Editorial

Irma Fast Dueck

"Christians aren't born—they're made," my colleague explains to a group of Iranian women, Muslim students in a course on Christianity that I'm teaching. "How does this work?" they wonder. "The church," replies my colleague. The church: that place the New Testament talks about more in metaphors than in doctrinal statements. Mustard seed, branch, harvest, light, salt, bride, family, household, living stones, building, flock. A place where the new creation begins, says the apostle Paul. The place that *is* the body of Christ. Or, as Anglican theologian Rowan Williams says of the New Testament understanding of the church, it is "a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God's sons and daughters)."[1] For most of the history of Christianity it has been impossible to conceive of being Christian apart from participation in the body of Christ, the church.

Yet today many see the church as superfluous to the Christian faith and life. Some have argued that the current crop of baby boomers may be the last generation to accept the church in its present form. Growing numbers of young people find little in the church that speaks to them, and they either leave it or have never connected with it in the first place. Sadly, they are disillusioned not necessarily with the Christian message but rather with the institutional structures in which the message has been embodied.

And it is not just young people. A new category is emerging that might be called "post-Christian" or perhaps "post-church" or even "Christian alumni." These people have grown weary of institutional Christian life, and after contributing much to the church, have ended up leaving it. Writers including Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, and Dorothy Bass have been arguing that our thinking and practices of church need to change, given our current cultural context. Are they right? Must everything change?

Donald Kraybill's classic book, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, described an Anabaptist-Mennonite vision of the church as a countercultural witness to the reign of God. This issue of *Vision* will examine what it means to be an "upside-down church" in our context. Four writers have been asked to reflect on classic Anabaptist ecclesiological themes, turning those themes upside down in light of current realities: Gerald Mast focuses on the relation of salvation and the church, Gerald Gerbrandt revisits the Reformation notion of the priesthood of all believers, Lori Unger writes about the hermeneutical community, and I have written on the relationship of baptism to church membership.

The rest of the essays focus various aspects of church life and practices. David Boshart appeals to contextual theology in order to understand the challenges and opportunities rural congregations face. Isaac Villegas describes what it means to be the church by reflecting on the corporate prayer life of his congregation. The relationship of Anabaptist ecclesiology to leadership and ministry is explored through an ordination sermon preached by Dan Epp-Tiessen and in an essay by Kevin Derksen written as he prepared for his own recent ordination. Joanna Shenk gives a passionate plea for a more inclusive understanding of church that expands beyond the traditional paradigms and models of congregational life practiced by contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonites.

This issue begins and ends with sermons. The opening sermon is written by Stuart Blythe, a Scottish Baptist drawn to Anabaptism because of its commitment to peace, rooted in Christ and the church as the body of Christ. The closing sermon, by Donita Wiebe-Neufeld, is a pastoral reminder of how the ordinary struggles of church life are places of compassion, healing, and hope.

Finally, the issue is seasoned with the prayers and poetry of pastor and theologian Carol Penner, who reminds us that the church is always more than what we see or comprehend. The church is a place occupied by Christ, a landscape that we are invited to enter and inhabit.

About the editor

Irma Fast Dueck is associate professor of practical theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. She worships with the saints at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.