

Peace and Agriculture:

Local Food in a Mennonite Context

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This paper examines how the concepts of nonviolence and social nonconformity inform decisions about consumption of food by Mennonites in North America. It also places these commitments in the larger context of secular Western culture to demonstrate how nonviolence and nonconformity can help Mennonites better participate in local food movements. *Nonviolence* provides a vision that contributes to local food movements, helping us understand that growing, buying, and eating food can be ways of practicing peace on a daily basis. *Nonconformity* provides an alternative vision that redefines buying and owning less, not as a sacrifice but as a way toward freedom from possessions through a deepening of relationships with other people in local communities and landscapes.

The church has the ability and calling to model an alternative reality, one that points in practical ways to these kingdom values of nonviolence and nonconformity. Mennonite theologian Duane K. Friesen calls the church to engage “focal practices,” which include ways of being, living, and behaving that model expressed beliefs in practical disciplines in a worshipping community over time.² As I will explore below, growing, sharing, and eating food in community are all examples of focal practices that bind members of a community to one another as well as to the land. Local economies are made sustainable in this binding, a process that we will explore in the example of Oakleaf Mennonite Farm later in this paper.

Many Mennonites also practice nonviolence and resist consumerism through responsible preparation of food. Consequently, cookbooks are popular Mennonite resources that reinforce eating as a way of living out faith. These resources do more than help us cook yummy desserts or prepare nourishing salads; they also help us practice our peace theology through our global food connections and how we build community. Mennonite cookbooks, as explored

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² Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City; An Anabaptist Theology of Culture* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2000).

below, provide an alternative narrative to overconsumption, offering ways to engage nonviolence and nonconformity through our preparation and consumption of food. Let's explore these Anabaptist values together.

Changing Perspectives on Nonviolence and Nonconformity

Anabaptist groups since the Radical Reformation have held the conviction that being a true Christian involves living out the gospel teachings of discipleship without conforming to the secular world. This led to their persecution and marginalization both in Europe and the Americas, and it remains a central doctrine for all Anabaptist denominations. Nonconformity for many acculturated Mennonites who no longer live in rural, ethnic Mennonite communities has shifted from an emphasis on outward appearance (plain dress and agricultural life) to inward ethical commitments to nonviolence and resisting consumerism. These two commitments have also begun to be translated into a care for the land.

The twin doctrines of nonviolence and nonconformity have their origin in the beliefs of the early Anabaptists, but the interpretation of the words and works of these early Anabaptists has evolved throughout the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Leo Driedger, Donald Kraybill,³ and Ervin Stutzman⁴ have all argued that nonviolence and nonconformity together play a central role in the theological positions of Mennonites, though Mennonite interpretation is diverse given the diverse theological convictions of Mennonites globally. Driedger and Kraybill examine the changing nature of these doctrines in *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism*. They note that in many Mennonite publications nonconformity and nonresistance, or nonviolence, are referred to in tandem as the distinguishing tenets of Mennonite identity. Driedger and Kraybill define nonconformity as the sectarian stance of Mennonite groups that is “expressed in a cautious social distance from the outside world.”⁵ Nonviolence is the refusal to use force against another person even in self-defense; Driedger and Kraybill explain that this posture affects both interpersonal and collective relations.⁶

Mennonite perspectives on nonviolence and nonconformity have evolved in the last hundred years as a result of changing cultural circumstances. New

³ Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1994).

⁴ Ervin Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908–2008* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2011).

⁵ Driedger and Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking*, 49.

⁶ Ibid., 32–33.

interpretations of the Bible and Anabaptist history have grounded these changes, and confessions of faith are one source for examining current doctrine. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* is a joint statement of faith written in 1995 by the General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church denominations that later joined to form Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. In Article 21, “Christian Stewardship,” caring for and working for the renewal of the earth is directly linked with the call to “live simply, practice mutual aid within the church, uphold economic justice, and give generously and cheerfully.”⁷ Stewardship of the earth is also linked with the biblical idea in Leviticus of the Sabbath of the land and the Jubilee year as well as the vision in Revelation of the new heaven and new earth. By making explicit the expectation that Mennonites live simply, the confession highlights resistance to consumption as a necessary quality for living faithfully. Such a theological foundation for nonconformity and nonviolence can ground resistance to consumerism and strengthen commitment to live simply in biblical tradition and Mennonite theological perspectives.

Mennonite theologians continue to flesh out the doctrines of the confession of faith and examine how the theological ideals of Mennonites should influence the church’s actions in the larger world.⁸ Mennonite beliefs and practices have been shaped through engagement with Western culture, and this has led Mennonites to engage with modern Western culture in distinct ways that are formed through their theological commitments. In the work of these theologians and scholars, two important ideas help frame Mennonite views on consumption and nonconformity: the idea of the church as an alternative society, and the economic vision of such an alternative society.

The first relevant aspect of Mennonite theology as it relates to nonconformity is the idea that the church should provide an alternative vision of society outside of the Western secular individualist model. Duane Friesen, in *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City*, explores this concept in his assessment of Anabaptist theology in light of Western culture. He argues that Christians engage culture as artists, citizens, and philosophers, and he describes how each of these modes of engagement is a form of social responsibility to the larger culture. He frames his argument around the passage in Jeremiah where the prophet encourages the Jews then in exile in Babylon to “seek the peace of the city where you dwell” (Jer 29:7). Friesen is concerned with how

⁷ General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church General Board, “Article 21,” *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1995), Kindle edition.

⁸ Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City*.

Christian existence is lived in creative tension between being part of the world and part of God's kingdom, which he calls living on the border between "the world into which we were born and another country, another city."⁹

Friesen alludes to the transformation of Christianity once it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, often called "Constantinian Christianity" or the "Christendom model." He argues that once Christianity became dominant during the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine, it lost its ability to be committed to an alternative cultural vision, of which nonviolence was a key testimony. Friesen relates this to Jeremiah by arguing that "the church is in exile like the Jews in Jeremiah's time because it is a minority community that cannot and should not attempt to dominate or control the world like it did after Constantine."¹⁰ The age of Christendom is over, and no Christian denomination dominates culture. For many Anabaptist scholars, this is a positive development because it allows Christianity as a whole to model an alternative vision of culture that challenges the materialistic capitalist society rather than identifies with it.¹¹

Friesen argues, "Consumer capitalism and a market economy has had the effect of 'socializing' us to think in terms of calculating self-interest," which cultivates an individualism that "erodes commitment to the weak and the marginalized and to the larger common good."¹² The role of the church, then, is to provide a moral community that challenges this erosion and cultivates a different vision for consumer culture. Mutual aid and commitment to nonconformity are both ways that Mennonite communities can resist the culture of economic self-interest.

One of the ways churches can model this alternative vision of society is through what Friesen calls "focal practices." These are ways of being, living, and behaving that embody such an alternative vision in practical disciplines and the liturgical rituals of the church.¹³ These practices are defined by a church community over time, and they are ways that communities tangibly express their beliefs.¹⁴ Food is one example of this tangible expression of belief, both through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and everyday eating. Friesen argues that focal practices "are 'bodied' in visible, concrete ways of living that

⁹ Ibid., 24–25.

¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

¹¹ Ibid., 38.

¹² Ibid., 135.

¹³ Ibid., 139.

¹⁴ Ibid., 67.

can be observed and evaluated by others, even those outside the circle of the community of faith.”¹⁵ As demonstrated below, growing, sharing, and eating food in community are all examples of focal practices that bind members of a community to one another as well as to the land.

Food and Gardening as Sacrament

Friesen’s concept of sharing food as a focal practice is particularly relevant for considering the relationships between people and the land. Agrarian scholars Norman Wirzba, Fred Bahnsen, and Wendell Berry all argue that growing and eating food can be considered sacred acts. Friesen argues that food is a tangible way to express belief, and agrarian scholars further demonstrate that this power of eating is an act that connects humans with the land. Wirzba in *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* describes the current environmental crisis as nothing less than a crisis of culture, if culture is understood from its Latin roots to pertain to the cultivation and care of the conditions humans need to thrive on the land and with one another.¹⁶ The root of this crisis of culture is human pride and greed that arose out of our attempt to separate ourselves from dependence on each other and the natural world.¹⁷ He argues that “an appreciation for the doctrine of creation will lead to a meaningful, wholesome reconnection with the wider social, ecological, cosmological, and divine contexts in which we necessarily live.”¹⁸ This involves action to “recover the art of being creatures” through an appreciation of the ways our lives are dependent upon the land and by gaining practical skills to act on this appreciation.¹⁹

This reconnection with the land must begin with a process of reconciliation. In *Making Peace with the Land*, Bahnsen and Wirzba argue that “Christian reconciliation is about bringing all bodies into a peaceful, life-promoting and convivial relationship with each other.”²⁰ They affirm that God cares for embodied souls, not disembodied ones, and scripture promises the renewal of all creation. Wirzba writes, “Human life simply makes no sense apart from the

15 Ibid., 139.

16 Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 2.

17 Ibid., 5.

18 Ibid., 15.

19 Ibid.

20 Fred Bahnsen and Norman Wirzba, *Making Peace with the Land: God’s Call to Reconcile with Creation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2012), 24.

life of all creation.”²¹ People in our time have become separated from the land, both physically and existentially, which has led to widespread environmental destruction as well as alienation from the natural world.²² It is only in reconnecting physically with the land that we can be brought into relationship with it, not merely by having bodies but by living through our bodies.²³

To illustrate how the Christian community, in being reconciled with the land, can do good work, Wirzba cites the example of church-sponsored community gardens in North Carolina that feed hungry and homeless people. In addition to this, he argues that “gardening is also the form of work that best describes God’s relationship to creation.”²⁴ God is continually present in creation, working in it as a gardener rather than watching from above. Gardens also provide fresh, healthy food directly from the land. Wirzba argues that eating is a crucial part of reconciling with creation, and it starts by appreciating where our food comes from and examining the destruction industrial agriculture has wrought on the land in order to provide cheap, fast, food. He notes that many of Jesus’s lessons were centered around food and eating, which he states is the “daily enactment of our dependence on other people, the land and ultimately God.”²⁵

Eating connects us to the whole complex web of ecological relationships that make our food possible, and it is in the growing and preparing of food that “we bear witness to God’s desire that all creatures taste life fully.”²⁶ Wirzba concludes by stating that “the redemption of humanity and the earth depends on the forsaking of all arrogance and the taking up of our rightful place as ‘gardeners’ who in serving the needs of creation bring blessing to it and glory to its creator.”²⁷

Wendell Berry also extols the virtues of gardening as a sacred act that makes eating meaningful. He believes that eating is both a pleasurable and an agricultural act but that this is compromised by the industrial food system that distances people from their food. Berry argues that “the industrial eater is, in fact, one who does not know that eating is an agricultural act, who no

21 Ibid., 24.

22 Ibid., 32.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 80.

25 Ibid., 114.

26 Ibid.

27 Wirzba, *Paradise of God*, 117.

longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land.”²⁸ Berry claims instead that eating should be “an extensive pleasure,” by which he means that “people who know the garden in which their vegetables have grown and know that the garden is healthy will remember the beauty of the growing plants, perhaps in the dewy first light of morning when gardens are at their best.”²⁹ Like Wirzba, Berry believes that growing and eating food connects humans with the land in a way that is reciprocal and mutually sustaining.

Local Food and the Bioregion

If eating can be considered a sacrament, as the above scholars propose, it is also a tangible way to become part of one’s local ecological community. Bioregionalism is one form of local food movement that is concerned with living within the ecological limits of a particular place—one’s bioregion or watershed. A bioregion is defined by features of local geography and the biotic community. A watershed is the most common way of delineating a bioregion, which is “the area covered in the water’s journey from its origination in the hydrological cycle to its end point in a particular body of water such as a pond, lake or ocean.”³⁰ Its boundaries are natural rather than political. Wes Jackson, David Landis Barnhill, and others call the effort to live in one’s bioregion “becoming native to place,” which indicates a commitment to learn the natural cycles of one’s local biotic community as well as to promote the well-being of the local human community as it attempts to live within these natural limits.³¹

Bioregionalism encompasses both the natural ecosystem and local human culture and economy. Jackson argues in *Becoming Native to Our Place*, “Our task is to build cultural fortresses to protect our emerging nativeness. They must be strong enough to hold at bay the powers of consumerism, the powers of greed and envy and pride.”³² He is not advocating for a nostalgic return to an earlier period; “change is the rule” he argues.³³ Instead he advises a cautious way forward that would enable communities to remove themselves from the “extractive economy” of fossil fuel and cheap consumer goods, and for him “it

28 Wendell Berry, *Bringing It to the Table: Essays on Food and Farming* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009), 228.

29 Ibid., 233.

30 Ched Myers, “From ‘Creation Care’ to ‘Watershed Discipleship’: Re-Placing Ecological Theology and Practice,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 3 (2014): 258.

31 See David Landis Barnhill’s anthology, *At Home on Earth: Becoming Native to Our Place* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999).

32 Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place*, 97.

33 Ibid., 112.

is the wholeness of community life and the need for community life that are on the line.”³⁴ For Jackson, the well-being of the community and the well-being of the land are dependent upon one another. The local economy should be the tool that binds the human community together itself as well as with the land.

This idea of local economy and local community as being mutually important directly ties in with the emerging concept of watershed discipleship. Scholar and activist Ched Myers is a key player in the emerging watershed discipleship movement and newly formed watershed discipleship alliance. He is part of the Bartimaeus Cooperative, a community concerned with learning about, living within, and restoring the Ventura River watershed in central California. He explains that watershed discipleship is a phrase that has multiple meanings and serves as a useful framing idea. First, the term “recognizes that we are in a watershed historical moment of crisis” that calls for Christians to make environmental and social justice integral to everything they do as inhabitants of particular places.³⁵ Second, “it acknowledges the inescapably bioregional locus of an incarnational following of Jesus,” which means that the life of the church must always take place in the context of a particular watershed.³⁶ Third, it “implies that we need to be disciples *of* our watersheds” by learning the resources and limits of the particular watersheds we inhabit.³⁷ This is a way of connecting bioregionalist ideals with the Christian notion of care for the land as a form of discipleship.

Understanding one’s own local landscape is a crucial aspect of “becoming native” to a particular place as well as discerning the best course of action to prevent or restore the ecosystem of one’s area. It also coheres with the twin doctrines of nonviolence and nonconformity by calling on people to identify with their local landscape rather than a political entity. The identity of Mennonites is one of belonging to God and to a particular piece of God’s creation. Eating food grown within one’s own watershed is important because it provides a tangible connection to the local ecosystem.

Secular scholars of environmental ethics and advocates for bioregionalism provide a larger context for framing Mennonite relationships with the land because they emphasize some of the same concepts that are important to Mennonites: the need for strong local communities, the idea that the ecological crisis is at its base a moral one, and the notion that humans are one creature among

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Myers, “From ‘Creation Care’ to ‘Watershed Discipleship,’” 266.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

many who are all subject to a higher authority, whether the earth as a whole or God. The two examples of Mennonite production and preparation of food described below can be framed in the context of eating within one's bioregion.

Faith in Practice: Oakleaf Mennonite Farm at Berea Mennonite Church

The commitment to owning less stuff and purchasing goods that are produced and traded ethically is difficult to uphold. Focusing on our interactions with food is a good starting place for this effort, and it is perhaps the most important because it is something we consume daily and is necessary for survival. The local food movement has made eating ethically and locally more feasible for many North Americans, though clearly there is much work yet to be done so that all have access to fresh and responsibly farmed food. Mennonites also have a long history of agriculture and foodways to draw upon in this effort, as well as theological convictions that value social justice and care for the earth. Oakleaf Mennonite Farm at Berea Mennonite Church in Atlanta, Georgia, serves as an example of how growing and eating food is both a sacred and peaceful act. The farm provides locally grown produce to those in their community who would otherwise have little access to fresh food. This demonstrates Wirzba's assertion that growing and sharing food reconciles people with the land as well as with one another.

Anabaptists have a long history of involvement in agriculture that stems from the early years of the movement when they were forced into rural areas due to religious persecution. Until the latter half of the twentieth century, most Mennonites lived in rural agricultural communities and made their living through farming. Oakleaf Farm is an example of how this agricultural legacy has taken new forms in the twenty-first century when most Mennonites in North America live in urban areas and work in non-agricultural professions.³⁸ As an urban farm, Oakleaf provides the members and visitors of Berea with a first-hand experience of farm life as well as a regular supply of food to their neighbors in need. Urban agriculture is a growing movement in North American cities as consumers are increasingly interested in buying local food. Oakleaf combines this cultural shift with their Anabaptist roots to form a new type of relationship with the land.

Berea Mennonite started the farm in 2009 as a way to reclaim their nine-acre property, a project initiated by Pastor John Wierwille and two seminary students. Wierwille had become tired of mowing the extensive piece of land and trying to keep away criminals and drug dealers who had used the property

38 Conrad L. Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2007).

and broken into the church for years. In starting the farm, the church hoped to become better neighbors by establishing a stronger presence and initiating activities to benefit the wider community.³⁹ The church had dwindled to only fifteen members at the time Wierwille came to Berea, but it has since experienced a resurgence as young people and members of the local community have joined the church, in part due to their interaction with the farm.

Oakleaf Farm currently runs a Community Supported Agriculture program (CSA) where families can purchase a share of the produce on a yearly basis in exchange for receiving a box of farm products each week, including eggs, fruits, and vegetables. Part of the farm is designated for providing food for people in the community who do not have enough to eat. This is an important ministry as their neighborhood is in a “food desert,” an area without a grocery store or access to fresh produce. In addition to growing fruits and vegetables, the farm is also home to sheep, chickens, goats, and a pig. The church employs a farmer who is in charge of the daily operations of the farm as well as the CSA program. Long-term and short-term volunteers work on the farm, and the church also hosts large groups of college students who work on the farm as well as at other social service organizations in Atlanta for a one-week period.

The church also provides a way for people who have been disillusioned by Christianity to return to the faith by helping them participate in sacraments by interacting with the landscape. Wierwille believes that when the church can say that the grapes and wheat for the Lord’s Supper came from just outside the door, the church will truly be living its call to care for human bodies and the land.⁴⁰ This ties in with Friesen’s concept of communion being a focal practice that binds the members of the church community together. In making communion “local,” Berea hopes to be a model of an alternative society that is built on fresh, fair food that nourishes both the bodies and the spirits of those gathered. This is a witness to those outside of the church, as Friesen and Wierwille suggest, because the church is living its commitment to care for the people in their community and to be stewards of the land they have been given.

The farm as a ministry to the community is an example of the renewed social activism of Mennonites in the twenty-first century recorded by Driedger and Kraybill.⁴¹ The members and volunteers at Berea are concerned with the welfare of their neighbors, and the farm is a way for the church to use their assets to address a situation of need. Farming in this context is a nonviolent

39 John Wierwille, interview by author, 2013.

40 John Wierwille, interview by author, 2015.

41 Leo Driedger and Donald Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking*.

practice for two reasons. First, the farm improves the land by using animal manure and compost as fertilizer, which adds nutrients to the soil rather than depletes it. Before Oakleaf started, most of the land owned by the church was a large lawn. It was mowed regularly but served no purpose and did not support biodiversity. The farm now is made up of forest, pasture, and row crops. There is no need for mowing, which burns fossil fuel, and it provides habitat area for small mammals and birds. The farm is also a responsible way to use the land because it provides food that would otherwise be trucked in from an industrial farm in another state, which burns fuel and is potentially detrimental to farm workers and animal habitat. Oakleaf Farm is a way that Berea can spread the “gospel of farming” to people who come to visit or volunteer.

In addition to being a ministry, the farm also serves an educational purpose for visitors, students, and members of the congregation. Education about caring for the earth is interwoven with Anabaptist history, nonviolence, and the agrarian themes in the Bible. Wierwille expressed a desire for his church community to engage in this farm work as a way to practice their faith in a tangible manner. He argued that faith should be incarnational, “work-ship” in addition to worship. He noted that both children and adults in the congregation can learn the gospel through tending the land, resulting in a more intimate understanding of the agrarian context in which the four Gospels were written. The church sponsors a “Peace and Carrots” camp each summer where children of the church and children from the surrounding community learn together about nonviolence in the context of farming. Wierwille feels that nonviolence is one important aspect of the Anabaptist tradition that Mennonites are losing in assimilating into secular American culture, and he hopes that religious education can prevent this in the younger generation of Mennonites.⁴²

Nonviolence is a daily commitment for the people who work on the farm, and it is a value that is also instilled in young people through religious education and in volunteers through work experience. The leaders at Berea have extended the historic Mennonite doctrine of nonviolence to include nonviolent action towards the land, and they are using their farm as a way to educate others about the power of nonviolence. The agrarian context of the Bible is also manifested in the work of the farm, from the grapevines on the front lawn to the sheep in the pasture. Oakleaf Farm is an example of how Mennonite environmental initiatives draw on the Bible and the doctrine of nonviolence to educate people about caring for the land.

Most of the people that come to volunteer and live at the farm are there

42 Wierwille, interview by author, 2013.

only for a short time. They have taken a week or a month from their lives to experience a different mode of living that occurs in close community. Oakleaf Farm is a place where these visitors can learn more about Mennonite nonconformity and nonviolence in practice. Secular North American society places a high value on individual freedom of choice rather than compromise and community. Experiencing a different way of life even for a short while helps visitors gain a new understanding of how they might begin to question the values of consumer culture in their own lives. In this sense Berea, through the farm, is acting as a conduit to spread knowledge about Mennonite practices to other Christian groups as well as non-religious people. This demonstrates that Mennonite ideals are relevant not only to other Mennonites but are also applicable to other Christian groups as well.

Eating Locally and Responsibly as Nonconformity

In addition to growing food locally, preparing food is also a sacred act that reconciles people with the land. Many Mennonites are practicing nonviolence and resisting consumerism through their food preparation and consumption. Cookbooks are one popular Mennonite resource that reinforces eating as a way of practicing one's faith. The consumption of food has been a way Mennonites have begun to make changes in their lifestyles that are less destructive to the land and other people. Many Mennonites in North America retain strong, if indirect, connections to the land, and Mennonites in urban areas have a growing interest in urban agriculture and community gardens.⁴³

Wendell Berry states that “the economic system that most affects the health of the world and that may be most subject to consumer influence is that of food.”⁴⁴ Eating responsibly not only affects the well-being of the earth but can also prevent the exploitation of farm workers and ease the suffering of farm animals. Farm worker justice, the fair trade movement, and eating locally grown food are all issues that urban and suburban Mennonite congregations in North America are engaging as they seek to retain their historic ties to agriculture. Berry writes, “Eating with the fullest pleasure . . . is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world.”⁴⁵ Food connects us to a whole network of other people as well as the natural world. The work of Doris Janzen Longacre and the World Community Cookbook series published by Menno-

43 The Mennonite Creation Care Network provides numerous examples of such projects on their website: <http://www.mennocreationcare.org/>.

44 Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 41.

45 Berry, *What Are People For?*, 152.

nite Central Committee (MCC) are publications that have been immensely popular in advocating for simple living in a way that respects the needs of people throughout the world to have enough to eat.

Cookbooks have been important resources in Mennonite life for several hundred years. Churches have published their own cookbooks that reflect the traditional foodways of their communities, while other Mennonites have published cookbooks that were meant for a wider audience. MCC first published *More-with-Less Cookbook* by Doris Janzen Longacre in 1976. It quickly became popular with both Mennonites and simple living advocates, and has continued to be influential for new generations of Mennonites. Though it is a cookbook, *More-with-Less* includes much more than recipes and diet advice. In the revised edition, Mary Beth Lind affirms Longacre's belief that "we are what we eat, and what we eat shows our theology."⁴⁶ Lind also argues that food in North America has become a commodity that is genetically engineered, manipulated, and fast. The way to get beyond this destructive idea, Lind contends, is to reclaim the idea of food as an integral part of life and home, which then in turn becomes part of our theology and allows us to be "co-creators with God and stewards of God's garden."⁴⁷

In her cookbook, Longacre spends the first fifty pages urging North Americans to think differently about the kinds of food they eat and their consumption of food as it relates to the global poor. She connects the excess consumption of food, particularly meat and sugar, to both widespread diet-caused health problems in North America as well as a failure to be good stewards of food resources.⁴⁸ She acknowledges that the immensity of the problem of world hunger can seem too large for one person to counteract even in a small way, but she affirms that the call of Christians is not to be successful but faithful: "Our directions come from the way Jesus told us to live, not from what we think will work."⁴⁹ Longacre does not end with this abstract call to consume less of the world's food resources, however; she also offers concrete ways to achieve this through examples of low-sugar, meatless meal plans and comprehensive information about how nutritional needs can be met with less processed food and less meat.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Longacre, *More-with-Less Cookbook*, Kindle edition, vi.

⁴⁷ Ibid., viii.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15–18.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 32.

These meal plans are mostly meant for people in the North American context who overconsume meat and sugar. Longacre promotes cooking more simply with beans and grains, which is already the primary daily subsistence diet for many people in non-western countries. It is also important to note that cooking food from whole, raw ingredients rather than eating fast, processed food takes more time than many families with multiple jobs or in single parent homes may have. She nevertheless takes great care to demonstrate that cooking in this way can save families a substantial amount of money, and she provides tables that compare the cost of different types of meat with beans and dairy—non-meat sources of protein.

Theology is an implicit part of Longacre's cookbook, and several recent articles on the importance of Mennonite cookbooks as cultural artifacts and sources for theological reflection provide context to Longacre's "more-with-less" theology. Malinda Elizabeth Berry argues in "The Gifts of an Extended Theological Table: MCC's World Community Cookbooks as Organic Theology" that the World Community Cookbook series published by MCC is a reflection of the organic theology of the Mennonite Church. She notes that cookbooks are cultural artifacts that help "subgroups define themselves within and even over-and-against dominant culture," and they also contain ethical and theological resources that have been neglected by church scholars.⁵¹

Malinda Berry argues that in *More-with-Less Cookbook* and *Living More with Less*, Longacre "set the stage for thinking about peace theology both in terms of international relations and community-building table fellowship."⁵² Berry differentiates between systematic theology done by theologians in an academic context and organic theology formed by communities in light of their shared experiences and struggles. She cites Latin American liberation theology as one example of organic theology. Both types of theology are necessary, but organic theology is often neglected at the expense of the shared wisdom and faith of the church community.⁵³

Berry argues that by "beginning with the basic unit of our social fabric, the household, MCC called Mennonites—and many others—to live a connected life from our roots, through the trunk, and into our branches," a tree that rep-

⁵¹ Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "The Gifts of an Extended Theological Table: MCC's World Community Cookbooks as Organic Theology," in *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2011), 284.

⁵² Ibid., 285.

⁵³ Ibid., 287–88.

resents the whole of the Christian community.⁵⁴ She argues additionally that Longacre blends prophetic witness and pastoral concern for neighbors throughout the world. Longacre's books frame issues of food and cooking within a global context, and Longacre always recognizes that God does not live only in North America. Longacre also connects the Mennonite doctrine of nonconformity to her prophetic witness, and Berry argues that "at the heart of nonconformity is the need for us Christians to avoid being defined by the priorities of broader culture that do not renew us or our communities."⁵⁵ Nonconformity means more than separation from the dominant culture; it involves living in culture without being defined by its standards or expectations.

Eating brings people together in both practical and tangible ways as well as in a way that has the potential to be "a renewal of our sense of peoplehood while at the same time extending the table for new and revolutionary changes to who we will be as people of faith and what we will do as followers of Christ."⁵⁶ Berry views food in the same way as Friesen: eating is a focal practice done in community that represents the community's beliefs. By participating in the fair trade movement, urban Mennonites affirm the idea that where their food comes from matters. By farming in a food desert, Berea Mennonite Church is living out their calling to feed the hungry by providing a sustainable source of food. Cookbooks are not the sole source for these initiatives, but the implicit theology within them supports the emphasis on social justice and care for earth's resources.

Cookbooks also have the power to become alternative narratives to the dominant narrative of consumption. Rebekah Trollinger, in "Mennonite Cookbooks and the Pleasure of Habit," examines the messages of Mennonite cookbooks regarding social justice and world hunger, arguing that calls for social justice are best motivated by a sense of pleasure rather than a sense of guilt. She focuses specifically on the MCC series of community cookbooks, of which Longacre's is the first. Trollinger finds that the language of addiction is a useful way to understand the compulsive relationship North Americans have with food.⁵⁷ She explains, "Consumer capitalism's main rallying cry is freedom of choice. Yet, it is precisely this freedom that necessitates advertising

54 Ibid., 293.

55 Ibid., 295.

56 Ibid., 178.

57 Rebekah Trollinger, "Mennonite Cookbooks and the Pleasure of Habit," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 81 (October 2007): 536.

that encourages compulsion and even, at times, mocks choice.”⁵⁸ Consumers are compelled to buy certain products, especially food, as a result of advertising. Consuming food is supposedly part of the freedom to choose, but Trollinger sees it instead as a trap in which North Americans are enticed to eat too much. She argues that the alternative to compulsion is habit and that this was what Longacre is trying to promote.

The emphasis on fair trade and eating locally are also becoming popular in North America more broadly, which is evident in the rapid growth of community farmers’ markets throughout North America, as well as in the diverse array of products that claim to be fair trade certified. Mennonites place these practices within a particular theological and social context that gives them more force within their communities. The authors described above name theology, Christian discipleship, and nonconformity as being influential in Mennonite food traditions. Friesen argues persuasively that eating is a focal practice that is developed in community, and so eating locally and ethically supports Anabaptist principles regarding social justice and the responsible use of the bounty of the land. It is for this reason that food can be considered an aspect of nonconformity. In connecting Anabaptist principles with the larger phenomenon of local food movements, Mennonites demonstrate in practice the idea that growing and eating can be considered sacred acts. This can give these practices more staying power in the long term and serve to further reinforce Anabaptist beliefs.

Conclusion

Nonviolence is a useful lens through which to view the production and consumption of local fresh food because it recognizes that these can be sacred acts that reflect one’s beliefs about the beauty and value of the created world. The Mennonite emphasis on nonviolence as an aspect of eating adds another layer because it recognizes that eating food produced within one’s bioregion can be considered a peaceful act. Peace and food are not often discussed in tandem in local food movements, but practicing nonviolence is not limited to Mennonites or even Christians. Viewing the production and consumption of local food as a way to live more peacefully can enhance the goal of local food movements in North America to protect local bioregions.

In addition to nonviolence, nonconformity is an ever-evolving theological doctrine and social practice that represents an alternative vision for modern society. Nonconformity is a powerful witness against overconsumption and emphasizes how living simply can be joyful rather than a sacrifice. Global con-

58 Ibid., 538.

sciousness of resource use by affluent countries, a commitment to nonviolence, and a resolution to cherish the natural order of creation are all aspects of non-conformity that Longacre, Kraybill, and other Mennonite theologians have explored in Anabaptist environmental literature and as discussed above.

In the twenty-first century, humans throughout the world are feeling the effects of global climate change as well as the more localized effects of environmentally destructive resource extraction. It is now clear that those with the fewest resources globally are disproportionately affected by climate change, which is caused by the overconsumption of fuel resources by the affluent countries of the global North. Different Anabaptist groups express nonconformity in a variety of ways, and though eating locally and refusing to buy certain material goods may seem to have little effect on such a global problem, every action matters. Mennonites are a minority in North America, but the popularity of *Living More with Less*, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, and other works by Mennonite scholars attest to the wider ethical witness that Mennonites offer to North American culture. Nonconformity provides an alternative vision that redefines buying less and owning less not as a sacrifice but a way to freedom from possessions. Eating and growing food locally within one's own community is another way to challenge overconsumption. Berea Mennonite Church is an example of a congregation that is attempting to provide an alternative vision of society by feeding the hungry and caring for the land in their own neighborhood. Eating local and sustainable food is one way of practicing peace and nonconformity that many Mennonites in North America are engaging. Community gardening, urban farming, and reclaiming small rural farms are all methods for putting theological ideals into practice.