a cemetery. Membership in 2020 was forty-two, with the average attendance sixty-five. From 1900 - 2021, Gospel Hill was a member congregation of Virginia Mennonite Conference. Leaders of the church asked for release from Virginia Conference, which delegates to the Virginia Mennonite Conference Assembly granted, June 12, 2021.

Photo by the Editor, 2021

The *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian* is published quarterly by the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians, established in 1993.

Officers of the Historians: Chair, James L. Hershberger; Treasurer, Norman Wenger; Secretary, James Rush; Lois Bowman Kreider; Gerald R. Brunk; and, Elwood E. Yoder, Editor

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If you have an idea for an article or picture for the *Historian*, contact the Editor at [elyoder@gmail.com](mailto:elyoder@gmail.com).

All past issues of *Shenandoah Mennonite Historian*, from 1994-2021, can be found at [mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net](http://mennonitearchivesofvirginia.net). This site includes a link to over 1,600 photos related to Mennonites in Virginia, provides a way to subscribe to *Historian* online, and connects readers to the Editor's history blog.

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