

Stories by John D. Roth

How Mennonites Came to Be

Group Study Guide by John A. and Alice W. Lapp

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One of the special dimensions of STORIES is the lists of questions embedded in the text in most chapters. Some of the following questions are similar to those included in the text.

Introduction: Conflict and Renewal in the church tradition

Are you convinced that “telling stories”—remembering together our shared past—is important to understanding who we are? (p.10)

In your experience, has tradition been stifling (p. 12) or a “map of the past” which orients us in the present and possibly for the future? (p. 13)

This book is premised on the insight that “conflict is inevitable” and “deeply rooted in human experience.” (p.15) Why is it difficult to appreciate the positive dimensions of conflict?

“Ours is not the only story of Christian faithfulness.” (p. 19) How is this understood and expressed in your congregation?

Chapter 1: A Newborn Church

How do you compare the church as a movement (p. 22ff.) from the church you experience today?

How do new church members “catch the common vision” (p. 29) of a Christian congregation today?

Are the six items on pages 24-28 as significant today as in the first century?

Is the process of “movement to structure” a recurring pattern in church history?

Do you see it taking place in the early 21st century? Where? How?

Chapter 2: A Catholic Church

Missionary and mission leader David Shenk wrote (The MENNONITE, June 5, 2007) about three different journeys for peace: Jesus, Constantine, Mohammed. How could this chapter nudge you to reconsider Constantine’s role in church history?

How do the practices of a “Christian empire” alienate many people to the

Christian cause ?

“Christendom refers to the fusion of religion, politics and culture.” (p. 44)

Describe your relationships with friends or acquaintances who hold to this position.

How do you engage people, especially other Christians, in conversation regarding the meaning of “Christendom” as defined above?

What did Anabaptists including Mennonites inherit from the Catholic past? What do you consider positive and what is problematic in that inheritance?

Chapter 3: A Protestant Church

If the body of Christ, then and now, “was a living organism, not a fragmented corpse” (p. 50) how do we justify different Christian bodies?

How has the modern Christian movement been impacted by the Protestant Reformation’s “individualistic and subjective character”? (p. 60)

What have Anabaptists including Mennonites inherited from modern Protestantism?

What do you consider to be positive and negative elements in the Protestant inheritance?

Chapter 4: An Anabaptist Church

Why were Anabaptists considered a “threat to the foundation of political stability” (p. 68)?

Who has changed more—the structures of modern states or the practices of contemporary Mennonites?

Is it significant that the first major Anabaptist document—Schleitheim (p. 75) is labeled a “confession” rather than a “creed”?

Compare and contrast the story of this chapter with Chapter 2 “from movement to structure.”

Chapter 5: Mennonites in Europe

Summarize in your own words the key insights of Menno Simons. (p. 92-93)

How might the questions Roth raises regarding the decline of Mennonites in the Netherlands (p. 88) be relevant to North American Mennonites at the beginning of the 21st century?

“The struggle for identity amid the pressures of compromise and voices of renewal has structured the contours of Anabaptist—Mennonite history ever since.” (p. 113) How do you observe this struggle in your congregation or conference?

What are the critical issues regarding compromise and renewal which you see today?

Chapter 6: Mennonites in South Russia

Why did Mennonites live in colonies in Russia?

What were positive elements which self-government provided for the Mennonites?

What problems did this colony life pose for Christian practices?

Can you identify at least six countries where Mennonites of Russian ancestry live today?

For North Americans, one of the newest groups which Roth describes (pp. 135-37) are the more than 100,000 *Aussiedler* (or resettlers) who returned to Germany after the collapse of the Soviet Union. How would you describe these communities?

Address the questions on page 138.

Chapter 7: Mennonites in North America I

In what ways was the *Martyrs Mirror* a teaching device particularly for American Mennonites?

How have Mennonites in the U.S. dealt with the recurring American wars?

Roth notes five types or themes of renewal among the Mennonites in America: Revivalism, 2. Progressivism, 3. Old Order Movements, 4. Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, 5, Historical Memory. Which of these movements have you and the congregation experienced to the greatest extent and why?

How do Mennonites continue to be impacted by American religious movements?

Chapter 8: Mennonites in North America II

Is it significant that the first North American Mennonite missions were organized by recent German and Russian immigrants?

Is Roth correct to identify recent Mennonite church growth as an “urban explosion”? (p. 183)

On page 186, Roth notes some of the contributions which newcomers or new Mennonites make to the church, enriching and renewing the tradition. How have you experienced these contributions?

How have you experienced moving from “they to we” in your congregation or your conference?

Chapter 9: Mennonites Around the World

There are now more Mennonites and Brethren in Christ living in the

Global South (900,000 in 2006) than in the North (600,000). How did that remarkable transformation occur?

How do the well-established churches of the North accept the enthusiasms and concerns of the newer, younger conferences of the South?

Note the questions on page 206 mid-page.

Are you prepared to identify with the affirmation of the Congolese church leaders? (p. 209-10)

Chapter 10: Mennonites in the World

“Anabaptists emerged within the context of a fracturing church.” (p. 218) How important is it for Mennonites to take seriously attempts to unite the Christian movement?

On pages 224 to 227 Roth presents an argument against what he calls generic Christianity and for Mennonite distinctives. Where do you identify strongest with his arguments, where the least?

Roth presents four ways for Mennonites to relate to the broader Christian world. (p. 228) Can you give more examples of these ways in your region or conference? Is your congregation engaged in such a conversation? Why? Why not?

Conclusion: Conflict and Renewal in the Anabaptist Mennonite Tradition

Who are “the storytellers, the keepers of memory” in your community? Are they as wise as Roth suggests?

What do you think of the triangle—“Context/Tradition/Spirit” (p. 240-42) for reflection on wisdom in the church?

How would you summarize the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition as a gift of God for the Christian movement and indeed the entire world?