

Food in the Contemporary UK Anabaptist Movement

ANDREW FRANCIS¹

Food and the generous sharing of it have been central to the development of the Anabaptist witness, theology, and influence in the UK during the last seventy years. This has been but one of a few decisive factors that have seen Anabaptism take a renewed and respected place within the UK's spectrum of Christian faith. Post-World War II, a Mennonite witness was re-sown in London. A generation later, many of us wrestled privately with John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*,² Ronald Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*,³ or Donald Kraybill's *The Upside Down Kingdom*,⁴ wondering where and how we might find others to discuss them with. Peacemaking, social justice, and community all required something more than dry-as-dust historic denominationalism, as 1970s Britain descended into greater individualism at a personal level, but increasing secularism and a corrosive collectivism due to both political and Trade Union militancy. Whether as students or as believers in a radical Jesus, we had questions and hunger for a different kind of discipleship: "We would eat together, and enjoy extending hospitality. We would help each other to grow in understanding of social and political realities"⁵—often explored together over meals.

A Personal Journey

By the end of the 1970s, I had resigned from my career in industrial relations to attend an ecumenical seminary, and found myself at a south-coast student conference. I opted to accept a northward lift home. Our Baptist driver suggested

¹ Andrew Francis is a UK-based community theologian, whose Princeton doctoral dissertation used Mennonite theology to reflect upon Christian practices of hospitality. His published work includes *Anabaptism: Radical Christianity* (2010), *Hospitality and Community after Christendom* (2012), and *What in God's Name Are You Eating?: How Can Christians Live and Eat Responsibly in Today's Global Village?* (2014). He has served as the Executive Vice-Chair of the UK's Mennonite Trust, as the first UK Anabaptist Development Worker, and now co-convenes the UK Anabaptist Theology Forum.

² John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

³ Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Leicester, UK: IVP, 1972).

⁴ Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1985), 4.

⁵ Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, "I Have a Dream for My Church," *Anabaptism Today* 12 (June 1996): 5.

that we pause at the Mennonite Centre as we wove our way through north London. What? Who? I quickly forgot that Centre's welcoming mugs of tea with home-baked cookies and the surprising interest in my Churches of Christ background. But a few months later, a church history lecture made me realize that my Campbellite⁶ roots were in Anabaptism, and I hurried to learn more. It was several more years before the writings of Richard Hughes⁷ and others, as well as my personal discovery of Anabaptism, could affirm my journey.⁸

The relevant core details of that personal journey emerge as this article unfolds. When my ministry took me to the Southeast of England, I was able to join the master's program in Anabaptist Theology at Spurgeon's College in South London. Later, I joined the doctoral summer schools program at Princeton Theological Seminary to help prepare for my (successful) thesis on the shared, missiological use of food.⁹ While all this academic study was occurring, I was increasingly being drawn into the UK's growing Anabaptist movement and seeing an increasing use of food and shared meals across the breadth of my ministry within local congregations.

Biblical study at both academic and pastoral levels revealed so much. From Eden's provision (Gen 1 and 2) through Jacob's duping of his father (Gen 27), Passover (Exod 12), the "wilderness provision" (Exod 16 and 17), and Belshazzar's Feast (Dan 5), to the Psalms (e.g., Ps 23) and the Prophets (e.g., 1 Kgs 17, Isa 25:6 and 55:1), the Hebrew narratives of the Old Testament are woven through with the sharing of food. God's promise is affirmed by ongoing provision of at least enough, and often plenty. The Gospels record seventeen episodes of Jesus and the disciples sharing food, but these are also recounted in twenty-eight different accounts. Apart from the Crucifixion and Resurrection, only the Feeding of the Multitude and the Last Supper feature in detail across all four Gospels. "The meal became the cornerstone of the community. Jesus'

6 Alexander Campbell was one of the founding fathers of the Believers' Baptist-styled movement, which later became known as the Churches of Christ or Disciples of Christ, seeking to restore patterns of New Testament Christianity. They formed part of the nineteenth-century Restorationist movement, and local congregations were initially known as "Campbellites" (in similar fashion to "Mennonites").

7 C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering our Roots: The Ancestry of the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1988).

8 Andrew Francis, "A Sort of Homecoming," in *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland*, eds. Alan Kreider and Stuart Murray (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000), 57.

9 Andrew Francis, "How Then Shall We Eat?" (DMin thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2010).

teaching and example were at its core.”¹⁰ I believe that those serious about the biblical witness, Jesus’s teaching, or *nachfolge*¹¹ cannot fail to ignore the communal sharing of food as part of our discipleship practice.

Sadly, denominational Christianity in Britain faced increasing pressures in many ways as congregations generally diminished the challenge of discipleship, allowing a dissatisfying Sunday “churchianity” to develop. It was hardly surprising that, from the 1960s onward, new forms of home-based and North American-style megachurches began.¹² Surprisingly (to me), neither the historic nor the emerging strands of UK Christianity seemed to use meals as part of their strategic practice and mission. It was only within Anabaptist circles, or within the emerging *ALPHA* course practice,¹³ that sharing meals was seen as vital to developing discipleship. I doubted whether these two patterns of mission (Anabaptist and *ALPHA*) could be seriously combined.¹⁴

My life journey was taking me into Anabaptist life and communities while I was studying both the Bible and church history. What I encountered, alongside many others, were the diverse levels of the Anabaptist Network, the open-door hospitality and burgeoning ministries of the London Mennonite Centre, and shared lunches at the anonymously-Anabaptist Workshop Course. Together, all these brought many to accept Anabaptist discipleship, ecclesiology, and mission as decisive contributions to the UK spectrum of discipleship. The question of “How much is that contribution to be?” is still unfolding.

History and Tradition

Within Britain, until the late Middle Ages, the vast majority of permanent places of worship were part of abbeys or monasteries or manorial estates.¹⁵ All were places of protection, welcome, and hospitality and therefore of food. Logic implies that if the populace traveled some distance to corporate worship, the

10 Noel Moules, *Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace* (Winchester, UK: Circle Books, 2012), 170.

11 *Nachfolge*: German for “following after”—the term normally used to describe Anabaptist-style discipleship.

12 Andrew Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom: The Radical Christianity of the House Church Movement* (London: Eagle, 1998).

13 Nicky Gumbel, *Telling Others: How to Run the Alpha Course?* (London, UK: Alpha International, 2010).

14 Andrew Francis, “*ALPHA*: Is It an Anabaptist Way of Mission?” *Anabaptism Today* 18 (Summer 1998): 3–9.

15 J. R. H. Moormann, *A History of the Church in England* (London: A&C Black, 1953), 68ff.

sharing of food would be a natural part of both the journey and the gathering of the faithful: consider Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Bede¹⁶ records the Northumbrian king, Oswald, feeding the faithful as they gathered for worship.¹⁷ This pattern of gathering either pilgrims or populace for worship was replicated across Europe until well after the first millennium.

The pattern of sharing food was also natural within dissenting, radical communities all across Europe both before and after the Reformation.¹⁸ The Waldensians and Franciscans have practiced the communal sharing of food since their pre-Reformation beginnings. UK county records document meetings of both English Independents and Quakers involving food; often upon interruption by the persecuting state authorities, they could claim they were just friends sharing a meal.

Therefore, when we come to consider the Anabaptist history of the Radical Reformation, it would be a surprise if the sharing of food and meals together were not a part of our history and practice. A brief history of our movement as it is oriented toward food sharing should be helpful. Our movement has polygenetic roots.

It is hard to imagine, and consequently fair to assume, the group convened by Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich—made up of highly educated humanists and church attendees—regularly meeting without eating. They followed the collegial patterns of the intellectual liberal circles in Strasbourg, involving Erasmus. How could men who could afford books or copies of the New Testament not afford the wine or bread-and-cheese platters for the guests in their home? When in 1525 George Blaurock, a traveling preacher, attended one such meeting and pleaded, “For God’s sake, baptize me,” he was baptized, and so were several others. This was an act of sedition—it would not have happened if the participants did not have strong enough relationships to trust each other with their lives. Except in extreme moments of warfare, it is again hard to imagine that trust-building could have taken place without sharing regularly around a table in Bible study, prayer, and food. But in those moments, the Swiss Brethren formed (if only in later scholars’ minds), and one part of that movement became known by their opponents as the *Wiedertäufer*, or Anabaptists.

Within the South German and Austrian history of our movement, itinerancy and exile became part of its fabric. Hans Hut was a traveling evangelist

16 Bede, *A History of the English Church and People* (London: Penguin, 1977), 150.

17 Andrew Francis, *Hospitality and Community after Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2012), 21.

18 *Ibid.*, 22–29.

for Anabaptism under the cover of itinerant bookselling before being accused of his Anabaptist beliefs, followed by torture and death. He likely relied on the hospitality of supporters for the provision of shelter, food, and conversation, for this was the recognized regional practice of itinerant merchants and sellers. As persecution of the newly forming Anabaptist groups grew, they fled eastward toward Moravia. Cornelius J. Dyck refers clearly to the spreading of cloaks on the ground to display material goods that the “less fortunate” could take and utilize¹⁹—‘community of goods’ was a natural part of this grouping.²⁰ It was hardly surprising that when and where they could settle peaceably, they lived communally. “Eventually they were to move to where the community owned everything and gave each person their tasks to perform as well as their food, clothing and housing.”²¹ In this communality, we see both the developments of the Hutterian Brethren then and the roots of the later Bruderhof. The sharing of food, which began at an individual level, grew into an integral part of the communal nature of such distinctive Anabaptism. While I have no desire to airbrush Münster’s aberration²² from our history, it has no real place in this brief survey of our historical roots except to warn against the excesses of power and wrongly enforced communality.

The Netherlandish spread of our movement relied on hospitality and generosity to at least the same degree as in South Germany or Austria. This is not the article to retell or formally assess the relative contributions of Melchior Hoffman or Dirk and Obbe Philips, although the theology and writings of the first two require serious assessment. Following Dirk Philips’s example in particular, the ministry and mission of the Catholic-priest-turned-Anabaptist Menno Simons becomes our first Dutch focus. Like Hut, Simons relied in his itinerant ministry upon the protection and hospitality of key supporters, as well as their money to keep his wife and children from penury; one such benefactor was Tjard Reynders, until his eventual arrest and execution. This left Simons

19 Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 73.

20 James M. Stayer, *The German Peasants’ War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 1994), 105.

21 Dyck, *Mennonite History*, 74.

22 The Westphalian city of Münster was declared to be an Anabaptist city by its dictatorial and apocalyptically charged leaders of Jan Matthijs and Jan van Leiden from 1534 to 1535. Their ultra-revolutionary vision, which enforced both polygamy and total communalism, was violently suppressed by the regional authorities, with the named and other leaders being executed. To this day, Münster remains a stain on Anabaptism’s character.

so dangerously exposed that William R. Estep's and Bender's²³ sources about the persecuting authorities can be summarized thus: "All persons were enjoined against giving Menno food or shelter.... Complete pardon for any crime committed was promised to anyone delivering the renowned heretic into the hands of the authorities."²⁴ The authorities hated both Menno and the spread of biblical Anabaptism, persecuting both leaders and supporters. But for our purpose, note that it was sufficiently common for the nascent Anabaptist community to share food—if only as hospitality to visiting leaders, and my perception (after talking with those who have studied Dutch civic records) is that it was a much broader, if not commonplace, practice among the *Doopgezinde*.

These biblical Anabaptists became known as Menists, then later as Menno-nites. Initially their heartland was the tidal marshlands of northern Friesland, but there is clear evidence that Menno preached not just in the northern cities of Groningen and Leeuwarden but as far south as Amsterdam. There, a focus of missionary activity was Jan Munter's bakehouse, where enquirers and potential converts shared in the life and work, as well as the meal table and conversation around it. It was in Munter's bakehouse that John Smith and Thomas Helwys lodged and worked while working out their Baptist principles; they returned to England to found what has become the Baptist Church in Britain.²⁵ "The witness by lifestyle attracted many new converts but exasperated the authorities."²⁶

Another part of the Anabaptist story continues in the raid of a house in Aldgate, London, on Easter morning 1575. There, an expatriate group from Flanders had gathered to pray and read the Bible; would they have eaten together as well? We have no evidence for any assumption, but they were successfully prosecuted for being some of those "dangerous radicals" known as Anabaptists. A few weeks later, two were burned horribly at the stake, both as a punishment to themselves and punitive warning to others.²⁷ But extant

23 Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Harold S. Bender*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA, Herald, 1957), 33.

24 William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 122.

25 Roger Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage: A Christian Training Programme Course* (Didcot, UK: BUGB, 1990).

26 Stuart Murray, "Introducing the Anabaptists," *Anabaptism Today* 14 (February 1997): 13.

27 Alan Kreider, "When Anabaptists Were Last in the British Isles," in *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland*, eds. Alan Kreider and Stuart Murray (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000), 176ff.

county records demonstrate that “despite this, the majority of Dutch migrants were Anabaptists and by 1587, these migrants constituted the majority of Norwich’s population.’ Extant historical records from this era point to the presence of Anabaptists in [many towns] . . . as well as London. However, the slur of Münster and ongoing persecution meant that most English Anabaptists went ‘underground’ joining Brownist congregations. The latter were an English Separatist movement.”²⁸ Although in the longer term they may have suffered some earthly privation, it was better to be a Brownist or an English Baptist than a declared but hated Anabaptist!

What the non-British reader now may not appreciate is how little of this past history was generally known in recent years, except to Reformation scholars. Very few church history books even carried this article’s level of Anabaptist history. Most focused on the Münster aberration and consequent general pejoration of the Anabaptist movement. The decisive 1572 Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England still condemns Anabaptists: “The ryches and goodes of Christians are not common, as touching the ryght, title, and possession of the same, as certayne Anabaptistes do falsely boast.”²⁹ When I entered an ecumenical seminary in 1979, this remained the common approach. Even reputable church history books³⁰ dismissed Anabaptism within a few paragraphs.

It is hardly surprising, given the Tudor Church of England’s vitriol toward the whole concept of Anabaptism, that its trail went cold for over 350 years. It was not until after 1647 and the ending of the English Civil War that the Church of England even had to concede that radical (and even more established) Christian movements such as the Independents (Congregationalists), Presbyterians, Baptists, and later the Quakers, had some rights of co-existence.³¹

In summary, the sharing of food was both a natural and essential part of our historic tradition. History is not always proclaimed by the winners but can only be told by its survivors. Every history is nuanced by what its protagonists want to emphasize. Therefore a reading of early Anabaptist history that considers its use of shared meals is appropriate—as would a history told from a different stance of, say, peacemaking or ecclesiology, et cetera. Using either known

28 Andrew Francis, *Anabaptism: Radical Christianity* (Bristol, UK: Antioch, 2010), 11.2. The internal quotation is from George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirkville, MS: Sixteenth Century Journals, 1992), 1205.

29 *The Book of Common Prayer* (Westminster: Church of England, 1928), 606.

30 E.g., Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (London: Penguin, 1990).

31 See Andrew Bradstock, *Faith in the Revolution: The Political Theologies of Müntzer and Winstanley* (London: SPCK, 1997).

Anabaptist history or sociological sources³² about general practices in Northern Europe allows appropriate recognition that practices such as the sharing of food within literate circles or the provision of hospitality for trusted itinerant contacts would have naturally occurred within Anabaptist contexts, too.

The Contemporary UK Growth of Anabaptist Influence

During the rise of Nazi Germany, various Bruderhof communities went into voluntary self-exile. One group ended up in middle England, and by their own hard labor, earning agricultural wages they purchased a series of neighboring small farms in rural Shropshire. During the war years, the Bruderhof became renowned for its food production, even if some of the local populace could not understand their pacifism. This very fact enabled some single men, who were Conscientious Objectors to war, to join them. In the 1950s, the remnant of this group moved several times, finally relocating to a former isolated tuberculosis hospital at Robertsbridge, near the Sussex coast. But in both Shropshire and later, Sussex, the Bruderhof's community of goods and refectory meals spoke clearly to and attracted Quakers, anarchists, and radical Christians. At the time of this writing, three English Bruderhof communities still continue; each witnessing their communal life to their local contexts, which includes the daily sharing of meals.

Alongside the impact of the Bruderhof, North American Mennonite relief work during the mid-Second World War saw John Coffman distribute aid in North London. But after that disastrous global conflict, wealthier North American Mennonites adopted a long-term strategy of support, both financial and through staff appointment, across several impoverished European nations. So in the early 1950s, to help counter innate racism, the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities opened a student hostel for overseas students in a newly purchased house—only yards from Coffman's former base in North London. This became the London Mennonite Centre, placed under the leadership of Quintus and Miriam Leatherman, who utilized food sharing to establish its ministry. "Miriam cooked countless meals for students—her Sunday dinners were legendary. She also presided properly at tea-time, which became another Centre institution.... They entered into a national Friday ritual by taking the bus . . . to buy fish and chips. They . . . enabled the Centre to become a kind of international village; smells of Ugandan, Chinese and Indian cooking waft-

32 E.g., Johan Huizinga, *Dutch Civilisation in the 17th Century* (London: Fontana, 1968).

ed from the Centre's various kitchens."³³ As part of Quintus Leatherman's ministry, a London Mennonite Fellowship began, predominantly attracting residential students. This continued upon the Leathermans's retirement, with the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities sending Menno and Shirley Friesen to replace them in 1969, with afternoon tea and international cooking remaining fully part of the Centre's menu.

Since the late 1970s, there has been further quiet growth of UK interest in Anabaptism. Much of this has originated from that changing witness and hospitality of the London Mennonite Centre. In 1974 the US Mennonite Board of Missions sent Alan and Eleanor Kreider as missionaries—he a church historian, she a liturgist and musician—to be based at the London Mennonite Centre.³⁴ This large, North London house, near Highgate tube station, was fast becoming a center of study, welcome, and hospitality.

After Alan Kreider became program director—bringing his courageous teaching and willingness to share of the Centre's growing library—most British students continued to learn of Anabaptism's reality through contemporary human encounter and the experience of that hospitality. In many ways, this was advantageous, as we were learning from a living tradition rather than from knowing much history—for we certainly did not know which sympathetic-to-Anabaptism books to read. Looking back, we can recognize that central to all of this have been the ministries of key individuals, firstly the Coffmans, Leathermans, and Friesens but particularly the life and work of Alan and Eleanor Kreider and the volunteer North American host couples who worked with them.

From the 1970s, many were drawn to the London Mennonite Centre, including radical young UK Christians who continued to form a residential community, sharing meals, daily prayer, and witnessing together to core Anabaptist values such as peacemaking. Now under the Kreiders' tutelage and gracious leadership, the Center's visitor numbers grew and daily gatherings of visitors, residents, and library users cohered around morning coffee and those afternoon tea times. This nurtured conversations and diverse friendship, fostered networking, and modeled patterns of discipleship and community. The Kreiders' personal friendship with and influence upon many of us have been life-changing. Some of that influence is visible in the leadership of new forms of inde-

33 Alan Kreider, "The London Mennonite Centre's First Fifty Years," *Anabaptism Today* 32 (February 2003): 3.

34 James R. Krabill and Stuart Murray, eds., *Forming Christian Habits in Post-Christendom: The Legacy of Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2011).

pendent congregations that are rediscovering believers' baptism and community for themselves. One such leader, Roger Forster, led the South London Ichthus Fellowship.³⁵ As his speaking ministry grew (among a very different, predominantly evangelical constituency), he often bore personal testimony to Anabaptist history and witness.

By the 1980s, the London Mennonite Fellowship had covenanted together as a congregation, meeting at the Centre on Sundays for worship and tea and increasingly during the midweek for meals. Sharing food became integral to the Centre's life, witness, and hospitality in North London, for holidaying Americans—those living or regularly worshipping there—as well as the more occasional visitor.

Alongside these developments, the Himalayan-born Noel Moules had been so inspired by “Jesus the peacemaker” and the witness of radical Christians and their ongoing diaspora communities³⁶ that he founded a leadership and discipleship training course called Workshop. As this grew, Moules's friendship with the Kreiders and his personal study and prayer all led to Workshop developing as a year-long, non-residential, weekends-only course in various UK locations each month, that was totally oriented to Anabaptism. At each course, weekend participants shared lunch together and regularly celebrated a Jesus-style “peace meal.” Over the course of twenty-five plus years, many hundreds of people attended Workshop, including elders and other leaders from the congregations that I was then serving as pastor. Attendees' testimonies acknowledged that it was *both* Moules's teaching *and* the sharing of food that helped them grow toward a fuller understanding of church—effectively toward an Anabaptist ecclesiology.

The Kreider-led development of the London Centre's Cross Currents teaching program of Saturday and weekend seminars was enhanced by the provision of generous meals and home-baked cookies for participants by those volunteer North American host couples. We ate our way into Anabaptism—cornbread, white bean soup, great salads, vegetarian enchiladas, shoofly pie, lemon drizzle bars, conversion cake—as we learned how to make this flavored discipleship work in our own lives and locations!

Alongside these developments, the London Mennonite Fellowship had morphed into the Wood Green Mennonite Church, becoming increasingly independent but still using the Centre's facilities for its communal meals and

35 Ichthus Christian Fellowship, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.ichthus.org.uk/>.

36 Noel Moules, *Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace: A Spiritual Manifesto from a Jesus Perspective* (Winchester, UK: Circle Books, 2012).

fortnightly Bible studies. The church also gained numbers via London-based enquirers about Mennonite values and witness.

One such person was Alastair McKay, who by the mid-1990s had founded a neighborhood mediation service, then undertook a conflict transformation master's degree at Eastern Mennonite University before returning to develop the Centre's Bridge Builders conflict transformation and training unit.³⁷ Like many others, I still benefit from and continue to use skills gained from their weeklong training module in "transforming congregational conflict," led by Richard Blackburn of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center in Chicago. But what also enhanced that course as a rich learning experience for many was the hospitality, welcome, and food provided by the hosts and volunteer team of the London Mennonite Centre, where the course was based. This "enhancement" was recorded annually in the course appraisals of participants. Initially, many of the Bridge Builders' course participants were drawn from the UK's burgeoning Anabaptist Network; now, senior denominational leaders and local pastors from many traditions form the majority of their clientele, all experiencing that Anabaptist-style hospitality.

The Anabaptist Network was launched in 1991 following the model of informal conversations, shared meals, and discussions that was initially facilitated by Alan Kreider at the London Mennonite Centre. Those involved included Moules, Stuart Murray—a writer and church-planter from East London—and David Nussbaum, a theologian and accountant, who was part of the Wood Green Mennonite Church's leadership. They formed a national steering group and encouraged the formation of independent regional study groups. Because of the distances involved, nearly all of these initial groups met over the meal table before sharing study and prayer.

When the Kreiders moved in 1991 to a teaching role at Manchester's dissenting ecumenical seminary, Luther King House, their London Centre successor, Nelson Kraybill, worked with Murray to start the thrice-yearly journal, *Anabaptism Today*. Kraybill worked in the Kreider mold but with a penchant for theological networking that frequently helped to lift the Mennonite cause into the media's positive attention. Kraybill's own brother, Ron, was the founding Director of the US Mennonite Conciliation Service, who came to London to lead a one-off conflict mediation course; it was this that inspired McKay's 1990s vision (see above). Kraybill was responsible for enabling the initial fund-

³⁷ Alastair McKay, "Conflict in the Church: Threat or Opportunity?," *Anabaptism Today* 27, (Summer 2001): 19–23.

ing of both Bridge Builders,³⁸ supporting its staffing, and helping facilitate McKay's training.

During my 1996 sabbatical, which focused on spirituality and community, I stayed for a few days at the London Mennonite Centre and was never without an evening meal invitation from one of the staff or other residents. Kraybill met with me personally over a lunch of his home-cooked soup as we talked through an "Anabaptist vision for the UK"; I still have my notes from that day. Now that Kraybill is the Mennonite World Conference President, we need to never let go of his desire to provide hospitality and be the humble host, in true Jesus pattern. He offers such a central example to all our ministries and witness.

The Network sponsored biannual Saturday conferences, during which networking and fellowship were key priorities. As the friendships grew during the 1990s, I recall personally several such conferences ending with a group of us going out to eat together before traveling home. On a few occasions, the Network also coordinated a pattern of weekend group visits to stay in the (then, only) UK Bruderhof at Robertsbridge, sharing fully in its communal but gender-segregated lifestyle, yet learning more of our broader Anabaptist tradition of community, including eating and working together.

Stuart Murray was now teaching at Spurgeon's College and co-leading the master's program in Anabaptist theology, in which I participated as a student. All master's students were invited to lunch together before each of our two long, afternoon seminars; somehow this humanized the punishing demands that absorbed much of my weekly day off. I had come home, finding an academic counterpoint to the two Anabaptist cells to which I then belonged—but all involved food and eating together.

In 1997 I was appointed as the Network's first Development Worker, dovetailing the Network-funded few days each month into my ongoing United Reformed Church (URC) ministry; it was symbiotic and creative. As I visited regional study groups, I often stayed and ate with these groups and other local Christian leaders, answering questions, explaining our cause; it became just as important to share the community aspects of Anabaptist life as to witness to our other values or tell of our history. I was then also part of the Network's national Steering Group, now under Murray's chairmanship, which met three times per year but always and necessarily included a meal for us all. As one of my URC colleagues remarked, "Anabaptists do church in different ways."

38 Nelson Kraybill, "Conflict and Church Decision Making," *Anabaptism Today* 11, (February 1996): 18–22.

The book *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland*,³⁹ published in 2000, still acts as a useful calibration of Anabaptism's growing influence. A core of this book is fifty-plus testimonies from individuals nationwide. Nearly all name the community aspect, study-cell groups, and literature as reasons for their own involvement, but only about ten mention meals and food directly. Since then, I have met and talked with about forty of those contributors, and *Coming Home* and other favorite books are well-mentioned during these times. When I have quizzed them about the importance of "eating together," most have responded that it was so much their usual pattern of Anabaptist gathering that it seemed unnecessary to use precious words on it. Biblically, I reflect how little the pattern of Acts 2:42–47 is mentioned across the New Testament Christian communities; perhaps we all forget to state the obvious.

Sharing food is central to our contemporary UK Anabaptism—whether in the London Centre's life (including Cross Currents), the nature of the regional Anabaptist study groups and conferences, or the "education" patterns of both Bridge Builders and Workshop. Within Anabaptism, people are "tasting and seeing" a different pattern of witness for both the sharing of discipleship and the nature of church.

A Developing Anabaptist Diaspora

In the intervening years, many of *Coming Home*'s contributors have noted the importance of eating together and hospitality to their own personal rediscovery of Anabaptist values and literature. I was able to experience this in my travels as the Anabaptist Network's Development Worker, and draw from such testimonies for my successful doctoral thesis at Princeton.⁴⁰ Now, Murray and I rarely find ourselves teaching or encouraging newly forming Anabaptist-oriented groups without using the "no meeting without eating" mantra.

There have been many changes, but the number of individuals who identify themselves as Anabaptists is growing. The influence and acceptance of our movement is broadening, but the task here is not simply documentary or formal consideration of economic and political influences but noting the movement's use of food. It is easy when reading this type of essay to forget how few of us UK Anabaptist/Mennonites there are, but space precludes proper analysis of how indicators of post-Christendom, such as increasing secularism and changing UK ecclesiologies, have contributed to people's search, re-discovery, and acknowledgement of Anabaptist influences.

In the past twenty years, there has been a distinct blurring between some

39 Kreider and Murray, *Coming Home*.

40 Francis, "How Then Shall We Eat?"

of the Anabaptist Network's study groups and their role as home-based worshipping communities. Groups began writing their own meal-based liturgies and sharing them with increasing regularity. Involvement in campaigns for justice or peacemaking led some individuals to an increasing dissatisfaction with their rooting in traditional denominationalism. For several of us, the wrestling involved in daily recommitting oneself to praying and publicly witnessing with those who oppose Anabaptist values, becomes ever harder. The life and relationships of a local Anabaptist cell becomes the seed-bed for the Spirit's creativity and a more vibrant spirituality. Wanting to spend time in those renewing contexts leads many into groups that eat, pray, and work together with increasing frequency.

In the late 1990s, the largest study group was in the West Midlands, which often met in three distinct locations, forty miles from each other for a mid-week meal, study, and prayer, creating more localized informal communities. They included a former Bruderhof couple, former Quakers, new and disaffected Christians, as well as those who took the Anabaptist leaven into the lump of historic congregations, but they also met all together for summer grills, Christmas parties, and seasonal study days. But death and diverging professional demands mean that particular corporate life has gone, evolving into several smaller and different groups.

Leatherman's wisdom in forging the London Mennonite Fellowship was complemented by the discernment of Kreider and then Kraybill in their advocacy to resist forming further Mennonite congregations and therefore needing another denominational structure. What they and their successors did was far more powerful in affirming the ministries of particular worshipping groups across Britain. Glasgow's Monday-night "Bert" congregation—whose meetings over thirty years have included food—has increasingly found itself identifying with the values of Jesus as emphasized by Anabaptism, and enabling its members to import radical Christian values into their professional lives.⁴¹ During the past decade, South Birmingham's "PeaceChurch" has evolved in three locations, with their fortnightly meetings wrapped around a shared Sunday lunch, when often children can outnumber adult attendees. Contemporary UK Anabaptism is reaching toward the next generations. Murray's forthcoming book, *A Vast Minority: Church and Mission in a Plural Culture*, will serve as an encouraging reminder of UK Anabaptism's nature.⁴²

⁴¹ Francis, *Hospitality and Community*, 67.

⁴² Stuart Murray, *A Vast Minority: Church and Mission in a Plural Culture* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2015).

Challenge arrives in the advent of new groups, however. The gathering of an independent African Mennonite congregation in Northwest England (most often in Liverpool) tells of Anabaptism's global spread. A predominantly Brazilian, Portuguese-speaking Mennonite congregation has planted itself near England's south coast; some of their participants travel fifty miles from London for their weekly gatherings. They share our Anabaptist distinctives, including eating together, but language is one of the main barriers precluding greater fellowship. But across England and South Wales, study groups have formed, met, eaten, prayed, and learned together over years, then faded away as professional relocation or life-demands upon participants changed. New study groups are gradually and gently emerging.

The needs of the global Mennonite family have affected the Anabaptist cause in the changes surrounding the London Mennonite Centre. Each successive director has brought new and enriching developments but in an increasing time of northern hemisphere austerity. North American Mennonite subsidies and grants were (rightly) slashed year-upon-year, with the result that the maintenance-and-renewal budget of the aging four-story quadruple-fronted London Mennonite Centre, with its high city taxes, was compromised. The building was becoming totally unaffordable just as the need for greater hospitality (more cookies, more meals!), more subsidized programs, and staff time were needed as more people became interested in Anabaptism's witness. The Centre was approaching bankruptcy, and I was invited to join its Board of Trustees on the same January 2009 night as the last director's contract was not renewed. Within weeks, I accepted becoming the (honorary) Executive Vice-Chair, and began working closely with our volunteer host couple, Ed and Phyllis Shirk (now back in Denver, CO) and our English staff team to "save the Centre." We received the prayerful, unstinting support of the trustee board. As subsidized residents left, we sold in advance holiday bed-nights to future North American Mennonite tourists, who would buy the very beds that they would sleep in with the dollar deposits that they sent in advance.

During the 1970s, the Centre developed a bookstore called *Metanoia*, with sales at the door, at conferences, and by post. Over its thirty years, the accredited figures show that the two consistent best sellers were John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* and Doris Janzen Longacre's *More-with-Less Cookbook*.⁴³ Two points should be made here. First, the sales figures echoed the UK practice of Anabaptist discipleship as that was often expressed around the meal

43 Doris Janzen Longacre, *More-with-Less Cookbook* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990).

table, using meals tasted at the Centre or regional conferences. Second, other lifestyle books⁴⁴ and cookbooks⁴⁵ sold just as much as, if not more than, books of Anabaptist history. This fact points to the practicality of UK Anabaptist discipleship, mission, and learning.

By 2000 *Metanoia's* profit had become a vital and major part of the Centre's UK-based income, but by 2010 the corrosive power of discounting global online booksellers had destroyed it, to the despair of its long-serving manager, Will Newcomb, who was also one of the Centre's accomplished cooks (and who has now retired to China).

The years 2009 and 2010 provided halcyon summers, with many visitors, book sales, and shared meals, but the London Mennonite Centre could not remain a tourist hotel without significant investment, nor maintain its significant subsidy and grant to Bridge Builders. To protect the latter's interest, McKay worked hard with committed supporters and the Centre's staff and board to enable Bridge Builders to become an independent charity. Now, having moved to its own offices, it continues to widely provide conflict mediation services to congregations, and training in those skills to denominational leaders—both such activities continue to be rooted in the sharing of fellowship meals, demonstrating broader practical application of Anabaptist values.

A June 2011 Thanksgiving service and grill, shared by visitors from across Britain and Ireland, as well as guests from Europe and North America, preceded the board's closure and sale of the Centre. But the message was one of hope and expansion—even for the Wood Green Mennonite Church, which lost their midweek meeting and meals venue. All UK groups had to look toward their own particular Anabaptist expressions to declare the future—and that involved many without previous responsibilities joining in the conversation, often meeting for meals to pursue the vision. The Mennonite Trust sought to relocate a “mother house” in a strongly Quaker neighborhood in south Birmingham. The initial ministry there was led by the Shirks' volunteer successors, Darrell and Barbara Jantz (now retired to Newton, KS), who welcomed many for meals and conversation. Together we planted a vegetable garden, led worship in local churches, and helped develop a network of student houses in Birmingham. Alas, new zoning planning laws disallowed the economic redevelopment of

44 E.g., Art Meyer and Jocele Meyer, *Earthkeepers: Environmental Perspectives on Hunger, Poverty, and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1991); Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living More with Less* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980); or Athol Gill, *Life on the Road* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1989).

45 Phyllis Pellman Good and Louise Stoltzfus, *The Best of Mennonite Fellowship Meals* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1991).

guest accommodation at that new Menno House there, while new UK immigration criteria ended the Mennonite Trust's use of volunteer hosts on three-year contracts from North America.

Now that my four-year term as a trustee has finished, my ongoing colleagues use the Trust's resources in new and dynamic ways to help build an Anabaptist diaspora across Britain. As an example, two leaders from Urban Expression, an Anabaptist-oriented church-planting charity, have been provided with low interest loans or low-rent homes to create places of welcome and hospitality in different locations. Another Birmingham property, "Kreider House," is used also as a place of welcome and hospitality as well as to accommodate the Anabaptist Network's national outreach worker and visiting educators from the global Anabaptist family. The sharing of meals is still at the heart of Anabaptist witness and expansion.

In recent years, the Bruderhof, now with their three distinct southern England communities, have chosen to be far more expansive in their hospitality and involvements. Their upgrading of the style of their international *Plough* publication books has brought them more publicity, sales, and interest. This new interest echoes the broader interest in the Amish after the 1985 Peter Weir film, *Witness*,⁴⁶ starring Harrison Ford, was released. Increasingly, the Bruderhof send strong representatives to national Anabaptist events, who are both good ambassadors for their own tradition and for the wider movement. This often results in non-Anabaptists asking to stay for residential visits with the larger Bruderhof communities, where the communal refectories and shared labor tell of their alternative-valued life together.

As a separate and independent development from the Centre and the Network, the Anabaptist Theology Forum is nearly twenty years old and endeavors to meet biannually and residentially. The sense of intermittent community has been important in the development of this ad hoc group of academics, writers, educators, and study-group leaders. Over the years, this forum has met in a variety of venues, including Anglican retreat houses and the Baptist International Mission Centre; each time, the dialogue over meals with the other guests at each venue has almost been as important as the seminars shared within the forum's program.

Increasingly, Murray and Moules are convening various configurations of Anabaptist personnel to facilitate formal discussions with different groups in the development of Anabaptist values in the UK. Recently, one such gathering involved leaders from the UK Churches of Christ to explore our shared—or not

46 *Witness*, directed by Peter Weir (Paramount Pictures, 1985).

shared—peace-making traditions. The day was built around a “Peace Meal” and lunch, using a liturgy that Moules devised with participants from Workshop and a local Sheffield group of which he is a part. This pattern of fellowship is atypical of how the UK Anabaptist movement seeks to proceed in informal conversation and more formal dialogue with others.

Last fall (2014), the new Centre for Anabaptist Studies, under Murray’s leadership, opened at the Bristol Baptist College. Six thousand books from the former London Mennonite Centre are on designated shelves in the library there and available for on-site research. It has been humbling to receive such open welcome to use their facilities and to participate in college lunches (for a modest price) by arrangement. Again, conversation over lunch with visiting Anabaptists is increasing respect for our values as well as our influence.

The contemporary UK Anabaptist movement owes a huge debt to the life, witness, and leaders of the London Mennonite Centre, including the traditions of shared meals and open hospitality, as well as the provision of both staff and finance from North American Mennonite agencies for over fifty years. This contemporary UK movement is now moving into its own value-laden maturity but with the tradition of shared meals and open hospitality as a necessary and central part in its developing witness. The common usage of Mennonite cookbooks and particular food styles, predominantly vegetarian, is marking the Anabaptist “community” in specific ways: as “earth-friendly,” ethical, etc.⁴⁷

In Conclusion

It is vital to reiterate more fully the introduction’s caveat, that the spread of UK Anabaptism owes a huge debt to the practice of eating together in many different contexts—but it is not the whole narrative. The equally important contributions of several key individuals or the life and work generated at the former London Mennonite Centre as well as the winsome witness and welcome of regional groups or the growing corpus of UK-generated Anabaptist literature would all find their rightful place in differently themed issues of *Anabaptist Witness*. Acknowledgement has already been made of North American Mennonite agency provision of both staff and financial support. All have been instrumental in the development of the present UK Anabaptist diaspora.

Across (at least northern) Europe, we are witnessing post-Christendom, which is different from postmodernity. What we can see is that nations that formerly identified as Christian, and often had state churches, are finding that Christianity is being pushed to the margins, while only 5 to 10 percent of their

⁴⁷ This writer’s own book *What in God’s Name Are You Eating?* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014) has already been used by various groups to help redefine such ethical eating.

inhabitants profess any form of active Christian belief. The right not to pay church taxes to the Lutheran Church in Germany, or the separation of church and state in France in 1912, are but two examples. Britain is another, with its multifaith society, which has more Muslims than Church of England members, and rising secularism, particularly in education and the popular media.

Britain needs to urgently find ways of being and doing church differently. The multi-voiced⁴⁸ Anabaptist community declares that it can be part of that difference within the broader catholic spectrum of reexploring hospitality against the UK's increasingly post-Christendom environment, in which the search for a coherent spirituality becomes vital. People need to "taste and see," to experience such vibrant community around the meal table. "For many Anabaptists, the kitchen or the dining table, rather than the sanctuary, is the iconic meeting place."⁴⁹

One Anabaptist initiative led by Murray is the organization and editing of a set of "After Christendom" titles. In one volume, the Kreiders wisely write that "many outsiders find it easier to cross the threshold of a home-church, where Jesus' presence is acknowledged in a meal . . . than it is to enter a church building for a gathering of a Christian congregation."⁵⁰ In another volume, I explore both how others are unwittingly rediscovering such practices, and how Anabaptist groups, as well as home-produced liturgies, can encourage others in this opportunity.⁵¹

Let me offer...

Three distinct conclusions:

1. Anabaptism, historically and contemporarily, has distinctive communal dimensions in the expression of discipleship. One of those dimensions is the "community of goods" that commonly finds its expression in the sharing of meals.

48 Sian Murray Williams and Stuart Murray Williams, *The Power of All: Building a Multi-Voiced Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2012). Williams and Williams define the "multi-voiced church" as one that operates with "an expectation that the whole community is gifted, called, empowered, and expected to be involved in all aspects of church life" (21).

49 Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2010), 105.

50 Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2010), 215.

51 Francis, *Hospitality and Community*.

2. During the last four decades, Anabaptism in Britain has been enriched by the exemplary life, witness, hospitality, and shared meals of London Mennonite Centre, learning to emulate this practice in order to foster, encourage, and nurture the growth and development of the movement.
3. And Anabaptism has a distinctive multi-voiced approach in expressing community to find greater acceptance within post-Christendom Britain.

Two clear cautions:

1. Christendom's developments were/are not all bad (such as the canon of scripture), and its demise is a predominantly North European phenomena.
2. And we need to recognize that UK Anabaptism is a miniscule Christian community but with a disproportionately big voice

And four objectives for ongoing witness and growth:

1. We need to recognize the importance and opportunity of a diaspora model within advancing post-Christendom.
2. We must pray and strategically plan for developing the UK witness of Jesus-shaped, Anabaptist-style discipleship, which needs to build on the lessons of our past.
3. We should seek to nurture a network of table-based UK Anabaptist home churches.
4. And, finally, we must acknowledge that "the emphasis on community, eating, sharing together and valuing each other as a base for mission represents . . . the essence of church."⁵²

It is my contention that there is a growing diaspora of Anabaptists gathering in pockets or cells in these islands. An overwhelmingly majority base their life and witness around the meal table as an intrinsic part of their study, prayer, and expression of nascent community. Britain's multicultural nature and changing ecclesiologies mean that the developing UK Anabaptist vision is sufficiently coherent and multi-voiced to attract more participants and new listeners within post-Christendom Britain.

Learning from our history and roots, we can recognize that *nachfolge* discipleship must have a communal dimension in both its sharing and serving.

⁵² Linda Wilson, an Anabaptist Network participant quoted in Murray, *Naked Anabaptist*, 48.

The opportunity for further growth and strategic planning now rests in an indigenous and independent contemporary UK Anabaptist stream. “Because hospitality is basic to who we are as followers of Jesus, every aspect of our lives can be touched by its practice”⁵³ in every local Anabaptist cell.

In the sharing of food, we declare what we believe about the world and about Jesus: “Hospitality shapes not only the life of those who accept an invitation to a meal, Hospitality re-shapes the group which makes the invitation.”⁵⁴ And we are continuing to repeatedly learn this in UK Anabaptist circles.

53 Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 150.

54 Francis, *Hospitality and Community*, 48.