

## Social Networking...

from page 4

back fence where news and greetings and personal stories could be shared—this time across oceans and deserts, national borders and natural barriers.

*Zionsbote* was established around 1884, only three years after the largest contingent of Mennonite Brethren arrived in America. The periodical began in Elkhart, Indiana, but tended to migrate wherever its first editor, John F. Harms, decided to live. It provided the vehicle for the spreading of village and community news. Births, marriages, and deaths were announced in its pages. The “Todesanzeigen”—or obituaries—were long and detailed, and told the life story of each newly-deceased person, a feature sadly missing in our current, less personal church periodicals. In addition, many individuals sent in their own correspondence, describing their own conversion experiences, their own understanding of scripture, and their personal comments about current events—whether political, personal, or church-related. Many communities had a designated correspondent, who faithfully submitted reports about church and community, keeping old friends in touch over vast distances from North America to South Russia to Siberia. Frequently, a searching writer would ask if anyone knew where an old friend now lived, hoping to rekindle a valued friendship.

The passing of time caused this very personal nature of *Zionsbote* to be forgotten. Later assessments of the periodical gave it a much more “politically correct” purpose. For example, the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* declared that the purpose of *Zionsbote* was “to acquaint the churches with the work in the field of evangelism and church polity in order to stimulate church life.”<sup>1</sup> This subsequent description seems to have provided a new and per-

haps unintended formality and global purpose to the periodical that overlooked or ignored the original intent: to keep in touch with old friends and neighbors, and to provide a new means of social networking.

Dora Dueck wrote her M. A. thesis on the impact of the *Zionsbote*, and her analysis gives a dramatically different picture from the formal description in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*. Her study showed that

“In *Zionsbote* communication, print often seemed in the thrall of oral experience. Contributors wrote as if they were speaking. The newspaper exhibited a carelessness to the visual aspects of print communication, a reliance on earlier social assumptions, a close connection with the Church’s itinerant activity, and frequent recourse to biblical text in the expectation that readers could move from reading to listening via these references.”<sup>2</sup>

The contributors were speaking to each other, just as they once had spoken across the fence or at the dinner table. They wanted to maintain the familiarity of the old village despite the distances that now separated them. I suspect that they might nod with a certain sense of understanding to the much more modern types of social networking now in vogue. Maybe we’re seeing a return of the village after all!

## ENDNOTES

1 *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, “*Zionsbote* (periodical),” by P.H. Berg, accessed August 4, 2013, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/Z590.html>.

2 Dora Dueck, *Print, Text, Community: A Study of Communication in the Zionsbote, a Mennonite Weekly, Between 1884 and 1906* (M.A. Thesis, Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, 2001). An abstract of her thesis is located at <http://grad.usask.ca/gateway/>

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