BHLA News and Notes
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BHLA NEWS & Notes

The Brethren Historical Library and Archives (BHLA) contains the literary remnants of hundreds of newsletters promoting the numerous ministries of the Church of the Brethren. As someone keenly aware of the cost and often short lives of most such publications, I know such ventures should not be entered into lightly. Nevertheless as with the creators of other newsletters I have come to believe that the unique mission of the BHLA requires direct communication with friends and potential users who may not automatically or even regularly turn to our web page. In effect, the mission of the BHLA warrants both the effort and the expense.

In all honesty the primary goal of BHLA News & Notes is frankly evangelistic. We want to share “the good news” about the many unique riches housed in Elgin and on-line through the recently inaugurated Brethren Digital Library. Secondly we want to promote the study of Brethren history both inside and outside the Church of the Brethren. As a result, each issue will highlight recent additions to our collections. Secondly we will highlight the work of Brethren scholars and others working with broadly defined Brethren themed materials. In a future issue we hope to highlight Steve Longenecker’s Gettysburg Religion.

In this our inaugural issue the lead article is by David A. Hollinger, Preston Hotchkis professor of history at the University of California, Berkley. A La Verne College graduate and son of a Church of the Brethren minister, Hollinger has written widely on modern American intellectual and religious history. This issue includes a review of Hollinger’s widely praised recent book, After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern America.

Kelley Brenneman Named BHLA Intern

Kelley Brenneman is serving this year’s internship in the Brethren Historical Library and Archives (BHLA). Since the fall of 2011, Brenneman has served as a student assistant, most recently archival assistant, in the Funderberg Library at Manchester University in North Manchester, Ind. She also has been a summer student worker at the Funderberg Library in 2012 and 2013. In June she was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from Manchester University where she wrote her senior thesis on Church of the Brethren member, Manchester University professor and United Nations leader Andrew Cordier. Raised in the Church of the Brethren, she is a current member of the Agape Church of the Brethren in Fort Wayne, Ind. She is currently vice president of the Simply Brethren student group at Manchester.
My Brethren Heritage and my Career as a Historian

By David A. Hollinger

Could it possibly be true that “the simple life” so central to the Brethren tradition is the best life and the one most in keeping with God’s will? Doubts about this pressed upon me in my high school years and then as a student at La Verne College. Perhaps complexity was good. Or was at least a reality so prominent in life that one ignored it at one’s peril? Might it be that the opportunities modern societies offered for the expansion of the human spirit were to be engaged rather than avoided? Perhaps the very ideal of the simple life, still enunciated in official Brethren self-presentation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was an anachronism held over from the German Baptist Brethren for whom the ideal had functioned to endow with dignity and worth a rural way of life that they inherited? Perhaps sophistication, rather than simplicity, was a better ideal for the urban, industrial, science-informed life of the 20th century United States? Perhaps even the liberalizers of the Brotherhood’s Elgin leadership during those years were not going far enough?

These youthful uncertainties constitute a vital matrix for the issues I have engaged as a historian for more than forty years. All six of my books can be understood as explorations of the tension between provincialism and cosmopolitanism, a set of terms I embraced in graduate school at Berkeley when I read the works of the great sinologist, Joseph Levenson, but which I easily projected back upon the Brethren and their ambivalent relation to modernity. I have written in (Chapter 8 of my recent book, After Cliven Tongues of Fire, “Church People and Others”) about how my experiences as a history graduate student connected with my Brethren background. Here, in this inaugural issue of the newsletter, I want to elaborate on how my appreciation for and frustrations with the Brethren milieu of my youth affected my life as a historian.

“Let’s Move the Church Forward” was the title (I can still remember this!) of a sermon delivered by M. R. Zigler at La Verne. Zigler exemplified for me the efforts I imperfectly understood of Brethren leadership to engage the modern world through service, first via the legendary Heifer Project (I remember the enthusiasm with which the Fruitland, Idaho, congregation of my early childhood participated in this endeavor) and then through Brethren Service more generally. I read episodically the Gospel Messenger and listened to sermons and other presentations by Loren Bowman, Galen Ogden, Harry K. Zeller, and Andrew Cordier as well as the more “far-out” Bob Zigler, all of whom were greatly admired by my father.

Albert Hollinger, Jr., had been a minister for a while but had decided, when I was ten years old, to switch to house painting to earn a living, a personal decision that had no apparent theological dimension whatsoever. My father was a Bethany graduate (1943), and had absorbed and always retained the progressive attitudes characteristic of the Brethren leadership of that generation. Although my father and I did not talk extensively about church issues, I overheard his conversations with friends and knew where he stood. And now and then I read his copies of Christian Century, of which I believe my father read every issue from his seminary days until his death in 1987. So there was a family context in which I identified strongly with what I took to be the determination of the denomination’s leadership to move the Brotherhood (as we still called it when I finished college in 1963) into the mainstream of ecumenical Protestantism. Yes, those Methodists and Congregationalists were probably on the right track, and we Brethren, with our more sectarian and persistently rural heritage, needed to become more like them even if this entailed less emphasis on the old “simple life” mantra of the Anabaptist and Pietist traditions.

At La Verne I used to argue with religion professor Vernard Eller about exactly this. Eller actually defended sectarianism, and was so devoted to the ideals of Brethren founder Alexander Mack that he named one of his sons after him. Of the authors Eller assigned in our class on “Issues in Christian Thought” I steadfastly defended Walter Rauschenbusch and William Temple, both of whom Eller disliked intensely. Eller found the atmosphere at La Verne anti-intellectual (indeed, our very decent and well-meaning president, Harold Fasnacht, persistently praised La Verne for not pretending to have “the sophistication of an Ivy League college,” a construction that embarrassed me) a view I shared with Eller even though both of us warmly
appreciated the personal qualities of most of the students and faculty. I was one of only a handful of La Verne students ready to engage him on what to make of Bultman and Bonhoeffer and other deep Germans. Eller strongly encouraged me to pursue an academic career, even though he thought of me as hopelessly liberal in my theology.

I gradually dropped theology as a graduate student at Berkeley, but as I proceeded to a career as a secular historian I continued to find the ecumenical Protestant tradition a very valuable part of American life and have written about it respectfully. In later years I came to realize that my friendly arguments with Vernard had been very important to my development because I had found in him an articulate and committed defender of exactly the aspects of the Brethren tradition I found the least defensible. This enabled me to sharpen my appreciation for the liberal, ecumenical outlook of other Brethren—Zigler, and the Elgin leadership that tried unsuccessfully a few years later to bring the Brethren into the Consultation on Church Union— even as I drifted away from that liberal version of the faith. Conversations with Eller gave me a deeper understanding than I had previously possessed of the issues Protestantism confronted in modern America.

Over time, as I absorbed the secular episteme of my academic milieu, I came to a highly instrumental view of churches, holding that the Brethren, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and even the Catholics (yes, really!) could be seen as vehicles for sound values for particular populations and that some folks, like me, would rotate out of these fellowships while others would stay, depending on their life circumstances. I probably would not feel that way had I not seen, in my own upbringing and youth, what a marvelously sustaining community churches can be. Religious affiliations are, like other affiliations, contingent entities, which are created, revised, transformed, diminished, and terminated by shifting historical conditions, sometimes swiftly and at other times over the course of many centuries. When to get out? When to stay and try to change the church so it better meets contemporary challenges? Those are highly individual decisions. My experience growing up in the Church of the Brethren has made me much more respectful than I otherwise might be of how and why individuals make these decisions, even when they decide differently than I have.

Protestant Liberalism: Progressive Creator of Modern America

Presidential addresses given to learned academic bodies are infrequently inspiring and seldom memorable. There have been, of course, rare exceptions such as Carl Becker’s “Everyman His Own Historian” or Harold Bender’s “The Anabaptist Vision.” David Hollinger’s “After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity,” given at the 2011 meeting of the Organization of American Historians is such an exception. It is a revised version of that address that forms the title chapter for Hollinger’s important and widely discussed book, After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern America (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). In a book that has inspired debate among readers of the Christian Century, and New York Times and among thoughtful Evangelical bloggers including historian John Fea, Hollinger argues that Protestant liberals,
including the great Church of the Brethren ecumenical activists of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, “played a greater role in American history than is commonly recognized.”

Although acknowledging that even as the liberals lost control of American Protestantism they accomplish something far more significant by furthering their real goal--a more just North American society. In effect, for the Protestant liberals, or in Hollinger’s term “modernizers,” the nation had replaced the church as the primary point of reference. Speaking autobiographically, Hollinger identifies one of modernizer’s most notable gifts to many Americans: that of providing a half way house to post-Protestant secularism. Like others nurtured in Southern California’s once vibrant Church of the Brethren sub-culture, Hollinger is no longer a confessing Christian. This fact alone adds poignancy to both Hollinger’s interpretation of Protestant liberalism and his personal biography. Readers of this newsletter will want to pay special attention to chapter 8, “Church People and Others.” In it Hollinger reflects on growing up in the Church of the Brethren, his experience at La Verne College and his vocational choice of a career as an historian. A more Church of the Brethren focused version appears as the lead article in our newsletter. There is so much more that warrants comment in a book that includes a rich and subtle interpretation of the numerical decline of the Protestant mainstream and a thought provoking discussion (that parenthetically would have not surprised that old missionary and pacifist William Beahm) of Reinhold Niebuhr’s key role in reducing the place of distinctly Christian ethics in American society.

I was introduced to the work of Hollinger at Notre Dame University by another noted student of American thought, my brilliant and very Catholic doctrinal advisor Philip Gleason. Although seemingly quite different, both share a common commitment to an American cultural unity that transcends ethnic and cultural distinctives. In the inevitable tension between provincialism and cosmopolitanism, an important theme for both, they come down on the cosmopolitan side. As an unrepentant provincial, my perspective is different. For me, and here I side with Hollinger’s old La Verne instructor the late, Vernard Eller, the Brethren cosmopolitans, such as Martin G. Brumbaugh, who had, I would acknowledge, a largely positive impact outside the church, undermine such core Dunker values as nonresistance and humility to the detriment not only of the church but as the church weakened ultimately to American society itself. For me, in a society enriched by cultural diversity, Brethren serve the larger society best not as ecumenical Protestants but as non-resistant Dunkers. This fact was not lost upon M. R. Zigler who worked for Christian unity while promoting the renewal of a very distinctive peace focused Brethren identity.

William Kostlevy, Director BHLA

Mission Statement
The Brethren Historical Library and Archives is the official repository for Church of the Brethren publications and records. Its purpose is to keep alive the Brethren faith heritage, by: collecting and preserving materials relating to the cultural, socio-economic, theological, genealogical, and institutional history of the Brethren; giving historical perspective and understanding to the mission of the church through counsel and publication; providing a centralized Brethren research center; serving as a clearinghouse for information on Brethren historical materials in other repositories.

BHLA Receives Warren F. Groff Papers
A recent significant addition to the BHLA are the papers of Church of the Brethren scholar and educator Warren F. Groff. A high school dropout, Groff is a graduate of Juniata College (1949), Yale Divinity School (BD, 1952), and Yale University (PhD, 1956). This valuable collection documents Groff’s career as a pastor, instructor at Bridgewater College (1954-1958) and at Bethany Theological Seminary (1958-1989) where he served as dean (1962-1975) and president (1975-1989). An active church leader, Groff served as the Annual Conference Moderator in 1979. The collection also documents his work as a theologian and his active role in the ecumenical movement, including records relating to his role as Moderator, and his membership in various Annual Conference Study Committees, and Conferences (including the Puidoux Theological Conferences).
Some Recent Additions to the Brethren Historical Library and Archives
Grand Junction (CO) Church of the Brethren records including board minutes, 1905-1927, 1958-1975
Mount Garfield (CO) Church of the Brethren minutes 1905-1916.
E. Joseph and D. Eugene Wampler, Church of the Brethren China Relief.
Scrapbooks of the Church of the Brethren Women’s Fellowship, Middle Iowa District, 1954-1963.
Church of the Brethren Industrial School Correspondence, Geer, VA 1930-1933 includes correspondence of M. R. Zigler, Henry S. Knight and H. C. Early.
16 Indian Dolls used by Marie Flory for teaching in India in the 1950s
Minutes of the India Mission, Church of the Brethren 1925-1935 (incomplete)
Reports and correspondence from the Church of the Brethren Scandinavia Mission of Niels Esdensen, 1946-1947
Garner Family Correspondence, 1914-1935. Correspondence of Kathy Garner, Brethren Missionary to India and her parents, Mr. and Mrs. H. Barkdoll.
Lucile Long Strayer Brandt Papers, Brethren author including copies of her writings.
Russell Mason diaries, 1918-1959 incomplete documenting his role as an active member of the Belmont Church of the Brethren, Spotsylvania, VA.

The BHLA Needs Your Help
In an effort to reclaim storage space, church leaders often discard documents, not realizing that they tell the story of the work of people of God in communities around the world. If you have items including photos, correspondence, and documents even bulletins from special services relating to the history of your congregation, district or even ministries of the national church, please forward them to the BHLA. Our address is BHLA, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120.
Support the BHLA with Your Financial Gifts
The Brethren Historical Library and Archives is supported through the Core Ministries fund of the Church of the Brethren. Financial gifts to the church are not only welcomed but needed. Please send your checks payable to the Church of the Brethren to BHLA 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120.

A Sauer Bible which is part of the BHLA collection.