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Lost book of Anabaptist writings now available in English

Elkhart, Ind. (AMBS) – The *Kunstbuch*, a collection of writings from early Anabaptists, was hidden in Swiss archives for centuries, but now has been released in English, a six-year project edited by John Rempel, professor of theology and Anabaptist studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

The *Kunstbuch* contains letters and other documents written in the 1500s by members of the Swiss and South German Anabaptist communities, including Pilgram Marpeck,

an early Anabaptist leader in that region. Jörg Maler, whose name reflects his profession as a painter, gathered together a variety of documents that the scattered Anabaptist congregations had found life-giving. As he rewrote them into one manuscript, he added his own artistic illuminations to the text. This manuscript circulated among the Swiss Anabaptist congregations, and at the end of the 17th century it ended up in the Berne city archive. Rempel surmises it was held initially as evidence against Anabaptists.

In 1950, Delbert Gratz, then a member of the Bluffton College faculty, discovered it. However, it wasn't until 1956 when it was rediscovered by German historian Heinold Fast that it came to the attention of Reformation scholars. At the end of 1956, the top journal of reformation history featured an article on the manuscript, acknowledging it as important evidence of the thinking and beliefs of Swiss and South German Anabaptists.

The book clearly documents the influence of Marpeck as a leader of the Anabaptists in that region. Sixteen of Marpeck's pastoral letters are included, and several other items were



John Rempel, professor of theology and Anabaptist studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, talks about the *Kunstbuch*, a collection of early Anabaptist writings.

written by close colleagues of Marpeck. Because he was not as authoritative a leader as Menno Simons, his influence had not been as easy to identify prior to the discovery of this manuscript.

Based on the table of contents, the manuscript Fast discovered in the archives is only half of the original, yet it adds up to more than 700 pages in the English version. Fast worked for several decades to prepare the German version for publication in a modern, critical edition. When he became ill, Martin Rothkegel completed the project. This German volume, with scholarly notes and commentary, was published finally in 2007.

Mennonite scholars had begun using some of the material already in the 1960s. William Klassen's doctoral dissertation in 1968 was based on Pilgram Marpeck's writings, and Walter Klaassen and William Klassen edited *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, published in 1978 in the Classics of the Radical Reformation series by the Institute of Mennonite Studies.

In 2004, Rempel began overseeing the English translation and editing of all the available *Kunstabuch* material. "What excited me about the project," Rempel explained, "is that because there was already a modern critical version in German, we could make this English translation more accessible to a larger audience. We aimed for 'literate but popular English,' sometimes choosing simpler terms than if we were translating for a scholarly audience."

The book contains meditations on God's provision for people who lived a very insecure existence, Rempel explained. It also includes theological treatises by Marpeck and pastoral letters with counsel to congregations about church discipline and the threat of persecution. Also included are personal confessions of faith, pieces by three Anabaptist mystics and poems.

"What attracted me to these writings is that these Anabaptists were able to take what was good from other movements," Rempel reflected, "It seems that the Marpeck circle grappled with the question of unity, but had only a few defining doctrinal points. They placed more emphasis on a personal experience of Christ, and then had more tolerance for differences of practices than other Anabaptist groups had."

Rempel believes this book has significance beyond the historical record of the early Anabaptist theology and practice. "These are believable people living precariously, having a depth of faith I would like to emulate. These writings can be lessons for people today who want models for holy living that are within reach. As we seek a deeper life of faith we will find our own struggles mirrored in those of these authors."

Jörg Maler's Kunstbuch: Writings of the Pilgram Marpeck Circle, has been published by Pandora Press of Kitchener, Ont. Copies are available from Pandora Press and from the Mennonite Cooperative Bookstore at AMBS.