

# A Report on the Conference, “Ritual in Anabaptist Communities”

June 26-28, 2003 – Hillsdale College, Michigan

Supplement to the Newsletters of the Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholars Network  
and the Anabaptist Sociology and Anthropology Association

Approximately 65 Anabaptist scholars and other interested persons gathered in June at Hillsdale College to consider various issues pertaining to the theme of Anabaptist ritual. Though attendance was lower than the planners had hoped, all of the participants who offered comments to me deemed the conference a successful and very significant event.

The Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholars Network and the Anabaptist Sociology and Anthropology Association cosponsored the event with the Hillsdale College program in Sociology and Social Thought. The planning committee consisted of Jeremy Bergen (University of Toronto), Peter Blum (Hillsdale College), Kerry Strayer (Otterbein College), John Rempel (formerly MCC United Nations Office, now at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary), and Rebecca Slough (AMBS). Approximately 30 presenters brought perspectives from biblical studies, theology, the social sciences, and the literary and performing arts, as well as from pastoral and other forms of church leadership and worship experience.

Following are two reports on the conference, provided by Irma Fast Dueck and Jeremy Bergen. Dueck’s report provides an overall interpretation of the significance of the conference, and Bergen summarizes the stimulating general discussion that occurred in the final session. (Our thanks are due to Marlene Kropf for keeping notes during the latter session.)

The planning committee is currently pursuing possible avenues for publication of some of the papers that were presented at the conference. Materials from the conference will remain accessible via the web for at least the next two to three months:

**<http://www.hillsdale.edu/academics/soc/ritual.htm>**

The steering committees for the AMSN and ASAA are considering further cooperative endeavors, including future joint conferences.

--Peter Blum

## **Reflections on “Rituals in Anabaptist Communities” Conference**

Irma Fast Dueck

(Assistant Professor in Practical Theology and Director of the Institute for Theology and the Church, at Canadian Mennonite University)

In June 2003, a group of Anabaptist scholars gathered together to consider the nature of rituals and their practice in Anabaptist communities. The conference was a new venture both in its engagement with the subject matter of “Rituals and Anabaptism” and in the interdisciplinary way it brought together Anabaptist scholars from a variety of fields including theology, sociology, anthropology and ethno-musicology resulting in a wide range of presentations. This mixed group of Anabaptist scholars was further challenged by the insights of a friendly, camera toting, “outsider,” Ronald Grimes, Professor of Religion and Culture at Wilfred Laurier University. Grimes, who has done significant research in the area of ritual studies, served both as a presenter helping us to understand the nature of rituals (though he was hesitant to offer any clear definition of “ritual”) and, by virtue of his critical distance from Anabaptist communities, also became an acute observer of our gathering as we ourselves became a kind of ritual lab.

While inquiry into rituals is something relatively new for Anabaptist-Mennonites this is not to suggest that participation in rituals is new (as if to say that up till now we have avoided rituals and now we should consider them like any new theological fad or practice). Anabaptists have always engaged in ritualized activities from the most obvious baptism and communion rituals to many less obvious activities. I recall doing my first funeral as a young pastor. Step by step the senior pastor described to me my roles as pastor at a Mennonite funeral. This included meeting the hearse in the parking lot of the church when it arrived and physically walking beside the casket as it was ushered into the church and then remaining with the casket in the foyer of the church until sufficient members of the community had arrived and the body would no longer be left alone in the church.

It was made clear by a number of the presentations in the conference that though Anabaptist Mennonites have always engaged in ritualized activities they have not always understood the meanings of the rituals in which they have participated in (this I suspect was some of the impetus for the conference). While inquiry into Anabaptist-Mennonite ritual practices is not easy since there are so few written texts that govern ritual practices and we are left to ponder mainly the actions of people, inquiry into the ritual practices themselves reveals much about

the theology and faith of the people who engage in them. Here the elusive quality of rituals became very evident. We cannot assume, which is so often done, that the rituals we engage in are simply an application of theology or theory without some consideration of the meanings made by those who participate in the rituals. To do so risks a kind of disembodiment of the ritual where the ritual is viewed primarily as an application of an intellectual ideal.

Though the conference consisted primarily of presentations of academic papers, the significance of the engagement of the body in this process of “meaning making” did not escape me. Central to the understanding of rituals is the assumption that human lives are shaped not primarily by ideas but even more by actions performed with our bodies. To put it simply, actions speak louder than words. Ritual performance has a way of capturing this embodied, material character of human life. The bodily emphasis of ritual performance assumes that meaning is made in the doing and that ritual action is therefore, as Ronald Grimes claims, “thick with sensory meaning.”

While it was helpful for me as a practical theologian studying Mennonite worship to be reminded of the ability of rituals to form and malform Christian communities, the conference raised numerous questions that, for the most part, remained unanswered. What gives rituals their authority in Christian community? What makes for good “ritualizing”? By what criteria do we evaluate and reflect upon the rituals we do participate in? Despite the lingering questions the cross-disciplinary approach to the conference was useful in helping to develop a greater awareness and appreciation of the multi-faceted dimension of rituals and their significance in the life of Anabaptist communities.

### **Ritual in Anabaptist Communities - Further Directions**

Jeremy M. Bergen

(Ph.D. student in theology at Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, and coordinator of the Anabaptist-Mennonite Scholars Network)

The final session of the Ritual Conference addressed issues which emerged in the course of the conference and identified some which ought to receive further attention. The fact that “ritual” was not defined at the opening sessions and remained fuzzy throughout was unsettling for some. Ron Grimes argued that there is value in using the concept without pinning it down. Nevertheless, one textbook definition he provided is: “stylized symbolic behaviour laden with community values.” A better way to talk about it is to say that

“ritual’s first cousin in drama, its second cousin is dance and its grandparent is music.”

One concept which also recurred throughout, “authenticity,” referring to a desirable quality of ritual or perhaps a particular kind of relationship between a participant and the ritual, was identified as needing further clarification. One person noted that the question of how power differences affect ritual was largely unexplored.

Coming to terms with the suspicion of ritual that has characterized Mennonite theology and church practice emerged as an underlying agenda at the conference. We have begun to recognize we are always engaging in ritual. Beyond this, there are good reasons for embracing more ritual, and this is perhaps most obvious regarding worship practices. From where does this impetus for change come? What are the forces embracing or resisting it? Are we adopting alien traditions? When we go about becoming more self-consciously ritualistic, is the exercise one of creating our own rituals or of submitting to participation in a larger symbolic order? Yet, even if these are the options, we may not be in control of the choice. As John Rempel observed, rituals can oppose their own intention and ironically can subvert the human attempt to order the world. They can perpetuate a fiction and/or be agents of unexpected change. The potential of ritual to go against the grain and subvert the dominant order raises new questions for whether Anabaptism itself plays a particular ritual role in relation to other traditions.

Further lingering questions surround what academics ought to do with reflection on ritual in relation to actual congregations. How ought the analysis of the theology implicit in rituals be communicated? For what purposes? Are scholars necessarily the experts? A question was raised about how focusing on ritual in Anabaptist communities may focus attention on the things which define us as distinct and thus perpetuate divisions in Christianity. It could be that a fractured Body enacts incoherent rituals. How would we diagnosis this?

The academic conference is itself a ritual. Rebecca Slough asked the group whether we do this ritual differently than other groups. Have we perhaps uncritically bought into a particular model of what counts as knowledge? What does the fact that we did not build in enough time for discussion and group discernment tell us? Ought the academic paper to be the essential element of scholarly gatherings? In spite of the possible conclusion that this particular ritual may marginalize voices, several participants indicated that a Mennonite academic conference is characterized by openness, community spirit and worship rather than by adversarial confrontation.