

## Teaching That Transforms

### Why Anabaptist-Mennonite Education Matters

by John D. Roth

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This study guide is for those in communities where there are no Anabaptist-Mennonite educational institutions or those unfamiliar with Anabaptist-Mennonite education. The questions are intended to expand and deepen appreciation for Roth's book.

#### Introduction

1. John D. Roth begins his book with a simple idea: "Education matters!" (page 14).

- What issues in your community, state or province have highlighted the importance of education in our lives and in society?
- Roth points out that our first education comes from our families. What are some of the ways you were instructed by family members, and what "methods" did they use? What were some of the values, spoken or unspoken, that were passed on through these experiences?

2. A second foundational idea Roth sets forth here is that "conversations about education are ultimately religious in nature" (17).

- Do you agree that "education is never a value-free enterprise"? (17).
- Consider your own school experiences. What values—stated or unstated—were communicated to you and your fellow students?

3. Spend some time with Psalm 34:8-14, either from your Bible or from page 33 in the book. When you have read it carefully, return to verse 11a: "Come, my children, listen to me."

- What is it that is most important, most urgent for "my children" to know? This is a way of getting at Roth's question, "What is it that really matters?" (32).
- What answers are suggested by the passage itself?
- What do you think it means to "seek peace and pursue it"? How might you go about teaching this concept to children or young people?

#### Chapter 1: *The Context of Mennonite Education in North America*

1. What is your view of the Pledge of Allegiance? What issues do you think it raises for Christians in the Anabaptist tradition?

2. Roth, a professor of history, surveys five "shifts" that have taken place in regard to education in Western culture. Most changes involve both losses and gains. For each of the five shifts, consider both the positive and negative results: What was lost? What was gained?

- The Secularization of Education
- Democratization of Access to Education

- Citizenship and Comportment: Education in National Identity
- Professionalization of Education
- Expansion of Mandate

3. Roth then offers a brief history of Mennonite education in North America, surveying its beginnings and tracing four general themes that emerge from the histories of Mennonite-originated schools.

- Were any of these four themes new or surprising to you?
- If you attended a Mennonite school, which of Roth's stages would have applied to the school during the time you were there?

4. Roth ends the first chapter with six important questions (page 62) that will shape the rest of the book.

- Are there other questions about Mennonite education that you believe need to be faced?
- What are some of the difficulties you predict Roth will face in offering satisfactory answers to these questions?

## **Chapter 2: *Theological Starting Points: The Incarnation as the Foundation of Anabaptist-Mennonite Education***

1. This chapter begins by recalling the tensions that arose for Mennonite schools in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. Similar tensions were experienced by individuals and congregations within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

- What are your recollections of those tensions? As you have reflected in the years since, how has your thinking about those events—and the U.S. response to them—changed or developed?

2. What Roth calls “the embarrassment of particularity” is an issue not just for schools, but also for congregations and individuals.

- If you belong to a Mennonite congregation, how have you dealt with the issue of “branding”? In other words, to what extent is Mennonite identity a part of your public “face” and communications?
- As a congregation and as an individual, when do you emphasize your commonality with all Christians and when do you emphasize distinctive Anabaptist-Mennonite beliefs and practices?
- In discussing the role of rational arguments and doctrinal statements, Roth concludes, “In the end, what we truly believe will be made evident in how we live” (76). Do you agree with him that our habits, attitudes and practices are a truer expression of our beliefs than statements of belief or theology?

3. In a stretch of barely five pages (77-82), Roth attempts something that seems breathtakingly ambitious: to lay out a biblical theology of redemption through the theme of incarnation.

- How would you assess the success—the accuracy and completeness—of this statement?
  - Because this statement is so brief, Roth uses relatively few citations of scripture. What scriptural themes or passages would you use to support—or to counter—the theology Roth proposes.
4. After establishing this theological foundation, the chapter goes on to suggest five different “consequences” of the incarnation for the educational task.
- For each of these consequences, 1) note what implications Roth sees for what education in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition should care about, and 2) think of any further implications that may be suggested to you.
    1. Because of the Incarnation Creation Matters
    2. Because of the Incarnation History Matters
    3. Because of the Incarnation Community Matters
    4. Because of the Incarnation Individuals Matter
    5. Because of the Incarnation the World Matters
  - To test the usefulness of this incarnational model, what other practices of Christian education have you encountered that seem to arise from different assumptions? What might be lost or corrected in these practices by incorporating Roth’s ideas?

### **Chapter 3: *Creating Communities of Learning: The Ethos and Practices of an Anabaptist-Mennonite Pedagogy***

1. The chapter begins with a story about a college student’s remembered encounter with “Grandpa Troyer,” and the way this encounter reflected the “ethos” of the school she attended.
  - Recall the most important single encounter—negative or positive—of your own school experience. Do you think this encounter was typical of the quality of relationships at this school, or an exception to the “ethos” there?
2. Roth presents three characteristics that should be present in the “invisible curriculum,” the “ethos” of an Anabaptist-Mennonite school: a culture of worship; attentiveness to tradition; and negotiating community: diversity, conflict, and reconciliation.
  - Consider the completeness of this list. Are there other elements that you believe are equally or more important than the three presented?
  - On first look, the third characteristic—negotiating community—would be one that any public school should aspire to. As Roth presents it, how might an Anabaptist-Mennonite school’s approach and aims differ from those of even a motivated and well-intentioned public school?
3. Working from the “incarnational” model established in chapter two, Roth presents five “dispositions” that should characterize the pedagogy in an Anabaptist-Mennonite school.
  - Any discussion of Christian pedagogy is subject to questioning about whether its assumptions and foundations are genuinely Christian, or whether they arise from other cultural or ideological streams. Each of the following would likely have application and relevance for a public school teacher. However, assess each point for whether or not

you believe Roth has successfully grounded it in Christian theology—specifically, the incarnational theology he presented in chapter two:

1. Curiosity: humility seeking understanding
  2. Reason: celebrate the gift of the mind
  3. Joy: education is not drudgery
  4. Patience: “if you knew it all you would not need to be here”
- Now that you have explored what Roth means by “the invisible curriculum,” consider the invisible curriculum of a school with which you are familiar.

#### **Chapter 4: *Outcomes of a Mennonite Education: Taste and See***

1. The author begins this chapter with an illustration about planting sequoia seedlings as a picture of the future-looking task of Christian education.

- Test this illustration by thinking of an example of something you learned or experienced in school whose relevance wasn’t evident at the time but which proved valuable later in life.
- One way to explore issues of assessment and achievement in a Christian context is to consider the issue of the honor roll: Should a Mennonite school publish an honor roll for students with the highest grades? Should other achievements and qualities receive similar recognition? Are such awards a reflection of what is truly valued by the school?

2. Roth then proposes six goals of an Anabaptist education, creatively couched in terms of the senses and voice.

- Since these are proposed as outcomes, evaluate each one as a personal growth goal for yourself. Is each one a quality that you would set as goal for your own spiritual growth? If so, how might you go about cultivating it?
  1. Gifts of sight and perception: seeing details in a larger context
  2. Touch: Mennonite education is practical, engaged, and embodied
  3. Taste: the discipline of discernment
  4. Hearing: learning to listen to others and to God
  5. Voice: discovering our vocation
  6. Smell: being attentive to the presence of the unseen
- It has been observed that the more important the educational goal, the harder it is to assess. How would a school go about assessing these important qualities? How do you assess them in yourself?
- In your opinion, are these appropriate goals for an adult Christian education program in your congregation?

#### **Chapter 5: *Keeping the Conversation Alive: Addressing Tough Questions***

1. In this chapter the author addresses a series of questions faced by parents, pastors and congregations, administrators and board members, and Mennonite Education Agency.

- It is important for the success of this chapter that the author be thorough and honest in addressing the issues faced by all the parties in a discussion about Mennonite education. In your view, has Roth accomplished this? What questions would you add?

- This chapter lends itself well to role play, where persons are assigned to take one side or the other of each issue. Alternatively, questions could simply be posed to the group as a whole for discussion, followed by examination and discussion of the answers Roth proposes.

2. Question #6 on page 182 is addressed specifically to the situations of “Mennonite congregations located far from existing Mennonite schools.” Are these conversations relevant, he asks, for such congregations? His answer covers three areas:

- Strong denominations require strong schools. To what extent has the leadership of your congregation been influenced by Anabaptist-Mennonite schools? Do you agree with Roth that “the most likely context for the transmission of our tradition will be in our schools”? (page 183).
- All congregations can support Mennonite education by including schools in budgeted contributions and by encouraging members to attend. Assess your congregation’s practice in these areas. Have the questions raised in this chapter entered into your discussions?
- Even congregations in small communities and urban settings should consider beginning a Mennonite elementary or high school. Has this possibility ever been discussed in your congregation? What issues would likely be raised in such a discussion?

## **Chapter 6: *Looking to the Future: Challenges, Opportunities, Visions, and Dreams***

1. The final chapter begins with several recent examples of education efforts in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

- In what directions for the future of Mennonite-related education do these examples seem to point?

2. Roth then offers a survey and analysis of the history of the Mennonite Church in North America since the final decades of the nineteenth century.

- How would you assess the relationship between the health of the Mennonite Church and the health of its institutions over the years?
- What are some of the elements of Anabaptist-Mennonite thought that are gaining acceptance and influence in recent Christian renewal movements?
- Do you believe that the forces that are diminishing support for Mennonite institutions are temporary or that they are likely to increase?

3. Finally, the author traces some of the possible outlines of the future of Mennonite education.

- What are some of the implications of Roth’s affirmation that “God’s kingdom is bigger than our institutions”? (page 204)
- Do you see a tension between the institutional goal of preserving tradition, and the missional goal of welcome and multi-cultural and multi-religious engagement?
- How do you evaluate some of the possible new forms for Mennonite education listed in this chapter: charter schools, homeschooling, the “Menno-term” or other Mennonite presence at state universities, and electronically delivered courses?

4. Revisit the two larger biblical themes that have run throughout the book: incarnation and the images of Psalm 34:8-14. What new ways can we embody Christ in the world so that new generations can “taste and see” God’s goodness?