
Book Reviews

Hyung Jin (Pablo) Kim Sun, *Building Mennonite Belonging: Toward an Intercultural Church*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, Quebec, 2025. 163 pp. \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-2280-2389-0.

I experienced a Mennonite church for the first time with a group of my classmates at Goshen College (Goshen, Indiana). We were in the early days of our inaugural semester, and one local congregation extended a generous invitation of Sunday worship and lunch to new college students. Church members enthusiastically welcomed us almost as soon as we walked through the door. One woman warmly greeted each student individually, asking our names and hometowns. I was surprised by the number of times she discovered that one of my classmates was related to someone she knew. These personal connections led to follow-up invitations to church activities. When I introduced myself, she looked puzzled and said, "I didn't know that Mennonites in that area had your last name." I responded, "I don't know about that. This is my first time at a Mennonite church." She politely smiled and moved on to the next student. As far as I could tell at the time, being outside the Mennonite fold apparently meant that I did not qualify for a follow-up invitation to her church.

Hyung Jin (Pablo) Kim Sun takes up the problem presented by experiences like mine in *Building Mennonite Belonging: Toward An Intercultural Church*. A constellation of family networks and ethnic histories function to uphold an insular Mennonite identity, often found to be impenetrable even by the most sincere adherents to Mennonite faith convictions. Can anyone be a Mennonite? Or does the Mennonite identity exclusively belong to an ethnic group? Kim Sun admits that "if Mennonites are simply an ethnic group and not a religious community, then there is no need to have this discussion" (117). He proposes, instead, an intercultural Mennonite church centered on faith in which a diversity of cultural groups engage in mutual relationships based in love and justice. The strength of Kim Sun's proposal is that he deals with the problem of insularity as an insider. His introduction begins clearly: "I am a Mennonite" (3). In fact, most of the sources that he draws from in *Building Mennonite Belonging* are other Mennonites. His book is not a depersonalized, distant criticism of the church, but rather a call to transformation from within.

Interculturality, as Kim Sun describes it, is a vision of shalom or *convivencia* (from Spanish, literally "co-living"). His definition emphasizes engagements across cultural groups that seek a just and peaceful society. The biblical theme of shalom describes the totality of cosmic well-being and harmony to which these

kinds of intercultural engagements contribute. Borrowing the word *convivencia* from philosophers and theologians in Latin America, Kim Sun describes close, mutual relationships that exist despite and by virtue of tension. Cultural groups do not arrive at engagements in a vacuum of context. Rather, cross-cultural interactions are always colored by the consequences of history. Similar proposals, like Canadian multiculturalism, do not adequately address asymmetries of power and the legacies of colonialism and racism. So-called “ethnic Mennonites,” despite their historical experiences of exclusion and violence, largely benefit from the colonial project in the Canadian context. Their “ethnic myopia and lax racial awareness” (115) are barriers to arriving at true interculturality. For these reasons, Kim Sun qualifies his vision for the church as a “critical interculturality” (9), calling for a critical evaluation of the historical and social context in which intercultural engagements occur.

Building Mennonite Belonging organizes its discussion of Mennonite ecclesiology by identifying how the church is imagined theologically as the “believed church,” and how the church operates sociologically as the “experienced church” (15). Kim Sun introduces a variety of Mennonite approaches to help readers understand the church theologically, and then he surveys studies of Mennonite peoplehood in Canada. After laying out a framework of critical interculturality, he returns to Mennonite ecclesiology to reevaluate common approaches and to propose practical engagements. For Kim Sun, the Mennonite emphasis on Christocentrism has contributed to the problem of insularity. He carefully explains how the Mennonite insistence on a plain reading of Jesus in scripture can ignore the cultural bias of interpretation, and furthermore contribute to the Mennonite tendency of identifying true followers of Jesus against the world. Without suggesting that Mennonites abandon their characteristic hermeneutics, Kim Sun proposes that Jesus-centered practices like baptism and the Lord’s Supper can become opportunities for unity and belonging across cultures.

Kim Sun holds that Mennonite theology and history already contain a multitude of resources that make critical interculturality a possibility for the church. He offers the theo-ethical norms of hospitality, love and justice, and mutuality—each rooted in Mennonite values and aspiring to interculturality—as ideals for the Mennonite church in Canada. Although he writes from and for this particular context, his proposal will certainly find resonance among Mennonites across North America who long for the transformation of an insular church. Again, Kim Sun writes as a Mennonite insider who sees the prophetic and missional potential of his own tradition. This is probably why I so deeply appreciate his book. Despite the off-putting experience that I had during my first visit to a Mennonite church, I can now say with Kim Sun that “I am a Mennonite.” In fact, it was an African American Mennonite pastor in Philadelphia who first told me that I could be a Mennonite. Then, it was a Hispanic Mennonite congregation in South Texas that first welcomed me into membership. Ironically, it was non-ethnic

Mennonites who invited me into the fold. (This was despite my upbringing in a German-Lutheran home culture, which is not so different from the variety of Mennonite culture that I initially found to be difficult to access.) I now serve as the pastor of a multilingual Mennonite church that is seeking the kind of intercultural vision that Kim Sun articulates in *Building Mennonite Belonging*. My congregation has experienced the tension of cultural difference, and at times has even questioned the compatibility of Mennonite tradition with interculturality. Can Mennonite faith express itself beyond the cultural and ethnic heritage that has carried it across time and place? Kim Sun convincingly demonstrates that the answer is yes.

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Peter M. Sensenig, *Good Guestwork*, Santos Books, Elizabethtown, PA, 2025. 194 pp. \$24.99. ISBN: 979-8-9994186-5-4.

In an era marked by global tensions and deepening religious divides, *Good Guestwork* by Peter M. Sensenig offers a timely and thoughtful contribution to conversations about Christian-Muslim relationships. The book addresses the tensions that arise from the persistent lack of meaningful interaction between Muslims and other faith communities, urging readers to move beyond superficial tolerance toward a posture of genuine listening. Sensenig's central argument is that the "spiritual vitality of the church depends upon building relationships with Muslims" (5).

My perspective on these themes is deeply personal, rooted in my experience growing up in Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation. Despite living in close proximity, it is still uncommon for people to be open about their personal beliefs. Misunderstandings often run deep, and what I would call "immature" conversations—those shaped by defensiveness rather than a desire to understand—can easily worsen relationships rather than heal them. Sensenig describes this dynamic as a kind of "sibling rivalry" (11). Muslims and Christians, he writes, "fight like siblings" because they share theological roots and physical space, yet political competition and historical tensions "erode trust that has been built" (12–13).

This book is important because it helps us understand how to approach these relationships with wisdom and humility. Sensenig argues that Christians must move away from "territoriality"—the impulse to control religious or cultural space—and instead learn to become "guests and hosts of one another" in the "great world house" God created (6, 15–16). His emphasis on relational presence resonated with my own experiences. I recall a high school friend who was strongly opposed to Christianity. We debated frequently, yet somehow managed