

The Mercersburg Society
Winter President's Letter
The Martyrs of Japan 2022



Dear Members and Friends of the Mercersburg Society:

As I begin writing on the 6th Day of February, I wish you a Blessed Martyrs of Japan Day. Besides this Christian remembrance in our Common Liturgical calendar, this is a story with important meaning in our history, legacy, and current mission. I will speak to that theme at the end of this letter.

It has been my practice to send an occasional letter to you, updating you on the work of the Corporate Board and the Society at large. We continue to advance our mission which is remembering the groundbreaking and seminal work of 19th-century Mercersburg Theologians who shape and inspire our vision of Christ living, incarnate, and sacramental. We live into our mission by discerning and interpreting how their work contributes to contemporary theological dialogues within the Church and in society. As a contemporary fellowship of theologians, historians, students, laity, and pastors our scholarship expands beyond the 19th-century genius of Mercersburg. Even so, our contemporary mission is grounded in its theology of the Church-Ecumenical as the Body of Christ: Evangelical, Reformed, catholic, Apostolic, organic, developmental, and connectional.

Our 2021 Convocation was a clear expression of that mission. Based on the theme, ***“Polarization and Reconciliation: Hints from the Mercersburg Tradition,”*** scholars, students and pastors reflected on the deepening political, cultural, social and racial divides being experienced within our congregations and our local communities. We asked the question, “How might the legacies of Mercersburg Theology (whose disciplines were formed in a time of tremendous theological and political conflicts) contribute to the work of local congregations and their leadership in faithfully addressing the challenges and call to minister in our time and place?” I invite you to read the lectures and sermon in the recent edition of the ***New Mercersburg Review***. I'm certain you will find them stimulating and useful.

I am most grateful to the Rev. F. Christopher Anderson, editor, and the Rev. Jane Ellingwood, Ph.D. chair of our recently formed Communications Committee, for their leadership in publishing this special reformatted edition of the ***New Mercersburg Review***. The Communication Committee is doing significant work to aesthetically and strategically improve the journal, including using the professional consultation of Bullock Graphic Designs. Our website is also ready for improvement as we have contracted with SwitchItUpDesigns to update and manage our website (mercersburgsociety.org). The website management expenditure (\$129 a month) was approved at the Corporate Board Meeting on January 21, 2022.

Looking ahead, please note that the 2022 Convocation will be on the campus of Lancaster Theological

Seminary, May 23 & 24. This year our convocation will be co-sponsored by Lancaster Theological Seminary, Moravian Theological Seminary, and the Society. Both seminaries have worked generously and enthusiastically with our Planning Committee, reflecting this year's convocation theme: ***“Moravian and Mercersburg Traditions: Can These Two Walk Together?”*** Tantalizing, isn't it?

In this time of significant transition for Lancaster and Moravian Seminaries, we believe that Mercersburg can contribute to the theological, spiritual, and worship traditions of both schools, even as a new experience of theological education and collaboration is being strategically discerned by the merged institution's leadership. Recently our own Rev. Dr. Martha Kriebel preached a wonderfully informative and inspiring sermon on the riches of Moravian traditions and the gifts they offer us. I highly recommend her insights to the society and the seminaries as we discern the “new thing” God is doing. You will find it on the Mercersburg website (mercersburgsociety.org) soon.

I also wish to share with you the elected officers for 2022:

President: Nathan D. Baxter

Secretary: Anne Thayer

Treasurer & Membership Secretary: Tom Busted

Program Chair: Randall Zachman

Editor of NMR: Chris Anderson

At Large Members: John Cedarleaf, Jocelyn McKeon, Chris Rankin

Committee Chairs were also appointed by the Board at their January 21st meeting:

Racial Justice: TBD

Communications: Jane Ellingwood

I am certain you will join me in thanking Tom Lush for his long years of faithful service to the Society as our Treasurer. The transition between Tom Lush and Tom Busted (affectionately known in Patristic terms as “Tom the Elder” and “Tom the Younger”) is now complete.

Now a word about why the ecumenical commemoration of The Martyrs of Japan is important to our life and mission. (I am grateful to Carol Lytch, Deborah Clemens, Peter Schmiechen, and Anne Thayer for their assistance in this section).

A missionary spirit and a sense of the Church as a global body are part of Lancaster Seminary's Mercersburg heritage. From my time as a student at Lancaster, I remember faculty who brought that missionary vision and challenge to our studies. I feel privileged to have studied as a seminarian with Dr. Alfred C. Bartholomew pastored and taught in the Philippines, Japan, Hong Kong, India, Greece, Ghana, and Honduras; Dr. Lee Gable, who led student trips to Rome, India, and Japan; and, John B. Noss, a scholar of the Church and religions in Asia. Professor Noss was one of the giants of inter-religious scholarship, with such notable publications as Living Religions, Man's Religions (4 printings) and History of Religion, which had 9 printings and multiple language translations. Professor Noss used to say about interfaith dialogue, “How can one truly understand one's own faith if one does not understand the religion of others?” These teachers also stressed the sacrifices that Christians in other cultures made for living and sharing their faith, particularly in Japan. The Martyrs of Japan are a prime example of such sacrifice when in the 17th century hundreds of thousands were killed. But in 1865, it was discovered that seven successive generations had survived as an underground church.

In 1879 Rev. Ambrose and Hattie Gring, Reformed Church missionaries, went to Japan inspired by their Mercersburg theology. There is a window in Santee Chapel commemorating our historic ties to the missions in Japan that began with them. From the seeds of their work came other missionaries. In

1886 Rev. Oshikawa and a Lancaster Seminary alumnus, Rev. William Hoy, founded two of Japan's distinguished academic universities, Tohoku Gakuin and Miyagi Gakuin. Other missionaries of our tradition, Rev. David Schneder, another LTS alumnus, and German Reformed missionaries Ms. Mary Ault and Ms. Elizabeth Poorbaugh were early teachers. Schneder and Poorbaugh later served as Presidents of Tohoku and Miyagi Gakuin, respectively. These universities and their related Tokyo Union Seminary have nurtured many pastors, teachers, scholars, and secular professionals. Some of their students have studied at LTS. Some of our alums have visited, served, and are buried in Japan and are honored each year by the indigenous church. In keeping with the Mercersburg legacy, our Japanese counterparts are very ecumenical in their work, Christians being only one-percent of the population.

In the 1990s LTS President, Peter Schmiechen, visited Japan to revive this relationship and educational exchange. Most recently President Carol Lytch has significantly advanced that relationship by visits, scholarly exchange, and the signing of a strategic covenant. Her visit was followed by Japanese administrators and educators' visit to LTS and the Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society Archives; and also the visit of LTS adjunct professor, Randall Zachman's visit to Tohoku Gakuin in 2019. Subsequently, Dean Vanessa Lovelace identified Japan for the LTS required cross-cultural course. Due to the pandemic, this trip was canceled in 2021 and 2022, but there are plans to reinstate it in 2024. Dean Lovelace is also exploring UCC scholarships to bring Japanese students to study at LTS. Professor Thayer has been invited to give a paper at an international Mercersburg Conference in Japan to be scheduled post-pandemic. **(A Thought: Might the Mercersburg Society plan a trip to Japan?)**

In 2020 Rev. Yudai Fujino of Tohoku Gakuin University, and a member of the Mercersburg Society, won the Roth Prize for his paper on the history and influence of Mercersburg Theology in Japan. Yudai spent the fall of 2015 at Lancaster, consulting primarily with Professors Anne Thayer and Lee Barrett.

The historic and vibrant relationship between our Japanese partner institutions, Lancaster Seminary and the Mercersburg Society is mutually exciting and seminal. Most important for us in this relationship is that their enduring witness reminds us to have courage in living and share our faith, even in our own dangerously polarized times. As the Book of Common Prayer so eloquently prays:

O God, who brought the holy martyrs of Japan through the suffering of the cross to the joys of eternal life: Grant that we, encouraged by their example, may hold fast to the faith we profess, even to death itself; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Yours in Christ,
+Nathan D. Baxter
President