



Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online

A Joint Project of
Mennonite Historical Society of Canada
Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission
Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee
Mennonite Central Committee

<http://www.gameo.org/>

Administrative Committee

Bert Friesen (Chair)
bfrie@mts.net

John A. Lapp
jalapp@infonline.net

Ken Reddig
kreddig@mbconf.ca

Dale Schrag
drs@bethelks.edu

Sam Steiner
(Managing Editor)
steiner@uwaterloo.ca

Report to the GAMEO Management Board

1 November 2006

GAMEO has continued to change at a fairly rapid pace in the past year. We have added a partner (Mennonite Central Committee) and are in conversations with a possible fifth partner (Mennonite World Conference). Inclusion of articles from volumes 1-5 of the print encyclopedia has seen significant advancement. The change to a new domain address had an unexpectedly negative impact in our visibility on the Web, but we may have turned the corner on this. Our rapid growth has compelled us to review next steps in managing in our data, and allowing more persons to add to and edit our content.

Some Statistics

Below is a table showing comparable figures from when we began to keep web statistics in April 2000 for the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada website. New weblog software was installed in August 2005, thus comparison to 2004 numbers and earlier is difficult.

The new GAMEO domain went live in November 2005, and Google did not “find” the site until 29 November 2005. Because GAMEO was seen as a “new” site we have been slow in rebuilding traffic, as can be seen from the statistics below. Presently only about 15% of the GAMEO site is indexed by Google, which is apparently close to the norm. This means that many articles cannot be “found” on the Web unless the searcher comes to our site and uses our search engine.

	Dec. 2000	Dec. 2001	Dec. 2002	Dec. 2003	Dec. 2004	Oct 2005	1 Nov. 2006
Visitors per Day	524	657	734	1,026	1,356	1,389	674
Page Views per Day		2,215	3,072	4,030	6,454	8,281	5,435
Articles in GAMEO	2,216	2,239	2,304	2,371	2,458	2,726	5,151

I have learned a fair bit about Search Engine Optimization (SEO) in my efforts to increase our visibility. Several things have become clear – we need to maximize as much as possible the number of links to GAMEO, as well as to individual pages within GAMEO. The greater the number of inbound links from “quality” sites (Page Rank (PR) of 5 or more), the higher our own ranking. Higher rank means more frequent and more complete indexing by Google (and others). Currently GAMEO’s front page has a PR between a 5 & 6 (out of 10).

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In efforts to increase inbound links I sent a message to most post-secondary theological schools in North America that had a “links” page to online theological resources. Almost all did not respond, but a few did make a link to our page, including the Yale University Library. I also went into a number of “Mennonite” articles in Wikipedia and added external links to our comparable article. This has had a positive effect, as quite a number of referral links come to GAMEO from Wikipedia. To this point these links number about 60.

The usefulness of inbound links underscores the need for every member of the Management Committee and the Canadian and U.S. editorial committees to encourage institutions and agencies to which they relate to add links to GAMEO.

A second issue is the structure of our web pages. We currently use “frames” which does not meet current html standards, and is difficult for search engines to navigate. This is an added impetus to our discussion about changing the structure of the site. There was an additional problem with the rotating pictures with which we once opened the site. Our articles were located too many “layers” below the top level for most search engines, so I made the search page the top level to eliminate one level.

A few additional details from the weblog report for October 2006. 3.2% of the visits to our site were over 30 minutes; 62.9% were for less than 30 seconds (i.e. they didn’t find what they were looking for). These are slight improvements over last year. 78.8% of our visitors used Internet Explorer; 14.5% used Firefox.

The “top ten” articles in October were: 1) Old Order Amish; 2) Anabaptism; 3) Amish; 4) Dordrecht Confession of Faith; 5) Dress; 6) Old Order Mennonites; 7) Furniture and Woodworking; 8) Balthasar Hubmaier; 9) Menno Simons; 10) Hutterian Brethren (Hutterische Brüder). This list varies from those of previous years; I believe some of the change results from increased references from Wikipedia. Other than search engines, the greatest number of referrals came from a *Slate* (an online newspaper) article on the Amish to our article on Anabaptism; and from Wikipedia articles on the Old Order Amish, Amish, Mennonites, Dordrecht Confession, Jacob Ammann and Beachy Amish. It is also worth noting that October 2006 was the occasion of the murder of 5 Amish girls in Lancaster County, PA, which likely heightened searches for Amish topics.

Status of Volumes 1-5 inclusion in GAMEO

Pages included from Volumes 1-5 @ 1 Nov. 2006	
Vol. 1	1-99
Vol. 2	
Vol. 3	151-169, 490-803
Vol. 4	1-145, 396-438, 1000-1054
Vol. 5	1-961

As can be seen from the chart at left, we have made good progress on uploading articles from vols. 1-5. All of volume 5 is now included (along with articles from 1-4 that were updated in vol. 5)

Most active in the past year in preparation of articles have been Richard Thiessen (who now has direct access to the website for editing and adding articles), Kevin Enns-Rempel, David Giesbrecht and myself. Smaller quantities came from Alf Redekopp and John Thiesen.

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It would be good to get more editors actively involved in this retrospective project. We need to discuss this concern both at the Management Board and Editorial Committee meetings. It would also be good to review the guidelines for the preparation of the copy submitted to the Managing Editor for upload.

New Content

Alf Redekopp of the Mennonite Heritage Centre oversaw Sharon H.H. Brown's preparation of 83 new biographical articles funded by a \$6,350 grant from the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation of Steinbach, Manitoba. These were derived from the publication, *Preservings*. An application for a follow-up grant from the Plett Foundation has been initiated. The number of other new articles was minimal.

A number of new articles are backlogged with the editorial group in Manitoba. Abe Dueck has resigned from this assignment, leaving Bert Friesen and Ernie Braun as the primary editors. The U.S. editorial committee established a similar structure with several editors, but no new articles have yet worked their way through this system.

We should discuss whether a centralized editorial process is the best approach, or whether this should be “downloaded” to the regional societies that also solicit new articles. The advantage would be greater throughput; the disadvantage would be some retreat from consistency in style. This will become a more pressing issue if GAMEO moves to a Wiki or content management system.

There is some “new” content that should be urgently pursued. These are articles on the active Mennonite post-secondary institutions and new conference structures. Most urgent, in my view, is an article on Mennonite Church USA. Should we ask an “insider” at each institution to write such an article? It would also be good to have current articles on active denominational publications.

Editorial Issues

According to the GAMEO style sheet, we conventionally use postal short forms for states and provinces, and allow a significant number of acronyms to be utilized in articles. I have come to believe this is not appropriate, given the global nature of our project. Postal short forms are meaningless to much of the world; **I wonder if we should generally spell out provincial and state names with sparing use of abbreviations. I would even suggest a retroactive conversion of postal short forms to full spelling in titles and article names.**

Similarly, I believe acronyms like “MCC” remain too frequently within articles. This should be re-emphasized.

Subject Templates

New subject templates should be developed for conferences/denominational articles and for institutions and businesses. Someone should be mandated to develop these. We

should make an effort to have such articles as current as possible, and certainly to reflect the changes in denominational structures that have taken place in recent years.

Technical Issues

GAMEO is currently indexed by the Microsoft indexing function on Conrad Grebel's web server. It does well on unique names and terms, but is not satisfactory on more generic types of terms. For example, a search for "Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren" will not bring up the "Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches" anywhere close to the top of the listing. Apparently the Windows indexer will not give priority to titles in building the index, thus articles about a subject that includes a lot of "generic" terms get lost.

The upside of the current indexing function is that it is free. Our current site is too large for any of the "free" indexing services (at least those that I know). There are significant charges for other options. This might well be addressed by some of the other changes we are contemplating, but we need to keep close tabs on this issue.

Our agenda will include extended discussion on moving to a new structure for GAMEO – from a straight html-based system to either a "Wiki" or content management system. Either of the later approaches would require some conversion costs, but would allow more persons to have "hands-on" access to content for editing or adding material. We are receiving some possibilities from Domain7, a firm in Abbotsford, and from PeaceWorks, a firm in Waterloo, Ontario. **I hope we can make a decision in principle on this matter.**

Even if GAMEO does not move to a new structure, it is essential to move from the present "frames" html approach.

Cartography Issues

Cartography within GAMEO is inconsistent. When maps existed in the print *Mennonite Encyclopedia* they have been included in GAMEO. In addition, for country articles I have used basic maps produced by the CIA for the World Factbook. They are good maps, and are not copyrighted. I have also used some U.S. Census maps to illustrate local U.S. county articles. It would be possible to use Google maps, but this requires inclusion of their advertising, a step we have not taken to this point.

It would be nice to find a good source for maps that could be utilized more generally. We have had some offers from cartographers to do some maps for us (John Janzen in Minnesota), but his example was complex and more detailed than I believe is necessary for an encyclopedia.

It would be good to explore alternatives to strengthen map content in our articles. I will have some conversation with a U. of Waterloo-related group (Centre for Community Mapping) in the next weeks to see if they might be able to help us.

Front Matter / Bibliography

Although it is not very visible, GAMEO does include a basic bibliography originally created by David Giesbrecht (it is available from the “Resources” page). This was created in the 1990s and needs updating. We asked David Giesbrecht and John Thiesen to work on this, but further clarity on the scope and extent of the bibliography is required. **One approach would be fairly minimalist (the major historical surveys and major reference works); another approach would try to be much more comprehensive. Are we able to provide direction on this?**

Related is a discussion that has been raised in the editorial committees for several years. On the former Mennonite Historical Society of Canada website was a “Who are the Mennonites” section created in 1998 by Derek Suderman. It provided an good overview of Mennonite history and culture. There is not a similar “introductory” feature on our site. **Should such an introductory section be created? Should we ask the MHSC to give over the present “Who are the Mennonites” and ask someone to update it? Should we create something briefer?**

Anabaptist Ethereal Library

In the “Resources” section of GAMEO is a collection of documents containing the full-text of significant Mennonite confessions of faith and position statements on a variety of issues. We do not presently have a policy statement on the context of this area. **Should such a statement be developed? Should we include longer documents in the library (*Martyrs Mirror*, works of Menno Simons, etc.)?**

Governance

This has been our first full year under the new structure with a Management Board and two (currently) nationally-based editorial committees. The management board is responsible for policy, publicity and promotion, funding and structural organization of the encyclopedia. The partners are responsible for the cost of sending persons to the management board meetings and sharing the travel costs of the managing editor. Is this still adequate?

The management board has assumed in earlier discussions that fundraising will be required for two staff positions: one for administration, publicity and fundraising, and the second for basic editorial management – uploading articles, coordinating correspondence, follow-up on articles, etc. Neither position would necessarily be full time initially. Priority needs to be given to the first position; I have volunteered one day a week for the second task through December 2008 (my retirement date).

For now the financial record-keeping has been done by the treasurer of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. Perhaps this is possible for the next few years, but longer term options may need to be found.

Are there other groups we should consider inviting to be part of the GAMEO project? With the exception of the Hutterites, we have not discussed the addition of other denominational partners, e.g. Brethren in Christ, Church of the Brethren, Missionary

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Church. We will hear more of the conversation with the Hutterites later in the agenda. The Brethren in Christ would be a logical fit since they were included in volumes 1-4, as were the former Mennonite Brethren in Christ (Missionary Church).

Editorial Committees

As suggested above, means need to be found to keep the editorial committees active. The U.S. committee is responsible for the scanning of volumes 1 & 2 of the print *Mennonite Encyclopedia*; the Canadian committee is responsible for volumes 3 & 4. I have completed work on volume 5.

Presently the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada pays the travel costs of the Canadian editorial group for its annual meeting, usually linked to the MHSC's meeting; this committee will next meet in January 2007. The U.S. editorial committee and the U.S. partners need to determine ways to best facilitate the work of the U.S. committee. We will have a meeting of at least part of the group Thursday afternoon.

Publicity / Logo

Our agenda includes discussion on these topics. **The present brochure is out of date because of the new partnerships and changes in committee membership. We need to decide if brochures have been useful and merit the expense of a revision. Likewise we should decide if a redesign of GAMEO's logo and look is warranted at this time.** We are still using the logo inherited from the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.

Mission Statement

Our mission statement is listed below. **Is it still adequate?**

The Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online provides reliable, freely-available English-language information on Anabaptist-related congregations, denominations, conferences, institutions and significant individuals, as well as historical and theological topics. Secular subject articles from an Anabaptist perspective and full-text source documents are also included.

I look forward to our discussion.

Sam Steiner,
Managing Editor