

2015

Review of *Together in the Work of the Lord: A History of the Conservative Mennonite Conference*—Nathan Yoder

Marcus Yoder

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/amishstudies>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation

Yoder, Marcus. 2015. "Review of Yoder, Nathan E. 2014. *Together in the Work of the Lord: A History of the Conservative Mennonite Conference*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 3(2):236-38.

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by IdeaExchange@Uakron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@Uakron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

Book Reviews

Review of Yoder, Nathan E. 2014. *Together in the Work of the Lord: A History of the Conservative Mennonite Conference*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press.

By Marcus Yoder, *Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center, Berlin, OH*

Nathan Yoder provides a history of the Conservative Mennonite Conference (CMC) from its inception early in the twentieth century to its present situation. Yoder, professor of church history at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, has his own history in the CMC, and while no longer affiliated with the conference, he is a child of the conference. This is evidenced by the first-hand knowledge in which he describes the origins and life of the Conference, which is both refreshing and revealing of the book's intent. It is refreshing in that it allows an "insider's view" of the workings of the conference, absent in so many histories like this. This gives the book a depth it would not have with someone who was not nurtured and raised in the Conference. On the other hand, it is also revealing of the CMC's Historical Committee's "engaged approach to conserving and passing along the faith that marks the CMC story" (14). This approach may be necessary in this work, yet it does raise the question of objectivity. Any historian must balance intimacy with distance while demonstrating objectivity in the pursuit, processing, and presentation of the archival material at hand. This "familiar objectivity" is evident in much of Yoder's work (the term is of my own choosing and seems conspicuously absent in many histories).

Yoder has organized his work by proposing four major metaphors to understand the shifts, both temporally and ideologically, within the Conference. The first is a garden (chapters one to three), a mold or foundry (chapters four to six), a trademark (chapters seven to nine), and finally reading glasses (chapters ten and eleven). He argues that "each metaphor offers a particular way of understanding and living in relation to it," and that they were generated through a close interaction with the archival sources (35). It is helpful that Yoder makes sure the reader knows when he is shifting metaphors, and that he makes frequent mention of how he is reading the particular metaphor. However, the multiplicity of metaphors is confusing and the reader has to remember the symbol or metaphor that Yoder is using. While this may succeed in layering the work, it can also make it feel cumbersome and can make it appear as though the neat categorizations that the metaphors create are reflective of the life of the Conference. It also begs the question of whether there is one overriding metaphor that Yoder could have chosen to define the life and history of the CMC.

The first half of the book does well at mapping out the tentative beginnings of the Conferences as a "small assembly of Conservative Amish Mennonite ministers" from a variety of geographical regions who first met in 1910 (21). Their first meeting was focused around what Yoder says was the "age-old challenge of balancing the call to particularity and the call to engagement" (45). This is at the heart of the first six chapters of the book, which cover the period from 1910 to 1950. Yoder's chronological approach, sprinkled with narrational accounts, such as

Willard Mayer's Secret Calling, make the first half of the book very readable. It is well researched and follows the transition of the Conference from a small group of "like-minded" ministers and leaders to a five-thousand member organization that was facing cultural changes in the world in which they moved.

The second half of the book is much more focused, as was the Conference, on those cultural changes and the subsequent various programs and missions of the Conference. From the first Winter Bible School in 1952 to a plethora of agencies that developed under the Conference's theater of operation (yet another metaphor to help define the CMC), Yoder explains how that program helped move the group into a viable evangelical Anabaptist group. Yoder's claims that "CMC carries within its theology, tradition, and practices resources for passionate fidelity and committed spontaneity" (419). While this perspective may be true, it does beg the question of how, or whether, the Conference has changed significantly since its early years. When, according to Yoder, the Conference was defined, and defined itself, "through its stances towards related groups" (21). What is not as clearly evident in the reading of the book is whether that stance towards related groups has changed, and if so, when and how. This latter half of the book is enjoyable, but not nearly as clearly focused as the first half of the book. It is in this half of the book that Yoder's positive framing of change-minded leaders and programs become evident. This approach has the potential to not only negate the archival material, but also silence the more conservative "children" that the Conference has spawned (both those who have remained within the CMC and those who have removed themselves).

Yoder often opens a chapter or a section by reflecting about how he will do his work. These are often helpful aids, although at times they can be a bit disruptive and even awkwardly patronizing. These explanatory notes may be necessary aids because of the vast amount of information that Yoder brings to the table, yet they often feel disruptive or like one is being lectured so that one can, or will, understand the information properly. Much of this may have been negated with the inclusion of maps, charts, etc. instead of requiring the reader to track the shifting alliances and community connections

Historians such as Yoder always make choices about what to include in their work. It is fair to ask how Yoder chose what events or archival material to include. It would seem that in the history and development of the Conservative Amish-Mennonite Conference the *Diener Versammlungs* (ministers' gatherings) of the mid- and late nineteenth century so ably described by Paton Yoder in *Traditions and Transitions* warrant some mention. Perhaps space, or scope, dictated the exclusion of any mention of these ministers' meetings; yet, these events helped give some definition and shape to those early years of the Conference. There are numerous occasions where the information would have provided significant depth to Yoder's narrative. This ambiguity is perhaps the largest issue in Yoder's work. His work is meticulously researched, but there are a few occasions where a broader perspective in the research would have helped connect the Conference to the larger world in which it was formed and developed. If, "from its beginning," as Yoder claims, "the Conference defined itself through its stances toward related

groups” (21), then these connections to the larger Anabaptist world—both temporally and ideologically—should be carefully mapped out.

Nevertheless, Yoder's work is and will be an essential part of the understanding the Conservative Mennonite Conference's history and their present world. His access to the sources, his interpretation of those sources, and his narrational form of presenting the sources make this a book of importance to anyone who wants to understand the origins, development, and present life of the Conservative Mennonite Conference.

Review of **Smucker, Janneken. *Amish Quilts: Crafting an American Icon*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.**

By Jana Hawley,¹ *John and Doris Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Arizona*

In this ambitious work, author Janneken Smucker provides a fascinating account of Amish quilts by placing the quilts into the context of history, culture, art, economy, and community. The in-depth book presents more than 100 spectacular color photographs that provide visual context for the well-researched and written text. Smucker is a fifth generation quilter. As a quilter, she understands the meticulous skill and aesthetic nuances needed to produce a magnificent quilt. Her enthusiasm of quilts led her to an assistant curator position at the International Quilt Study Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. As a woman of Mennonite heritage, she inherently better understands the Amish culture than many others who have written about Amish quilts.

Smucker couches the entire work in the context of Amish history and culture. As she points out in the introduction, the purpose of the book is not to discuss what Amish quilts look like or how they are made. Indeed many other authors have already done this (Koolish 1994; Pellman 2002). Instead, Smucker helps the reader understand the generalizations and stereotypes of Amish quilts so that an even deeper understanding of the quilts can unfold. She then accurately describes the transitional phenomenon of when outsiders began to collect Amish quilts as pieces of art, an investment, or a souvenir from a trip through Amish country. When collectors became enamored with Amish quilts, the quilts moved from a cultural tradition to an economically driven artifact that will forever change the purpose and production of Amish quilts.

Throughout the book, Smucker has visually made her point with remarkable photos of Amish quilts. The photos range from vibrant examples of quilts as art to close-up images that point to the detail of Amish quilts. Each photograph draws the reader into the book searching for the narrative that supports the photos.

Smucker reminds the reader throughout the book of the historic and cultural tenets of the