

## Disciplined Interreligious Dialogue

By Dorothy Yoder Nyce, DMin  
Goshen, Indiana

Exposed to religious plurality when I first lived in India (1962-65), my questions and insights have grown during six return assignments and other opportunities. Most recently (1998), I served with the Mission, Ecumenism, and Dialogue staff in a Lutheran seminary in Chennai (Madras). Serious friendships with many Indian and South Asian students who have attended Goshen College during recent decades, plus reading numerous books and articles, complement direct experience in a land teeming with diverse living faiths. Hindu-Christian ex-

change especially interests me. I served as a board member with Mennonite Board of Missions (1983-91), chairing the Overseas Committee for five years. My DMin degree (1997) culminated in *Dialogues to Foster Interreligious Understanding*.

For this short article, intended to stimulate discussion, I formulate a few key principles about interreligious dialogue. Such principles determine content, attitude, approach and vision for dialogue between people who hold sacred views. Those views evolve, enriched through differences that will always exist alongside profound concerns held in common.

- Through interreligious dialogue (witnessing

continued on page 2 . . .

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### Editorial

There are four quite diverse elements in this issue. Dorothy Yoder Nyce's reflection on interreligious dialogue is an example of how this newsletter may be used as a forum to discuss a specific issue. I hope that scholars in different disciplines and institutional locations will respond to her proposal.

Susan Kennel Harrison continues the discussion from past newsletters on a the broader question of "who we are" as a network of Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars. She responds to Lydia Harder's article "What is your definition of Anabaptist-Mennonite? Do you work self-consciously as an Anabaptist-Mennonite scholar?" which appeared in Vol. 2, No. 2 (December 1999), available at: [www.chass.utoronto.ca/~tmtc/net4.htm](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~tmtc/net4.htm). These questions, quite basic to the sort of conversation this Network can facilitate, will likely be

revisited in future issues.

The third section is an attempt to use the database to characterize and visually portray something of the "shape" of this Network. I should note that the kind of data received from members varies considerably—some forms are filled out in detail while others leave significant gaps. While the methodology is not strictly rigorous, I hope the portrait is helpful. Of course, many more questions may be asked of the data, and I welcome your suggestions. Ryan Rempel, PhD student in law and currently of Winnipeg, deserves credit and thanks for designing the database and enabling to be used in this way.

Finally, upcoming events, calls for papers, publishing notes and job openings are detailed on page 8. Please send your announcements to me at the address to the left, as well as address changes. Many blessings to you.

- Jeremy Bergen

**“Interreligious dialogue” continued. . .**

to faith within), people pursue God’s mission. Christianity has always depended on interreligious dialogue; it emerged from Judaism and has distinct ties to Islam.

- Distinction and tension between the particular and the universal are crucial to dialogue about faith. For instance, since God is the God of all nations, Christians cannot claim our particular view of or relationship to God as universal. Being vast, God’s disclosure and salvation dare not be limited by people. Believers respond to Mystery; we use diverse, meaningful names—like Allah, Yahweh, and Rama—to convey a measure of the Absolute God’s richness and fullness.
- People loyal to any religion will avoid being imperialistic in dialogue—to conclude that all others need my particular ‘brand’ of faith or to deny that my religion is limited (relative).
- Engaged by another’s faith, authentic dialogue partners, who are committed in personal religious understanding and loyalty, freely engage in self-critique. Willing to re-think personal meanings, they hesitate to negate another’s truth or relationship with God. That task is God’s alone.
- Genuine listening depends on honest interest in learning from the other person, conscious that neither knows fully. Not presuming that my truth is normative, I tell the other (in understandable language and consistent action) how faith or meaning is emerging. Not starting with an absolutist conviction that “I have what you desperately need,” each moves toward a better world for all, by sharing strengths from a religion each thinks is worthy. Neither presumes to be an expert or conveys paternalism or a “holier than thou” stance. Christian endeavor that primarily tells rather than learns often fails to truly hear or value the other’s experience of the sacred.
- Christian participants in dialogue recognize, yet prove invalid, the “classical fears” of the missionary movement: “syncretism, compromise with the uniqueness of Christ, and loss of urgency of mission” (Ariarajah).

- To dialogue with Asians, North American Christians will first learn from Asian Christians who daily encounter, engage with, and have considerable knowledge of neighbors of other living faiths (neighbors who also believe, pray, and know the One God). They choose not to trample another’s insight and dreams or to pursue arrogant, evangelistic tactics.
- Dialogue, while strengthened through conversation, is not limited to either words or two people. As secular or people loyal to religions together confront poverty, they live out dialogue. As an individual reflects on content read about another religion or credits its distinct features, dialogue takes place within. From the depth of religious being, each partner then shares, aware of limits to sacred knowing.
- Although I know or anticipate salvation (wholeness) through Jesus the Christ, Yahweh God’s incarnate reflection, I choose not to limit how God might love or make real salvation (wholeness and justice) for others. This conviction shapes attitudes, my choice of mentors, and actual dialogue.
- Jesus’ life and message (as through parables) always pointed to God, not himself, setting the pattern for Christians in doing justice (freeing victims). To claim Jesus as truly God and my key Mentor, while dialoguing with neighbors of other living faiths, does not warrant making Christology into idolatry through *only* language. I value S. J. Samartha’s insight that “Christocentrism without theocentrism leads to idolatry.” He confesses that “the only way to be Christ-centred is to be God-centred, but in a religiously plural world to be Christ-centred is not the only way to be God-centred.”
- IntraChristian dialogue will address differing interpretations of John 14:6. Rather than endorse this as an exclusive claim, I hear Jesus respond to Thomas’s dilemma: “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Not to be used as a triumphal boast or to feel superior to or favored over others, Jesus tells Thomas to recognize his Way of suffering love that leads to God (Scott). Through Jesus the Christ, believers know truth

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about God. Through faithful living with God, they see anew what Jesus offered. A particular, absolute claim for Christ that disregards the biblical, universal Truth that God chooses all people can be “the greatest hindrance to genuine witness” (Ariarajah). This Sri Lankan Christian continues: John 14:6, a statement of faith for Christians, was meant to “express and arouse commitment, not to condemn others”; it reflects the theocentrism of Jesus.

- Dialogue allows partners to express and be transformed by features distinct for each living faith. Christians express the concept of “one and only” through full commitment to (relation with) Jesus the Christ, without denying worthiness among others—non-duality for Hindus, transforming mindfulness for Buddhists, the sacredness of the earth within Native American spirituality (Knitter, Aleaz). Enhanced by mutual witness, partners turn (experience conversion) toward deeper religious understandings.
- Dialogue proves that religions are not all the same or equal, but they all exercise the right and duty to enrich existence, human and environmental.
- People experienced with dialogue teach attitude and method. Paul Knitter identi-

fies four essential ingredients of dialogue: differences, trust, witnessing, and learning. Raimon Panikkar names three prerequisites for interreligious encounter: deep human honesty in the search, intellectual openness (devoid of prejudice), and profound loyalty to one’s own tradition. He stresses how essential another person is to my becoming open to my own truth. Panikkar’s multi-steps for dialogue begin with a faithful and critical understanding of one’s personal tradition (1). A similar understanding is required of another tradition (2), to the point that one’s new understanding becomes conviction (3). Then an internal, *intradialogue* needs to take place between the two religious convictions (4) within the self before a person engages in external dialogue (*inter*) with an adherent of the other tradition (5). Each dialogue partner completes this sequence of steps (6) before both test their new interpretations (7).

Many people have taught me about interreligious dialogue. I am particularly indebted to conversations with or writings by: Paul F. Knitter, David C. Scott, Stanley J. Samartha, Wesley Ariarajah, Raimon Panikkar, Diana L Eck, K. P. Aleaz, David J. Krieger, and Sreekala Rajagopalan. I welcome response.



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# Identities in Scholarship

By Susan Kennel Harrison  
 ThD student, New Testament  
 Toronto School of Theology

In this essay I will engage Lydia Harder's interpretation of the questionnaire she posed to "Anabaptist-Mennonite scholars." [*This article appeared in the Vol. 2, No. 2 of the Network newsletter (December 1999) and is available at: [www.chass.utoronto.ca/~tmtc/net4.htm](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~tmtc/net4.htm)* Four responses were published in Vol. 3, No. 1 (May 2000). -ed.] Harder's description of the 45 persons who responded to the questions "What is your Definition of Anabaptist Mennonite?" and "Do you work self-consciously as an Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholar?" reveals a homogenous group. This is due to the fact that the largest group of respondents work at Mennonite institutions and are men. Since at least half of the respondents are working within a Mennonite context, the possibility of saying they do not work self-consciously as Mennonite is neutralized. Additionally, there was no information in Harder's demographic description to indicate that the nature of a respondent's vocation provided any guidance on "boundary setting and identity issues." Because Harder selectively provides quotes from the respondents' "definitions and confessions" it is difficult to determine what the respondents said apart from how Harder interpreted and framed their answers.

I found the question raised about whether defining one's identity is an exclusionary activity or a "helpful way to confess one's own rootedness in a particular tradition and context" intriguing. As I understand it, the activity of defining oneself is not optional. We are by our very being, defined, and that necessitates exclusion. This is not something that we can somehow avoid, but a reality to be noticed so as to be more accountable in our critical scholarship. We are not doing scholarship in an accountable way if we cast a blind eye to the reality that tradition, gender, class, geographical locale, political affiliations, etc., define us. The more precise we can be in noticing our identities and naming each of our own boundaries the more accountable we can be in noticing that others (and their scholarship) also stand

legitimately within their own identity boundaries.

I will not discuss the various perspectives around the usage of Anabaptist or Mennonite as part of our name. I only wish to comment on Harder's brief remark that "a number of people acknowledged that Anabaptist is not nearly as significant as other identities for many Mennonites." It would be useful to know what those "other identities" included for the respondents.

I expect the process of naming those additional identities would reflect the attempt to notice that each of us comes to our critical studies with pre-understandings. I agree with Daniel Patte who wrote that our scholarly questions are always first informed by our ordinary readings, and then the various aspects of our self-understandings inform the questions and methods we will pursue to (usually) legitimate our reading. According to Patte

Critical readings have in common with ordinary readings the fact that they reflect the interests, concerns, and thus the pre-understandings of the readers, be they exegetes or ordinary readers. But critical readings are distinct from ordinary readings in that they are the outcomes of reading processes that are disciplined and controlled by the use of critical methods, instead of being spontaneous and intuitive. By contrast with ordinary reading processes, critical practices are self-conscious (*Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 102).

Patte challenges us to acknowledge that we relate both as "ordinary" thinking people and "critical" scholars in our various disciplines. Our "ordinary" thinking reflects our Mennonite/Anabaptist sensitivities/interests as much as our critical work does, the difference being that the former is done intuitively, the latter is done self-consciously. So, to ask whether we work "self-consciously as Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholars?" is really putting the question somewhat incorrectly. To be Mennonite/Anabaptist scholars does not make our critical work neutral. I prefer to ask: Do we notice, when working critically, what pre-understandings/interests our reality as an Anabaptist/Mennonite enter into the methods we choose and of the

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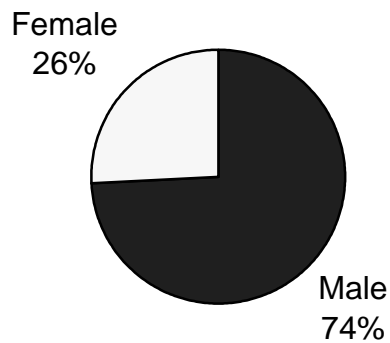
questions we ask? What of our Anabaptist-Mennonite identity are we trying to legitimate or advocate (or challenge/refute) when we work critically?

Even critical work that has “integrity, commitment and practice consistent with belief” necessitates the difficult process of naming what pre-understandings each of us Mennonite/Anabaptist scholars assigns to those categories. For each of us there will be often substan-

tive difference in meaning of what we understand integrity, commitment, practice and belief to look like, despite our common identification, whether we find ourselves at the center or the fringe. Harder's interpretation of the questionnaire responses helps to elucidate what some of the pre-understandings Mennonite/Anabaptist men, working in denominational institutions, are bringing to their critical work.

## Scholars Network Data

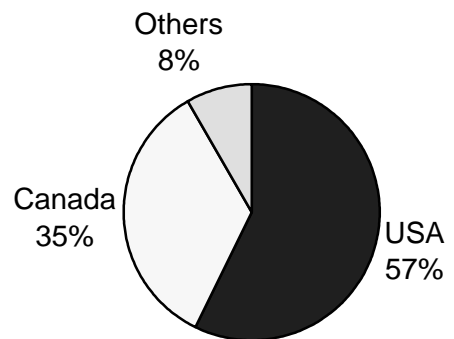
Figure 1--Gender



Total number of members in the Network: **256**

Percentages are of those who responded to a particular question.

Figure 2--Country



**Notes:**

Other countries (total numbers): UK (4); Sweden (3); Switzerland (2); France (2); Germany (2); 1 each from India, Indonesia, Japan, Lithuania, Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland, South Korea.

Figure 3--Membership fees

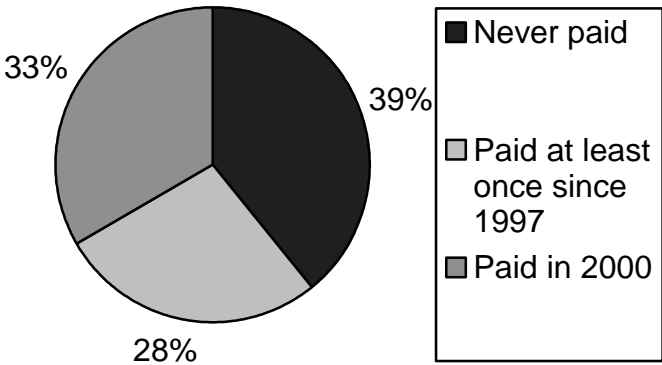
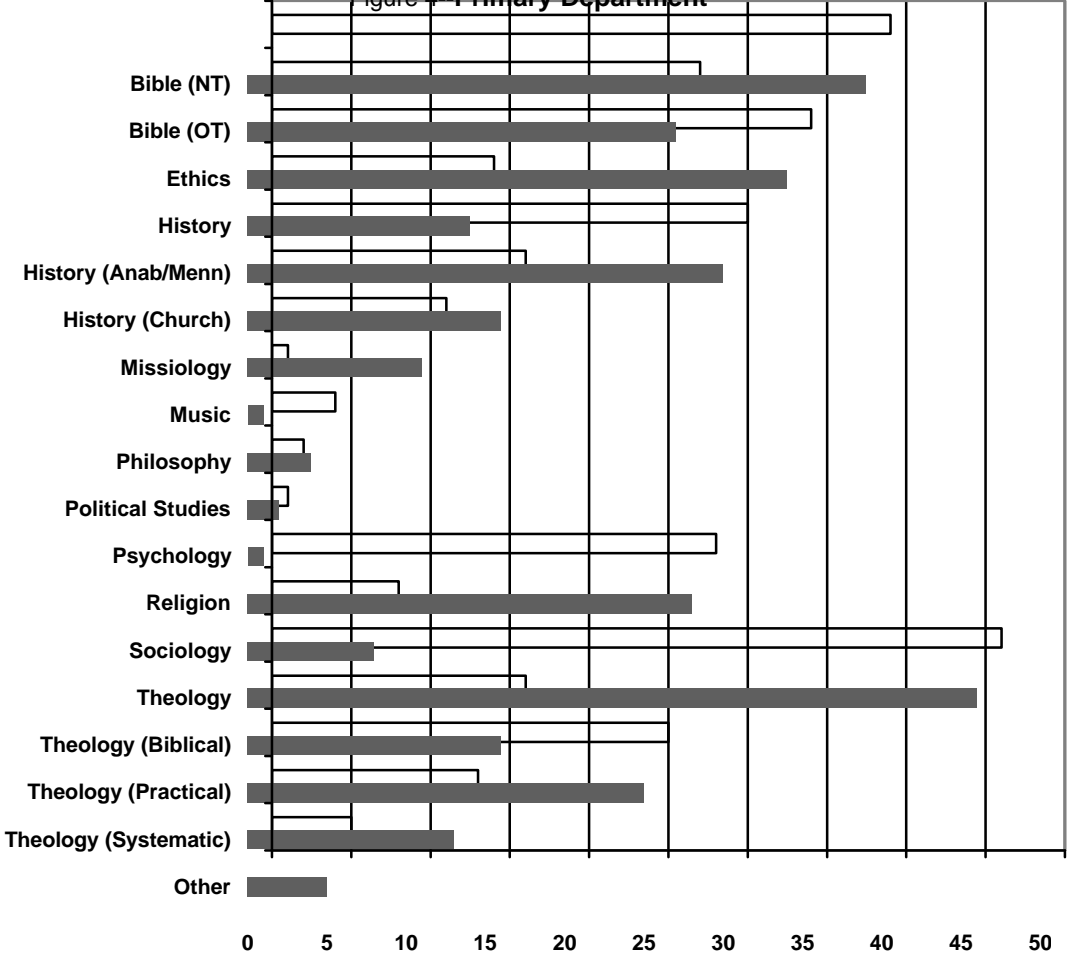
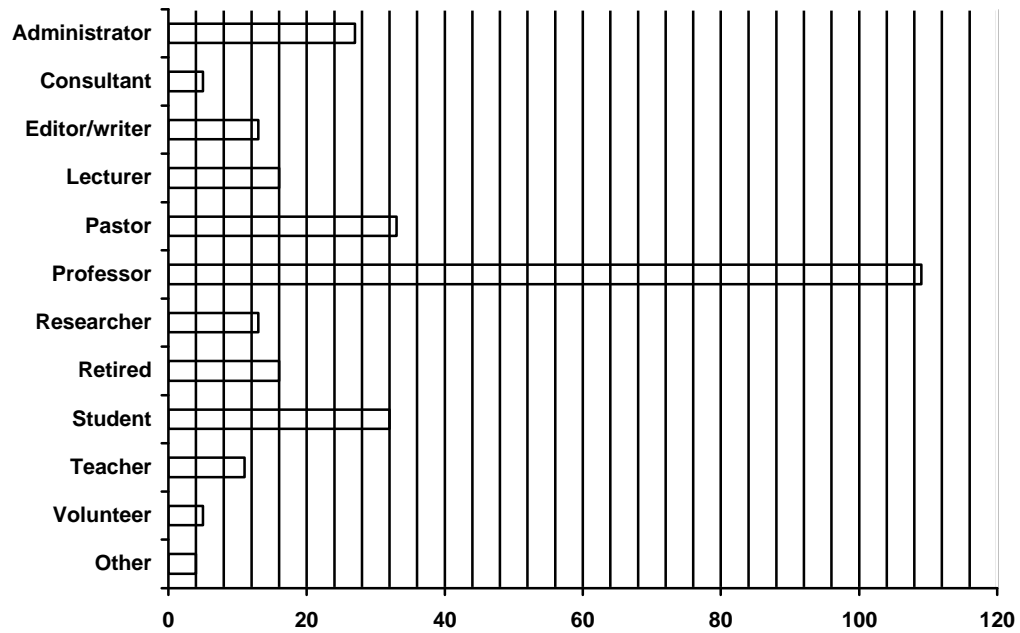


Figure 4--Primary Department



- Notes:**
1. There was significant variation in the number of departments selected by individuals: from 1 to 6.
  2. Others: Archaeology, Anthropology, English, Peace Studies, Social Work

Figure 4--Primary Occupation



**Notes:**

1. Several members selected more than one option.
2. Other occupations: Spiritual director, Supervisor, Archivist, Publisher

Figure 5—Institution from which doctorate was earned

Toronto School of Theology	23	Iowa University	4
Princeton University	10	McMaster University	4
Harvard University	8	Northwestern University	4
Duke University	7	Temple University	4
Graduate Theological Union	7	Emory University	3
Claremont School of Theology	6	Fuller Theological Seminary	3
McGill University	6	University of Minnesota	3
University of Chicago	6	University of Toronto	3
Vanderbilt University	6	Yale University	3
Union Theological Seminary (Virginia)	5		

**Notes:**

1. Doctorate = PhD, ThD, DMin
2. Includes doctoral students and incomplete degrees
3. All units of an overarching institution are included under one name. Eg. Princeton University = Princeton Theological Seminary + Princeton University. This is partly due to the fact that on some forms the institution is specified precisely while on others the general name is given.
4. The Toronto School of Theology total includes 6 students.
5. 10 institutions have 2 doctoral graduates each; 40 have 1 graduate.

## upcoming events

Send us your announcements, job openings and publishing notes. The next newsletter will be published in May.

## new journals, new books

## job opening

### Calls for Papers

The Institute of Mennonite Studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, extends a call for papers for a Believers Church Conference, "Assessing the Theological Legacy of John Howard Yoder," to be held March 7-9, 2002. Papers for the conference should consider how Yoder's work has been and continues to be appropriated in the areas of sixteenth-century studies, biblical theology, ecclesiology, social ethics, peace studies, mission, theological education, and ecumenism. Perspectives from the believers church and other ecclesial traditions, and from the context of the academy, the church, or activist circles are welcome. Send one- to two-page proposals, postmarked by **March 15, 2001**, to Karl Koop, Institute of Mennonite Studies, 3003 Benham Avenue, Elkhart, Indiana 46517-1999 or kkoop@ambs.edu

Proposals are hereby solicited for a meeting of the Anabaptist Sociology and Anthropology Association, to be held in June of 2001, at Elizabethtown College

in Elizabethtown, PA. The meeting will be held in conjunction with a Young Center conference, "Amish, Old Orders, and the Media: Conflicts of Interest?" which will be June 14-16, 2001. Membership in ASAA is open to anyone who is strongly interested in Sociology or Anthropology and in the traditions historically associated with the Anabaptist movement. Deadline for submission of proposals is **January 15, 2001**. Submissions should be sent to: Peter Blum; Hillsdale College; 33 E. College St.; Hillsdale, MI 49242. Email: peter.blum@hillsdale.edu Copies of the full call for papers are available at: [www.hillsdale.edu/Dept/Soc/asaa/CICall.htm](http://www.hillsdale.edu/Dept/Soc/asaa/CICall.htm)

### May 4-5, 2001

Women Doing Theology Conference: "Embracing Hope: Envisioning an Inclusive Theology of Service." Resource people: Mary Malone, Ireland; Lydia Harder, Toronto; Alix Lozano, Colombia. Place: Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario. For more information contact Miriam Frey at 519-885-9086 or miriamf@online.net

**Ted Grimsrud**, *God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Bible's Main Themes*. (Pandora Press; Herald Press, 2000).

**J. Denny Weaver**, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium*, with a foreword by Glen Stassen, C. Henry Smith Series, vol. 2 (Pandora Press; Herald Press, 2000).

**Duane K. Friesen**, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City: An Anabaptist Theology of Culture*. (Herald Press, 2000).

**Karl Koop** and **Mary H. Schertz**, eds. *Without Spot Or Wrinkle: Reflecting Theologically on the Nature of the Church*. (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000).

The first issue of **Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology** has just been released, co-published by Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Man., and Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind. The journal, which will be published two times a year, seeks to encourage theological reflection by church leaders on the identity, mission, and practices of the church from an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective. Issues in 2001 will focus on the Eucharist and transformation.

To subscribe, Canadian readers should contact Gordon Zerbe, CMBC, 500 Shaftesbury Blvd, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3P 2N2; 204 487-3300; [gzerbe@cmu.ca](mailto:gzerbe@cmu.ca). Readers in the U.S. and overseas should contact the Institute of Mennonite Studies, AMBS, 3003 Benham Avenue, Elkhart, Indiana 46517; 219 296-6239; [bngingerich@ambs.edu](mailto:bngingerich@ambs.edu)

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Send curriculum vitae, three references, and letter indicating interest, availability, and ability to meet qualifications to Dr. Loren L. Johns, Academic Dean, AMBS, 3003 Benham Avenue, Elkhart, IN 46517-1999, [ljohns@ambs.edu](mailto:ljohns@ambs.edu)