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## Anniversary Reminiscences About *Direction*

*Elmer A. Martens*

**D**irection began its life in January, 1972, and was properly christened. The name came as a proposal from the two of us, my wife and I, in serious kitchen conversation upon learning of the decision to coordinate into one periodical the separate efforts by several educational institutions. *Direction* became the successor to *The Voice*, a publication begun in 1952 by the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg, and to the *Journal of Church and Society*, the publication in the United States begun in 1965 by the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Tabor College, and Pacific College. Whether matured or not, *Direction* is now twenty-five years of age and celebrates a bench-mark anniversary.

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*Direction provided a vehicle for Mennonite Brethren schools to speak with a united voice to the churches and to point the way theologically.*

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### FIRST STEPS

Cooperating partners in 1972 in this new venture called *Direction* were the four schools of higher education in the denomination: Mennonite Brethren Bible College of Winnipeg, Manitoba (now Concord College), Tabor College of Hillsboro, Kansas, Pacific College of Fresno, California (now Fresno Pacific University), and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary also of Fresno. A frontispiece of the initial issue noted: "These schools were founded to train pastors, missionaries and laypeople to assist the church in its witness around the world. They represent the concern to combine theology and arts/science in order to serve

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*Elmer Martens, Old Testament professor at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California, and former editor of Direction, continues in retirement his ministry among church and academy.*

the needs of a broad spectrum of church and society.”

These four schools subsidized the 1972 publication in order to keep the subscription price low, namely \$2.00 per year for four issues! Each issue of forty to fifty pages consisted of two or three articles, a “Preaching Lab” department (later re-titled “Hearing the Word”), a book review section, and the traditional opening editorial. The Board of Christian Literature (now the Resource Ministries Board) became a fifth partner in 1981. Columbia Bible College (Abbotsford, British Columbia) joined in 1989 and Bethany Bible Institute (Hepburn, Saskatchewan) in 1993. Such developments were a healthy move toward the goal of providing a vehicle for the schools of the denomination to speak with a united voice to the churches and to point the way theologically.

One of the dreams of the founders was to coordinate and unify, and thereby strengthen, the publication efforts of the schools, and hence to bring greater solidarity to the North American Mennonite Brethren churches. This vision has been largely realized, as I see it, at least in the collegiality of the institutions. Planning the issues brought us together; we got to know each other. By means of the articles we spoke to one another, and that sometimes in debate.

### EDITORS AT WORK

My own involvement began at the incubation stage of the journal. I served on the ad hoc committee (with Abe Konrad and Vern Ratlaff) that planned a pilot inter-institutional issue which appeared in 1971. When the journal was launched, I was assistant editor, and in 1975 was named chair of the four-member editorial committee. Delbert Wiens of Fresno Pacific College, the first editor, was an astute and careful editor. It was not uncommon for him to re-write major portions of someone’s contribution. He disliked administrative detail, so I, with the help of the secretarial staff available to me, handled much of the correspondence. Howard Loewen in Winnipeg was managing editor. Three editors, apart from guest editors, have served during the first twenty-five years of the journal’s life: Delbert Wiens (1972-75), Allen Guenther (1981-89), and Elmer A. Martens (1976-81; 1989-95). For all but nine of the twenty-five years, I have been closely associated with *Direction*—and loved it!

My second stint as editor of *Direction* came in 1989, a term that ended with my retirement in 1995. At meetings every two years or so, representatives of the participating institutions would spend half a day or more refining proposals for themes to be treated in forth-coming issues. We tried to identify the issues facing the denominational church, quite in the spirit of Delbert Wiens’s first editorial: “The sponsoring schools

offer this journal to those laymen and ministers who are willing to listen to each other and to think prayerfully together on the sort of questions described in the article which follows." That article by Wiens, "The Questions We Face," touched on the theological question of biblical authority, the ecclesiastical issue of the church's nature and mission, and the sociological question of denominational ethnicity (see reprint this issue—Ed.). Wiens stated (p. 7), "Our diversity is our problem—and our challenge."

Deliberations in committee sometimes began with a list of persons whose contributions we would welcome. But our intention was to grapple with significant church issues, either latent or blatant, in the church constituency. Examples include, "Women in the Work of the Church," 9:1 (1980); "Mission and Pluralism," 23:1 (1994); "Music in Worship," 22:2 (1993). The editor served to implement the editorial council's collaborative planning.

### THE SHAPING PROCESS

In 1989, the general format was augmented in the following ways. Articles would now be written around a given theme, and there would be more of them, since by this date the periodical was larger (usually more than one hundred pages) and appeared biannually. An assistant editor, Richard Kyle of Tabor College, now directed the Book Review section. In addition, three more features were added: Books I Recommend (related to the theme), Current Research, and Historical Endnotes. The last was provided by members of the denomination's Historical Commission. The section, "Current Research," contained the titles of theses prepared for the Master of Arts degree, largely, but not exclusively, by students at the Seminary. This section also included abstracts of doctoral dissertations on religion by faculty or constituency members.

Back of these changes were certain convictions. The journal had a network function: scholars within the denomination, at the least, had a way to know of each other's work. It had a ministry function: the readership included graduates of our schools, who needed on-going education; faculty and specialists could offer guidance by recommending pertinent literature. The journal also had an identity-giving function. Apart from news sheets and the occasional books, the denomination's historical commission did not have a publication. *Direction* could offer print space, and did. The two-part series on the translation of Abram Unger's writings (19:2 [1990] and 20:1 [1991]) is a good example. So is the earlier essay, "The History of the Bekker Manuscript" (3:3 [1974]: 243-48). Abe Dueck presented a bibliography of significant books on Anabaptism

(4:4 [1975]: 378-80).

The theme articles were often treated from the perspective of biblical theology rather than one of systematic theology, philosophy or history. Still, in looking back it is with some embarrassment to see how little, despite the denomination's much touted emphasis on the Bible (viz., Mennonite Brethren Bible College, Pacific Bible Institute, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary), the journal reflects biblical exegetical work. Richard Thiessen's fascinating bibliometric study of the journal shows that only 7.4% of the 411 articles between 1972-1991 dealt with either Old or New Testament passages ("A Bibliometric Study of Direction," 21:1 [1992]: 83-93, especially p. 90).

### SUBSCRIBERS FEW

The subscription list was small, disconcertingly small: some four hundred in 1989 with a print run of five hundred copies. Still it was gratifying to visit libraries in Dallas or Chicago and to find copies of *Direction* in the periodicals section. An occasional footnote to a *Direction* article in a scholarly article or book by non-Mennonites indicated a wider readership. It was gratifying on occasion to receive requests for reprints, sometimes from the most unlikely sources.

The managing editor's task of increasing the number of subscribers was certainly challenging. At meetings of the denomination's leaders, for example, the "commercial" for *Direction* would draw a wry smile but few sales. Pastors reported that they found other magazines such as *Leadership* more to their liking. Did we as writers and editors know sufficiently well the concerns of the readers we were targeting? We did profit from a readership poll, but the question of the periodical's viability was often an agenda item.

### ATTEMPTING TO BE HELPFUL

What contribution was *Direction* actually making? The purposes were frequently rehashed in private conversations and committee discussions. Clearly, faculty from the institutions found in the periodical a vehicle for the dissemination of their research and the communication of their prophetic "burden." Certainly writing helped them be more articulate. Beyond the institutions' faculties, *Direction* became the vehicle for the publication of papers given at the denomination's study conferences. The papers given at the Symposium on Faith and Ethnicity Among Mennonite Brethren were published (17:1 [1988]). One issue carried the presentations at the North American Consultation on Church Growth (20:2 [1991]). A well-received issue reported the presentations given at a con-

sultation on biblical hermeneutics by Bible faculty of the denomination's educational institutions (24:1 [1995]).

One of my concerns as editor was to have the periodical become the voice of Mennonite Brethren internationally, since by the late 1980s there were able scholars in the younger churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The most rewarding of these attempts was the issue with the theme, "Mennonite Brethren and Evangelicalism" (20:1 [1991]), which carried articles by Indian, Japanese, Zairian, Colombian, and German Mennonite Brethren. Some of this networking is also evident in the earlier theme focus, "Mennonite Brethren in Inter-Mennonite Endeavors" (7:3 [1978]).

The periodical continues to chronicle the theological thought currents of the denomination. As Richard Thiessen notes, Anabaptist History and Theology comprised 14.8% of all articles between 1972-1976. Ethnicity issues were addressed in eight articles between 1987-91 (approximately 7% of those published); in the same period 14.2% of the articles treated Marriage and Family (21:1 [1992]: 91). And yes, there is a readership beyond the denomination, though unknown as to size, so that one could argue that *Direction* has added an Anabaptist voice to the ecumenical theological dialogue. Some notable response beyond denominational readers came with the issue on "Caregiving" which reported the several-year project by Congregational Care Associates, and gave an Anabaptist perspective to the topic. The printing was quickly sold out.

### **FILLING A THEOLOGICAL GAP**

It may be that the current generation prefers audio-visual mediums, such as movies, but printed material still has a place. In one sense, a post-modern age, which tends to slight argument and prefers glitz, desperately needs to grapple intellectually and systematically with theological issues. It is still incumbent for believers to define and embrace a Christian world-view (Rom 12:1). There remain serious readers, and there remains a biblical theological gap to fill in the print media, both for denominational readers and beyond. *Direction* has attempted to fill the gap in the past. While each generation decides how best to chart the course, the need for direction (if not *Direction*) will not go away. ❀