

**Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology**

# Rethinking discipleship

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- 3** Editorial  
*Mary H. Schertz*
- 6** From radical to missional discipleship  
*C. Norman Kraus*
- 15** Crazy. And Christ-like?  
*Rachel Twigg Boyce*
- 20** “For you were aliens”: Discipleship in loving the other  
*Jessica Mast*
- 29** The legacy of Sarah and Abraham: A sermon on Genesis 17 and Romans 4  
*Paul Keim*
- 35** “If these were silent, the stones would shout out”: Truth commissions and Anabaptism in dialogue  
*César Moya*
- 43** Three R’s of our common discipleship: Rejoicing in recent relations between Lutherans and Mennonites  
*Kathryn L. Johnson*
- 49** Becoming unbound  
*André Gingerich Stoner*

- 55 Learning from Luther on Christian discipleship  
*Allan Rudy-Froese*
- 64 Holy experiments in forming disciples: Area church and congregational stories  
*Ruth Boehm*
- 73 Talking from the heart, seeing from the heart: Lessons from the Sermon on the Mount—and my dog  
*Will Streeter*
- 78 The authority of discipleship: An approach to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount  
*Katja Neumann*
- 87 A Mennonite view of grace  
*Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld*

# Editorial

Mary H. Schertz

**P**eople formed in the Anabaptist traditions tend to take discipleship for granted. We have heard the word as long as we can remember. It was part of our catechism or baptism classes, where we learned about the sixteenth-century martyrs, teased out the phrase *radical discipleship*, and thought about our commitment to be followers of Jesus. Pressed to articulate a faith statement, whether before baptism, as part of a small group exercise, upon coming to seminary, or just because someone asks, most of us include something about discipleship.

Precisely because discipleship is a commonplace among us, it is time to look again at this notion. Does it still inspire us? Does it demand anything more of us? Does it still serve? Has it become, in

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our rhetoric or in our practice, something twisted and less than full-orbed? Have we shaped the concept of discipleship rather than letting it shape us? Does the way we think about discipleship relate to Jesus and his disciples? Is there something about our context—with its wealth, privileges, and opportunities—that calls us to reevaluate our discipleship? Is there something about living in twenty-first North America that calls us to rethink discipleship *and* to ask for help in

doing so from people who are not so wealthy, privileged, or flush with opportunity?

The mission of this issue of *Vision* is not to answer these questions! They are important questions that call for many more voices to join the conversation. We need to hear from Anabaptists in all parts of the world and from many different strands of the tradition. There are many ways to be Anabaptist, many ways to understand this tradition, many ways to live out of and into

these commitments. But the writers in this issue are making a start toward those answers. Although no issue of *Vision*, no matter what the topic, claims to be the last word, we do want to contribute to the dialogue about what matters among thoughtful church leaders and other believers. This issue on rethinking discipleship does that.

We begin with two articles that help us look at where we have been and where we might be going. Norman Kraus has been thinking about discipleship since the 1960s when he was guiding college students to reflect theologically and ecclesiastically, and then through years of evangelizing in Japan that called him to rethink salvation and the atonement, and now into his productive retirement. Here he gives his take on our collective move from the notion of radical discipleship to missional discipleship. Rachel Twigg Boyce picks up where Norman leaves off. She is one of our newer voices, the pastor of an intentional community in Winnipeg. Their articles converge on the issue of economics, which both authors see as a significant challenge to discipleship. Kraus notes that the institutional church, including North American Mennonite congregations, has chosen “accommodation to the economic disparity in society as it organizes its life and ministry.” Such accommodation makes it difficult to keep relations between established Mennonite churches and the movement Boyce represents strong and healthy.

Along with economics and economic disparity, the concerns of our contemporary context provide other lively testing grounds for following Jesus. The next three articles are quite different, but all help us think through our responses to some of those challenges as ways of living out our commitment. In my mind, these pieces cluster around hospitality. Jessica Mast engages biblical themes, principles, and stories to address immigration matters, and she formulates a stance on discipleship as hospitality. Paul Keim’s sermon helps us break through the patina of earnestness and self-righteousness that tempts disciples, to move into a hospitality of the mind and heart where we can truly practice faith. César Moya, in his work with Latin American truth commissions and Anabaptist theology, challenges us to see hospitality to truth and justice as part of living out our commission as disciples.

In assembling this issue, I have learned how important ecumenism has been for our ongoing conversation and practice of dis-

cipleship. Part of that importance is the simple reality that we as Anabaptists have no corner on discipleship, as Allan Rudy-Froese suggests with an engaging turn on the parable of the good Samaritan. We may take discipleship for granted, but we by no means own it. We have much to gain from conversations with those of other traditions. The Lutherans have been particularly influential in our thinking. Kathryn Johnson (Lutheran) and André Gingerich Stoner (Mennonite) have worked together in their respective denominational roles. Here they offer companion pieces about what we have learned from each other about discipleship. Johnson makes a poignant comment about Menno Simon's definition of true evangelical faith, and Stoner asks an equally poignant question about whether an Anabaptist martyr mentality really serves our efforts to follow Jesus at this time.

Ruth Boehm, from her perspective as an experienced pastor, reflects with clarity and gentle wisdom on discipleship as it takes shape in church life. Ultimately, real congregational life in the context of real interaction with the real world that God loves is the concrete arena for following Jesus. In many ways, challenges raised earlier in the issue—economics, hospitality, and ecumenism, among others—resonate practically with what Boehm is doing in and with the congregations of her region.

Toward the end of the issue, we return to the Bible. The Sermon on the Mount has been an important text—maybe *the* text—for Anabaptist understandings of discipleship. Will Streeter and Katja Neumann provide two different and important perspectives on the sermon. Streeter insists that in the first place faithful discipleship is a matter not so much of doing but of seeing from the heart. Neumann's carefully reasoned thesis argues that intellectual work is also discipleship—and also requires heart. Using Bonhoeffer's work on the Sermon on the Mount (*The Cost of Discipleship*), she argues that discipleship needs not only revelation but also reflection on the recognition of revelation.

Thomas Yoder Neufeld concludes the issue with his article on a Mennonite view of grace. Our need for a sense of grace in serving our commission as Jesus' disciples has wound its way through many of the preceding offerings. Yoder Neufeld pulls these together in a way that is both chastened and much more useful. Thanks be to God.