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*My name is Geertruyt Simons. You may know my husband, Menno. He has become quite famous. We tease him about this. It makes him uncomfortable.... But he knows God has called him. And the people need good leaders.*

## *Imagining Geertruyt, Finding Self*

*by Julia Reimer*

*I* recently had the opportunity to delve into my Mennonite history in a way that I had not prior to this point. I was asked to portray the figure of Geertruyt Simons for a women's gathering at my local Mennonite Brethren church. Geertruyt was Menno Simons' wife. As theater faculty at Fresno Pacific University and with roots going back to the Dutch reformers, I was a natural candidate for such a task. However, next to nothing in the form of first-hand accounts was written about Geertruyt. Accounts of other Anabaptist women can be found in court documents, martyr songs, and the 17<sup>th</sup> century *Martyr's Mirror*. But of Geertruyt, we have only a comment or two squeezed into her husband's otherwise impersonal writing.



*The author portrays Geertruyt Simons in a performance piece she wrote and performed for the College Community Mennonite Brethren church in June 2010. (Photo Credit: Carol Friesen)*



*This is what life has been like for me, the wife of Menno Simons: It is to live as nothing less than a refugee for more than 18 years.... Early in our marriage we would not stay in one place for more than half a year. It was too dangerous.*

So, to the lives of the other Anabaptist women I went. I planned to use their collective lives as a paradigm for what Geertruyt's might have been. I would look to Menno's biography for additional clues. Finally, I would throw in some "lives of the heretics" details for local color. I felt a little intimidated by the task, but I was willing to trust the creative impulse that had previously sustained me through countless papers, a dissertation, and many a theatrical production.

*Menno was forty when I married him. Not old, but not young. To marry an elder of the new church—and one who had been a priest of the old—was an interesting proposition.*

About this time, I was also asked to write an essay, something "creative," for this issue's celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mennonite Brethren church. As I started in on my first assignment and pondered the second, a few things became apparent. One was that, given my upbringing, it was not as difficult as I had anticipated to write myself into the shoes of a sixteenth century Dutch Anabaptist woman. The Geertruyt I could imagine shared more than a few principles and prejudices with MB me. And it also occurred to me that the spirit of reform that motivated the "brethren" of the 1500s was not unlike that of the 1860s Brethren that we celebrate this year. Both groups of reformers had a sneaking suspicion that all was not well with mother church. Both looked to Christ and the scriptures for the solution. Both acted boldly against church and culture as the only way they could imagine for setting things right. And both were persecuted for their presumption. This, then, was my double inheritance as twenty-first century heir to the Mennonite and the Mennonite Brethren stories.

*"For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ".... We are all responsible to God for our own souls and salvation. We must look to the scriptures to find Christ and the truth.*

When I think of my MB upbringing and the principles that Geertruyt and I share, I think first of the Bible. *Sola scriptura* after all. Growing up, I wouldn't say that my family was exactly religious about Bible study, but we had our moments. My grandfather was known for his regular reading through the entire tome. I began my own read-through numerous times, usually getting stuck somewhere around Leviticus. In later years, my father's mealtime lectures about conflict as interpreted through the stories of Genesis, or a model of leadership as understood from Jesus' interactions with his disciples instructed me well in the role that careful biblical scrutiny could play in ferreting out the bigger picture. It always came back to Jesus. In my adult life, this biblical education inspired a chamber theater presentation of the entire book of Acts, delivered verbatim, as well as another production based on the parables. A Fresno Pacific University theater student involved in the book of Acts production recently commented, "This was one of my most memorable productions. What a way to hide the Word in your heart!" Geertruyt would have approved.

*We try to dress modestly and hold to honest behaviors and dealings with each other. We keep away from cards and taverns and all such frivolous entertainments that waste time better spent, and so quickly lead people astray. We use our leisure, rather, in studying the scriptures. We help each other and those poorer than us as best as we are able, though most of us are not rich ourselves. Yet we take seriously Christ's command to feed the poor, to clothe the naked, to visit the prisoner.*



*Menno worries that disagreements in the congregations will break us apart. But I remind him of Paul and the apostles—what struggles they endured to find agreement among the believers in those early years. And they had not the holy gospels as we do. The Lord has blessed us indeed. I feel sure, I tell my Menno, that the Lord will not forget the work that he has started here, nor the sacrifices that have been made. The race has not been run in vain.*

My grandparents' modeling instructed me in the value of service. I watched as they spent countless hours volunteering in the Mennonite Central Committee store and at Mennonite Relief sales. Grandma sewed and quilted for Mennonite Central Committee. Grandpa rescued and fixed broken furniture to sell. My parents gave often in the area of hospitality. They hosted people from Switzerland, Holland, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Japan for long-term stays. Countless others came for a night or meal. We knew early in life that the Mennonite/Mennonite Brethren worlds did not stop at the border. Our Christian family was not defined by national identity and boundaries. And neither, therefore, was the generosity that we extended. Thus, when a seminary family from Ethiopia needed a place to stay for their last semester of graduate work, it seemed natural to move home to my parents for a time to allow them the convenience of my condominium near to the school. Might not Jesus have done the same? Geertruyt would more often have been on the end of receiving versus extending hospitality, but the theme of giving where risk or inconvenience was involved would have been more than familiar. Geertruyt would have approved.

***Menno is very much against violence. He says that the "regenerated"—that is what he calls us—must be "children of peace." We must be different from the others. Our "sword is the sword of the Spirit which we wield with a good conscience through the Holy Spirit."... We are lovers of peace, the way that Jesus taught.***

Stories of conscientious objectors and alternative service during times of war were also a part of the family lore. A great-uncle had managed a smoke-jumpers camp during World War II. My grandfather was exempt by virtue of farming. My father had to go before the draft board in the 1950s to defend his conscientious objector status. Anabaptist beliefs against serving in the military weren't popu-

lar, I knew—even among our fellow Christians—but neither were the beliefs of the first Anabaptists. And many were ready to die for these truths. Though I had not had to take such a stand myself, and wondered if I would have the courage, I was proud to be a member by virtue of association of this counter-culture. Being Mennonite Brethren was cool.

Being Mennonite Brethren is not, of course, the only way. Christ is the way. And I have appreciated the things I have gathered from the other streams of tradition. The larger Mennonite movement (á la Menno and my imagined Geertruyt) is our parent, but the Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Pentecostals, Orthodox are also in the family. Still, I am grateful for the significant gifts I have been given through the denomination that I call my own. Being Mennonite Brethren—with all the inheritance and history that entails—has given me lessons in hospitality, global fellowship, radical discipleship, the centrality of Christ and the scriptures, and a sense of myself as part of a most interesting story. The Lord has blessed us indeed.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Julia Reimer is faculty in theater at Fresno Pacific University, where she teaches, directs, and occasionally dabbles in writing for performance. She holds a Master's Degree in Theater from Bowling Green State University and a Ph.D. in Communication/Performance Studies from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. At its very best, she believes that a performance event is creative and communal, incarnational and prophetic; it shows us who we are and who we can become.*