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Holding to the Center:

The Life of John E. Toews

Valerie G. Rempel

GROWING UP IN THE CENTER

John E. Toews was born July 20, 1937 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He was the first of three sons born to J.B. and Nettie Unruh Toews, “a very sweet healthy baby,” who, according to his mother, “attracted the attention of everyone.”¹

He was a child born into a family of achievers. His father, “JB,” was a young Russian Mennonite emigrant to Canada who had studied at the University of the Ukraine and the University of Amsterdam before making his way to the Canadian prairies.² JB had hoped to study medicine but found himself drawn into church leadership and ministry. He became one of the most influential men in the North American Mennonite Brethren community, serving as pastor to key congregations and occupying nearly every seat of power in the denomination. His ambition and strong will were moderated by a deep piety, but inevitably the call of the church took center stage in his life.

In choosing Fresno over Princeton or Wheaton ... John made a conscious decision to again align himself with the Mennonite Brethren. He was strongly influenced in this by his father

John’s mother, Nettie, was the American girl his father wooed and won while studying at Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas. Nettie was born into a relatively wealthy Mennonite Brethren family settled in Marion, South Dakota. She left home to pursue an education and met JB while studying at Tabor Academy after she had finished her nursing program. Frequently

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left alone to manage their household and raise their sons, Nettie learned to tackle house remodeling and make significant financial decisions for the family on her own.³ At her funeral, her sons described her as “the center ...the nurturing, the loving, the caring, the gentle, the constant presence” who, as a nurse, “fretted endlessly over the health of her family.”⁴

At the time of her marriage Nettie’s father had warned her that “the kind you are marrying move around a lot.”⁵ He was right. Hepburn, Saskatchewan was followed by Portland, Oregon; Freeman, South Dakota; and then Buhler, Kansas where JB became pastor of the Buhler Mennonite Brethren Church.⁶ Two events from this period are worth noting. According to his father John was “very curious as a child.”⁷ During a trip to an uncle’s farm John repeatedly climbed onto the tractor to play. On one occasion he was able to successfully start the tractor and began to drive off. His terrified uncle came running and was able to jump up from behind the tractor and from there shut off the engine.⁸ It is tempting to see this as early evidence of a determined nature, a keen ability to solve tough problems (how does one start a tractor when one is four years old?), and a strong desire to sit in the driver’s seat.

The second notable event reflects a growing sense of identity that would, in turn, shape his vocational choices throughout his life. John’s given name at birth was Eldon. As a schoolboy in Buhler he began to realize that firstborn sons in the Toews family were usually given their father’s name. Determined to be known as a “true Toews,”⁹ he decided to change his name. When the family moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba in the summer of 1945, nine-year-old Eldon became John Eldon Toews.

The move to Winnipeg was prompted by JB’s appointment as president of Mennonite Brethren Bible College. It was not an easy transition. The Buhler years had been, as Nettie Toews described them, some of the family’s “most pleasant years,”¹⁰ and John has characterized them as a significant time of personal and spiritual formation.¹¹ Winnipeg was larger and the community much more diverse. Many Canadian MBs were still fighting the inevitable language transition from German to English, a transition that, if badly managed, could mean the “ruin of all that is good,” as one church leader fretted.¹² At the same time, in the aftermath of World War II, Mennonites were keenly aware of the difficulty inherent in any kind of German identity. Many strove to identify themselves as Dutch, instead. It was, as Abraham Friesen has argued, a well-practiced nuancing of ethnic identity.¹³ A young John Eldon, observing his elders, began to question the integrity of Mennonite Brethren speech and action, and the linkage of a particular culture with Christian faith.

In 1948 the family moved again; this time to Reedley, California where JB became pastor of the Reedley MB Church.¹⁴ While JB and Nettie nego-

tiated the transition into a challenging pastoral assignment,¹⁵ John, by his own admission, practiced being a disruptive influence in Sunday school and Wednesday night Bible class; actions rooted, as he has recalled, in the sense of privilege that accompanied his role as the preacher's son. John frequently traveled with his father and was able to observe firsthand JB's own skill at managing people and events. He was, perhaps, testing his own abilities in this arena.¹⁶ John had, after all, determined to be a "true Toews."

John's administrative bent and competitive nature showed up early. Immanuel Academy's 1953 school yearbook records a grinning John E. in the photograph of sophomore class officers (he was vice-president) and a suitably sober basketball player lined up for the "B" team photograph (he earned his sweater letter). One additional photograph shows the team in action; an unnamed player that appears to be John is charging the basket and the photographer has caught the moment when the intensity of the player has launched him into the air in preparation for a shot at the goal.¹⁷ If the player isn't John E., he should be.

As noted earlier, John looks back to his years in Buhler as the beginning of his spiritual formation. This was nurtured by a childhood confession of faith while in Winnipeg and made public by his baptism into membership of the Reedley MB church in 1951. John has since recalled these events with the critical eye of a scholar, noting their importance to the larger community as a religious ritual based as much on right words and actions as on the spiritual needs of the young person. The way in which these rites of passage were managed in Mennonite Brethren circles would end up further shaping his concerns about outward forms of piety and the ritualization of church practices.

Once again the family would be uprooted when JB was persuaded to become "promotion secretary" for the Mennonite Brethren missions program, a position that necessitated a move to Hillsboro, Kansas. John moved from the center of an active social and academic life to the margins of Hillsboro High School and, because of his advanced standing, chose to enter Tabor College a year early.

As a college student John continued to be very involved in the life of his family, assisting Nettie when JB was absent,¹⁸ and providing taxi service for the flow of missionaries and staff moving through the mission office in Hillsboro. He had developed a love of reading as a student in Winnipeg and now began to practice what would become a lifelong habit; John never goes anywhere without something to read. He discovered *Christianity Today*, the periodical founded in 1956 by an emerging generation of evangelical leaders as an alternative to the more liberal *Christian Century*, and was particularly engaged by authors such as Carl F. H. Henry and Edward Carnell.¹⁹ Through his studies at Tabor he developed a fascination

for history, so much so that he became a history major, completing his bachelor's degree at Tabor and later his master's degree at Wichita State University (WSU).

At Tabor, John also met Arlene Classen, a young woman from Meade, Kansas who was a transfer student from Grace Bible Institute. John and Arlene conveniently found themselves working together, and courting, in a campus organization known as the Christian Fellowship Association.²⁰ They were married August 8, 1958. That fall, Arlene began teaching in an elementary school classroom and John began work on his master's degree at WSU.

In a sermon written many years later John reflected on the world he grew up in. It was, he said, "a centripetal world, a world that was deeply centered."²¹ The church was confident in its place, secure in the belief that "the gospel would triumph throughout the world," so secure, in fact, that primary attention was directed toward boundary maintenance, or, as John put it, "with clearly defining and reinforcing the circumference of the church to make sure the faithful knew and respected the boundaries."²² When faced with the threat of an encroaching culture, Canadian MBs sought to reinforce the protective fence of the German language; in the U.S., MBs tended to seek refuge in the subculture of evangelical fundamentalism. The rhythms of the church year, its festivals, Bible conferences and revivals continued to regulate its practices and reflect its core beliefs.²³ Only the astute questioned the effectiveness of these practices or recognized that the religious and cultural landscape was changing.²⁴

John grew up in a centered world but he also grew up in the center. As the son of an influential church leader, John had a front row seat to the practices of the church and the conversations of those who sought to organize them. He saw that Conference decisions could be orchestrated from behind the scenes, that there was very little tolerance for theological diversity, that rhetoric and practice did not always match. He listened, he watched, and he began to question. In reflecting on that world, John would quote the poet, William Butler Yeats, who said at the end of World War I: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold."²⁵

REVISING THE CENTER

By the time he began his master's program John had already decided to prepare for church ministry. His choice to pursue a degree in history was something in the nature of a back-up plan. A teaching certificate would give him a way out of the church if he needed it. Suspicious of the quality of a Tabor education, he also wanted to test himself intellectually.²⁶

John quickly moved to the forefront of his class. He embarked on a thesis exploring the Russian intellectual, Peter Kropotkin, and was award-

ed the departmental teaching assistantship for 1958–1959, a position that gave him regular access to faculty conversations and another inside view of institutional politics. It also placed him in the midst of an expansive intellectual community that challenged the worldview of his ethnic Mennonite upbringing and John began to question its usefulness in constructing a Christian identity that served in the modern world.²⁷ Many of his intellectual endeavors over the course of the next decade would aid the construction of a new center for faith and life.

Although faculty at WSU encouraged him to pursue doctoral studies, John was committed to serving the church. After completing his M.A., John and Arlene relocated to Winnipeg so that John could study theology at Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC). It was a decision he has long regretted.²⁸ John left WSU confident in his abilities as a scholar, committed to intellectual integrity, impatient with mediocrity, and disinclined to accept without question the boundaries of the church. MBBC in the early 1960s, still laboring under the burden of fundamentalism, was not the place to nurture such a student.

A frustrating year in Winnipeg was followed by a move to Fresno, California, and enrollment at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS). In choosing Fresno over Princeton or Wheaton (John's other possible choices), John made a conscious decision to again align himself with the Mennonite Brethren. He was strongly influenced in this by his father who expressed concern that John would never be fully accepted in MB circles if his theological views were formed elsewhere.²⁹ The irony, of course, is that in pressuring John to limit his exposure to outside influences, JB repeated what had earlier been done to him. During his own doctoral studies JB had been visited by his uncle, B.B. Janz, an influential voice in MB church life. Janz had warned JB that "he was going too far" and that it was time to quit school as he risked both his "simple faith" and his standing in the brotherhood.³⁰ JB reluctantly acquiesced. John E. did, as well.

As the similarity in acronyms might suggest, John's experience at MBBS was not very different from that of MBBC. The faculty in Fresno was still strongly dispensationalist in its theology. It was a narrow, restrictive environment and John chafed under a program that appeared to be modeled after Dallas Theological Seminary. It was a period in which the books produced by leading theological voices of the century, Barth, Bruner, and Bultman, were included in the library collection but had "read with discernment" scrawled across their flyleaves.³¹ Frustrated with an attitude that discouraged honest questions, John completed the course work for a Bachelor's of Divinity but refused to write his thesis.³² Still, there was a growing love of language study as faculty at the College and the Seminary introduced him to the Greek and Hebrew languages, and satisfaction in his

own exploration of the New Testament. As John has often said to students, his own spiritual life is fed through his intellectual inquiries. For John, it has always involved the union of his head with his heart.

One of the things that had made MBBS attractive was the opportunity to begin teaching at Pacific College.³³ The college had been founded as Pacific Bible Institute by West Coast MBs in 1944, partly in reaction to the perceived liberalism of Tabor College. By the late 1950s the preference for vocational training over Bible school threatened the existence of PBI and led to the creation of a two-year junior college program. Arthur Wiebe, the new president, offered John a part-time teaching position in American History and an appointment as Director of the Christian Service Program. In 1963, he became a full member of the faculty and then head of the Bible Department.

At Pacific, John found himself at the center of a group of young MB scholars determined to chart a new vision for Mennonite Brethren education. Delbert Wiens has described them as “a group of brash young teachers bright enough to have succeeded at some of America’s best universities and sophisticated enough to question many assumptions of abstractive modernity.”³⁴ They were idealists who put together the foundation of what has come to be known as the Fresno Pacific Idea and their enthusiasm was contagious. Speaking at a faculty event in 1993, Luetta Reimer recalled how John was instrumental in her own decision to stay at Pacific when tempted by teaching opportunities at larger schools. “He had been my Bible teacher,” she said, “and he was a powerful influence on how I think about a whole series of issues. . . . he was brilliant, motivated, hard working.” At a faculty gathering at President Wiebe’s home, John’s relaxed attitude convinced her that Pacific was worth her investment. “I saw that he had holes in the bottom of his black dress shoes,” she recalled. “I remember fixating on those holes and thinking, ‘I want to teach here too. I want to spend my life at a place where people are so committed to what they’re doing together that it’s okay to have holes in the bottom of your shoes.’”³⁵

In forming the center of a new program of higher education John and his colleagues deliberately drew on conversations in the wider Mennonite scholarly world, especially those around the recovery of an Anabaptist vision. As Paul Toews has pointed out, their work was indicative of a desire to “understand their own theological and historical inheritance.”³⁶ They were a generation of scholars who chose to stay among the Mennonite Brethren, attempting to find within its own theological history and identity a useable past that made sense in forming a contemporary Christian identity. It was an ambitious agenda for an institution with Bible institute DNA.

As a young professor, John sought to be the kind of teacher he most ap-

preciated: one who encouraged critical thinking and a genuine examination of inherited assumptions about the world. He was increasingly calling for a radical faith that took seriously the questions of a world caught up in the cultural upheavals of the 1960s.³⁷ It was an understanding formed by his own study of the Bible and shaped by a growing Anabaptist identity. It was a perspective that increasingly challenged the conservative theology and political views of many MBs.

John's attraction to Anabaptist history and theology was first nurtured in a history course taught by F. C. Peters at Tabor College, furthered by his Russian studies during his program at WSU,³⁸ and then by his time at MBBS. During the 1960s, those interests were especially nurtured through his participation in the Mennonite Graduate Student Seminar.

The graduate seminar was jointly sponsored by the youth committees of the General Conference Mennonites, the Mennonite Brethren, and the Mennonite Church. During the mid-1960s they brought together Mennonite graduate students who had not studied at Mennonite colleges with an aim "to keep them in the church."³⁹ It was a heady group of scholars who met each summer to present papers and debate. John was a regular participant and has described these events as "intellectually formative."⁴⁰ Through the seminar he learned to know John Howard Yoder, Al Meyer, Walter Klaassen, Bill Klassen, and Millard Lind—critical thinkers who were shaping theological agendas in their own institutional contexts. John immersed himself in the lively debates around the recovery of an Anabaptist vision and its implication for the contemporary church. The personal contact of the seminar reinforced his own understanding of himself as an Anabaptist and gave him conversation partners with which to explore what that might mean.

His work at the seminar was fed into the conversation at Pacific College and helped form some of the ideas about church that would take root at the newly established College Community Church in Clovis, California. This congregation had formed in 1962 and many of its initial members had ties to either Pacific College or Fresno State University.⁴¹ Frustrated by their experiences in local MB churches, they gathered to form an alternative expression of the church that would meet their needs as educated, urbanized Mennonite Brethren. Peter Klassen has noted that from the beginning the group was willing to be unconventional, expressing the conviction that they "must dare to be boldly innovative if the church was to 'be the church.'"⁴² Here, too, was an idealism and willingness to experiment that attracted John. He and Arlene became charter members and in 1963 John became moderator of the young congregation.

As moderator, John encouraged the congregation to act on their faith and convictions, assuring them that this would "lead the church into a

deeper and more satisfying understanding of what it means to be a Christian brother, to worship God, and to be a missionary in the world.” “The church,” he wrote in a report of the Church Council, “gains its life by losing it; it grows as it dies and as it is resurrected by God in new and significant forms of life and mission.”⁴³ Under John’s leadership the Council worked to “crystallize” the congregation’s purpose, to organize their structures, and to establish a permanent meeting place.⁴⁴ He worried, though, that the congregation might quickly become too established. “How can we avoid the establishment of irrevocable precedent?” he asked in his first agenda as moderator; “what must be done to keep the group receptive to new ideas, methods, and structural patterns?” “Can we remain an organism and also become an organization?”⁴⁵

These questions about institutional life and identity would be carried forward throughout his career as a professor and administrator. But the center had been reconfigured. It was anchored in the Jesus of the New Testament, the one that had called forth the “radical faith and church” of the earliest Christians, and that had given birth to the “radical Christian commitment” of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement.⁴⁶ In what had become a centrifugal world, John would proclaim that “Jesus holds all things together. Jesus is Lord,” he said, “and the Church is Center.”⁴⁷

WORKING AT THE CENTER

In 1968 John and Arlene moved to Chicago where John began a doctoral program in New Testament Studies at Northwestern University-Garrett Theological Seminary. Their family had grown considerably. Three children, Delora, Dawn, and Mark, had been born in Fresno. They found Chicago unwelcoming, still reeling in the aftermath of the 1968 Democratic convention and showing the after effects of the violence that had broken out during the heated exchanges between police and anti-war protesters.⁴⁸

John, of course, thrived in the academic environment of the University and in his ongoing work with the Student Graduate Seminar where the conversations increasingly focused on the cultural issues of the day—poverty, racism, the Viet Nam war and the draft, student unrest, religious movements and the church.⁴⁹ As a family, they made connections at Reba Place Fellowship, the communal church fellowship founded in 1957 as a way to practice the radical discipleship and common life of the New Testament church.⁵⁰ They gradually learned to love the city and it became a rich time in the life of their family.

Following his course work John accepted a teaching appointment at Conrad Grebel College, part of the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario. At Grebel, John was able to have a foot in two worlds, the intimate setting of a small Mennonite college and the expansive environment of a

major university. But when the opportunity arose to take a teaching position at Tabor College, John and Arlene returned to the States and to active involvement in Mennonite Brethren higher education.

There was considerable culture shock. Hillsboro was small and the College was in the midst of transition. As Wes Prieb has described that period, in response to a trend toward "'student-centered learning,' and 'whole person' education, Tabor revamped its general education program to allow for more liberalization, individualization, flexibility, selectivity and integration."⁵¹ As had happened at Pacific and again at Grebel, John was quickly given administrative responsibilities, balancing those duties with his teaching, the needs of a young family, the completion of a dissertation, and the building of a house. He found satisfaction in shaping a new generation of Mennonite Brethren scholars, but there was exhaustion, as well.

Then, in 1976, John was invited to join the faculty of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. In the years since his time as a student the faculty and program had been entirely refashioned.⁵² Now, like a baseball player being called up to the majors, John was ready to test himself in a wider conference arena and to participate more directly in the formation of church leaders. He joined the faculty as Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation in the summer of 1977 having just completed his dissertation on "The Law in Paul's Letter to the Romans." Three years later he became Academic Dean.

In 1975 negotiations with the Canadian Conference had resulted in a shift of the Seminary program from the U.S. Conference to General Conference ownership and management.⁵³ Student enrollment was high and the shift in ownership promised a more secure financial future. It was, however, a fragile stability. There was growing theological diversity throughout the Conference, increased localism, more and more accommodation to North American life and values. On both sides of the border denominational leaders struggled to hold to a confessional center and to articulate a vision that would unify the denomination. John quickly moved to the center of these conversations.

Beginning in 1980, John would spend the next fifteen years on various task forces and boards working on peace education, strategic planning, the orientation of new pastors, the debate over women in ministry, and the revision of the Confession of Faith. He would serve for nine years on the General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel (later the Board of Faith and Life) and serve a term as secretary of the bi-national General Conference.

As a professor and as a denominational leader, John sought to shape a vision that reflected his understanding of the church as a covenanting community called to live in counter-cultural ways.⁵⁴ As always, he called

for an identity that was separate from the traditions that so often defined MB church life and theology; a peoplehood defined by identity in Christ rather than Mennonite folkways. John is a strategic thinker and he was often the one who laid out issues and proposed solutions. His childhood, spent observing the workings of church and conference life on both sides of the border, gave him an instinctive understanding of MB culture, politics and personalities, and he was able to effectively use that knowledge as he worked to hold together an increasingly fragmented church.

In his writing and lectures John worked to revitalize the church's commitment to peace-making.⁵⁵ He co-edited *The Power of the Lamb* to serve as a congregational resource and was a key member of the task force charged with revising the Confession of Faith. John also spoke to the increasing centralization of power in the role of the pastor and sought to articulate an understanding of leadership that was rooted in the corporate call of the church. At a study conference in 1980, John reminded participants that "the test of genuine authority to lead in the church is service to others," and that "the style of authoritative leadership is mutual subordination."⁵⁶ Of course, not everyone understood how that would work. The respondent to John's paper noted that these were helpful guidelines but that it still did not "resolve the question of 'who is in charge?'"⁵⁷

Faculty and staff at MBBS and in his later appointment as President of Conrad Grebel University College, seldom had to ask that question. John was always in charge. As an Academic Dean, John guided the Seminary through two accreditation processes and a major revision of the curriculum while anchoring critical courses that continue to shape church leaders around the world.⁵⁸

Whether articulating a denominational vision or an institutional vision, John was motivated by his reading of the biblical text. It was a reading that pushed him to tackle critical questions of the day, but it was, at times, a reading that put him at odds with fellow church leaders. For example, at a church growth consultation designed as an opportunity to examine the emerging Church Growth Movement, John tried to affirm the evangelistic mission of the church but, as the *MB Herald* reported, "aggressively took to task many of the tenets of the CGM," and participants were reportedly "unnerved by the lively interaction," that followed.⁵⁹ Though peace was restored, at least outwardly, the conversation unfortunately heightened the perception of a gulf between "theorists" and "practitioners," the academy and the church.⁶⁰

His role in the contentious debates regarding the leadership of women in the church and his commitment to the full inclusion of women in church ministry also grew out of John's reading of the Bible and was rooted in conclusions drawn during his doctoral studies. "Doctoral programs in

biblical studies for those of us from conservative backgrounds are always about reading the texts," he has said. "Problem texts are case studies for hermeneutics," they "grab people's attention."⁶¹ Yes, indeed.

As a writer, and lead editor for *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*, John argued that an accurate reading of the New Testament text allowed for an inclusive view of leadership in the church. Not everyone agreed. In a 1994 analysis written for the Board of Faith and Life, John pointed out that the Board had consistently tried to do two contradictory things: "to affirm women for ministry in the church; [and] to restrict the ministry of women in church."⁶² The *MB Herald* described the situation as follows: "Take an emotion-laden doctrinal debate. Mix it with a long-standing concern for biblical faithfulness. Now add to that a heavy emphasis on the importance of covenant community and theological integrity. Stir for several years and pour it into the mold of a compromise. What do you get? A recipe for disaster."⁶³ John was deeply disappointed when delegates to the General Conference convention in 1993 failed to affirm women for pastoral ministry and unsurprised when the number of women enrolling at MBBS began to decline. Still, he continued to be a strong advocate for women, encouraging their academic endeavors, and helping to steer them into conference, church, and institutional leadership wherever he could.

After eighteen years at the Seminary, including twelve years as Dean and several stints as Acting President, John made one additional career move when he accepted the presidency of Conrad Grebel University College. Though it appeared for a time as if John and Arlene would be unable to make the move after Arlene suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, her remarkable recovery permitted John to accept the position.

This next set of Grebel years, 1996-2002, was particularly satisfying. Since his childhood years in Winnipeg John has retained a keen sense of Canadian identity. Grebel had been his first appointment after doctoral studies and he enjoyed being back in the expansive environment of a wider Mennonite community and its university context. At Grebel, John was especially effective in tackling organizational and financial needs, so effective as a fund-raiser that the recent addition of a four-story glass atrium linking residence and academic buildings was named in his honor.⁶⁴ And, though his service at Grebel serves as the capstone of his career, the significant role he played at MBBS has not been forgotten. In 2007 he was named Dean and Professor Emeritus at MBBS.

John and Arlene have retired in Fresno and their church membership is again at College Community Church. His long-awaited commentary on Romans for the Believers Church series has recently been published to much acclaim and he has turned his attention to other writing projects. John serves as adjunct faculty and he is active in the local Senior Professionals

group.

A biographical sketch can only skim the surface of a life. This one fails to mention the impact of important friendships or the role John's brothers, Paul and James, play in his life. It also neglects the central position his children, and now grandchildren, occupy. Its focus is on the public over the private, a decision in keeping with John's own manner. The intent has been to provide a sense of the person and his passions, for though John lives his life at full speed (much like he drives!) he is also able to enjoy it. He has a keen sense of humor and a great bark of a laugh. He relishes a good joke, a good story, a good sermon.

During his years as Academic Dean at MBBS, John routinely closed admission letters to students with verses from 2 Corinthians 1. The Apostle Paul wrote:

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, . . . was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (vv. 19–22, NIV).

John has indeed spoken the "Amen" to the glory of God.

NOTES

1. Nettie Toews, "My Life's Story" (Autobiographies of JB and Nettie Toews 1968–1994. J.B. Toews Papers, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA). Paul Toews was born in Freeman, South Dakota; James Toews in Reedley, California.
2. See J.B. Toews, *JB: A Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim* (Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), for a detailed account of his life.
3. "Eulogy," Family Papers: Death and Funeral of Nettie Toews, 1986; J.B. Toews Papers, CMBS, Fresno.
4. Ibid. See also "Nettie's Life" (Family Papers: Death and Funeral of Nettie Toews, 1986. J.B. Toews Papers, CMBS, Fresno, CA). Not incidentally, Nettie kept her nursing licence until nearly the end of her life.
5. "Eulogy" (Family Papers: Death and Funeral of Nettie Toews, 1986. J.B. Toews Papers, CMBS, Fresno, CA).
6. See Herbert Kroeker, *The Ebenezer Story: 1879–1979* (Buhler, KS:

- Centennial Committee, 1979), for a study of the congregation. The Buhler congregation was one of the first Mennonite Brethren congregations formed in the United States. See also *JB: A Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim*, 118–21.
7. “Nettie’s Life” (Family Papers: Death and Funeral of Nettie Toews, 1986. J.B. Toews Papers, CMBS, Fresno, CA).
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. Personal conversation with John E. Toews, March 17, 2008.
 10. “My Life’s Story,” 5.
 11. Conversation with John E. Toews, March 17, 2008.
 12. B.B. Janz, quoted in Gerald C. Ediger, “Canadian Mennonite Brethren and Language Transition,” in *Bridging Troubled Waters: The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century*, ed. Paul Toews (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 1995), 247.
 13. See Abraham Friesen. *In Defense of Privilege*. Series: Perspectives on Mennonite Life and Thought (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2006).
 14. With membership well above one thousand, the Reedley church was one of the largest in the denomination. During JB’s tenure as pastor, a new sanctuary was built with a seating capacity of 2000. For an account of the congregation and the J.B. Toews years, see Esther Jost, *The Church Alive in its 75th Year: 1905–1980* (Reedley, CA: The Anniversary Committee, 1980); and Vernon Janzen, et al., *Honoring God’s Faithfulness: 1905–2005* (Reedley, CA: The Centennial Anniversary Committee, 2005). See also *JB*.
 15. In his autobiography, J.B. Toews outlined the divisive situation he found himself in as the new pastor. See “Back to the Pastorate,” in *JB*, 140–57.
 16. Personal recollection of John E. Toews in an unpublished manuscript. John recalls that his father was often bold in his demands, expecting and receiving privileges. I am grateful to John for sharing excerpts from his personal memoirs.
 17. *1953 Torchbearer* (Immanuel Academy, Reedley, CA), [32],[56], and [60].
 18. Personal recollection of John E. Toews. Nettie Toews recalled that “the change to a new environment, church and all took quite some time for all of us to adjust, schools as well. Dad tried to find his role into his work, a work which would take him away from home very much which we soon experienced as reality.” “My Life’s Story,” 7. JB would later note the “toll” his “continuous absence” took on his family during these years but comforted himself that in accepting second place, they had made the “greater contribution to the cause

- of missions,” during this period of his life. *JB*, 165.
19. Personal recollection of John E. Toews.
 20. The Christian Fellowship Association was an umbrella organization formed by students in 1953 to coordinate the various religious clubs on campus (Mission Band, Peace Team, Gospel Team, YMCA and YWCA). John served as president in his senior year. The College experienced significant transitions throughout this time period. Four different presidents were installed, the theology program was transferred to Fresno, California, with the formation of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Pacific Bible Institute was begun as a more conservative alternative for Mennonite Brethren students on the West Coast, and the Canadian MB Conference withdrew their monetary support for the College. The College also began to work towards accreditation as a four-year college. For a review of the decade’s events, see Wesley J. Prieb and Don Ratzlaff, *To a Higher Plane of Vision: Tabor College, the First 75 Years* (Hillsboro, KS: Tabor College, 1983), 21–28.
 21. John E. Toews, “Moving from Centrifugal to Centripetal: A Sermon on Col. 1:15–20,” *Direction* 24 (Spring, 1995): 90–95. The sermon was originally preached October 10, 1994, at a consultation on biblical interpretation held in Fresno.
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. Revivals were so key to the church during this period that Nettie Toews in her very brief memoirs marked their various pastoral tenures by the successful revivals that swept over the congregations during their brief sojourns in Hepburn, Sask., Buhler, Kan., and Reedley, California. “My Life’s Story.” In a similar way, a brief history of Tabor College notes the “campus revival” that occurred as part of the 1956 Bible Conference. Prieb, 24.
 24. See Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930–1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996) for an analysis of this transition. Toews uses William McLoughlin’s work to suggest that the mid-century revival movement among Mennonites was an effort to navigate the cultural shifts of the period. See “Mennonites, Revivalism, Evangelism,” 216–21.
 25. John E. Toews, “Moving from Centrifugal to Centripetal.”
 26. Conversation with John E. Toews, March 17, 2008.
 27. Personal recollections of John E. Toews.
 28. Personal conversation with John E. Toews, March 17, 2008.
 29. Personal recollections of John E. Toews.
 30. J.B. Toews, *JB: A Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim*, 124.

31. Personal recollection of John E. Toews.
32. Ibid.
33. It is now Fresno Pacific University.
34. Delbert Wiens, "The Christian College as Heresy," *Mennonite Idealism and Higher Education: the Story of the Fresno Pacific College Idea*, ed. Paul Toews (Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), 55.
35. Quoted in Joel A. Wiebe, *Remembering . . . Reaching: A Vision for Service; a Fifty Year History of Fresno Pacific College* (Fresno, CA: Fresno Pacific College, 1994), 97.
36. Paul Toews, "Singing the Christian College Song in a Mennonite Key," *Mennonite Idealism and Higher Education: the Story of the Fresno Pacific College Idea*, ed. Paul Toews (Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), 94.
37. Personal recollections of John E. Toews.
38. The subject of John's thesis, Peter Kropotkin, had interactions with Mennonites.
39. Personal conversation with John E. Toews, March 17, 2008.
40. Ibid.
41. Untitled list (College Community Church Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA).
42. Peter J. Klassen, "The College Community Church Mennonite Brethren, Clovis, California: A Tenth-Anniversary Review, January, 1973" (College Community Church Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA).
43. John E. Toews, "The Purpose of the Church" (College Community Church Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA).
44. "Commission Reports: College Community Church - MB - Clovis, September 1965" (College Community Church Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA).
45. "The Agenda for September 27, 1963" (College Community Church Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA). Authorship verified in conversation with John E. Toews, March 17, 2008.
46. John E. Toews, "Where to, Mennonite Brethren . . . ?" *The Christian Leader*, 6 January 1976, 2.
47. John E. Toews, "Moving from Centrifugal to Centripetal."
48. Personal Recollections of John E. Toews. See also <http://www.cgi.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/conventions/chicago/facts/chicago68/index.shtml>, accessed March 21, 2008.
49. Personal recollections of John E. Toews.

50. http://rebaplacefellowship.org/Who_We_Are/History, accessed March 21, 2008.
51. Prieb, 33.
52. See A.J. Klassen, *The Seminary Story: Twenty Years of Education in Ministry, 1955–1975* (Fresno, CA: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1975).
53. From its beginning, Canadian students had been a regular part of the student body and the U.S. Conference had long hoped that a joint program could be established.
54. See John E. Toews, “Where to, Mennonite Brethren . . . ?” See also “The Nature of the Church,” a paper presented at the Study Conference in Normal, Illinois, August 2–4, 1989 (General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches Board of Reference and Counsel Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA.)
55. See John E. Toews and Gordon Nickel, eds., *The Power of the Lamb* (Winnipeg: Kindred Books, 1986). See also “The Theology and Strategy of Peace as Evangelism,” *Direction* 3 (April 1974): 173–76; “A Theology and Strategy of Evangelism from the Peace Perspective,” *Christian Leader*, 3 October 1972, 4–5, 19; “Window on the Bible: Peace,” *Christian Leader*, 10 February 1981, 15; “Peacemaker or Pacifist: Studies in New Testament Peace Theology,” *Sojourners* 14 (November 1985): 40–42; and “Kingdom Peace Theology for Modern Mennonites,” *MCC Peace Section Newsletter* 17 (July–August 1984): 8–10.
56. John E. Toews, “Leadership Styles for Mennonite Brethren Churches,” Board of Reference and Counsel Study Conference 8–10, May, 1980, Clearbrook, B.C. (General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches Board of Reference and Counsel Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA).
57. Herb Neufeld, “Response Paper: Leadership Styles for the Mennonite Brethren Church,” Board of Reference and Counsel Study Conference 8–10, May, 1980, Clearbrook, B.C. (General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches Board of Reference and Counsel Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA).
58. Personal recollection of author. In a variety of settings and theological discussions I have observed church or denominational leaders begin a statement with “Well, John E. says . . .” and then quote from his Romans class or New Testament theology. This was especially evident when I served on the Confession of Faith task force and in my role as General Conference Secretary where I served as a liaison to the General Conference Board of Faith and Life. A new genera-

- tion of MBBS students, privileged to work with John as adjunct faculty, have begun to do this as well.
59. Don Ratzlaff, "Church Growth Consultation: Debating the Means to a Good End," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 3 May 1991, 17.
 60. *Ibid.*, 17. The tension "was articulated in various ways: CGM proponents vs CGM critics, growth vs community, practitioners vs theorists, and pastors vs academics." As reported by Ratzlaff, "the tension became personified in the presentations of James Nikkel, outgoing director of evangelism for the Canadian MB Conference, and John E. Toews, academic dean at MB Biblical Seminary, Fresno, CA. Nikkel presented a 28-page paper that was generally sympathetic toward CGM philosophy. Toews responded with an 18-page critique that affirmed the evangelistic mission of the church but aggressively took to task many of the tenets of the CGM."
 61. Conversation with John E. Toews, March 17, 2008.
 62. "John E. Toews Memo" dated September 5, 1994, "Interpretation of the '81 Resolution re Women in Ministry," General Conference Board of Faith and Life Women in Ministry 1992–1999 (General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches Board of Faith and Life Records, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA).
 63. Jim Coggins, "Smorgasbord of Issues Gets Mixed Reviews," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 6 August 1993, 7.
 64. "Atrium will become the heart of the college," http://www.grebel.uwaterloo.ca/aboutgrebel/releases/2003_17_dedication.shtml, accessed March 15, 2008.