Mission as Distraction?

A Critical Twist on Formation and Mission in Anabaptist Communities on the Möbius Loop

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Ring of Möbius by Hans Kalkhoven, Eindhoven University of Technology, Eindhoven, the Netherlands, 1986.

A physical möbius strip made by the author.

Church on the Möbius Loop

Imagine a long, thin strip of paper with different colors—red and yellow—on either side. Now imagine this strip of paper lying straight on a flat surface, with its red side visible and yellow side face down. You pick up the strip by its ends, then turn one end over so that you can now see the red side on one half of your twisted strip and the yellow side on the other. You bring your hands together, laying the yellow end on top of the opposite red end. You secure the ends together with a piece of tape, and you have a Möbius loop.

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The Möbius loop is a well-known mathematical puzzle, fascinating to artists and engineers alike. With its curious characteristics, it is the subject of two M. C. Escher works as well as a design for machine belts and typewriter ribbons.[1] The Möbius loop consists of a surface with only one side—an object that cannot be oriented up or down, back or front, side to side. You can trace your finger along its single surface forever, without falling off an edge. As you do so, the wear is even on both sides.

In *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer writes about "life on the Möbius strip" to illustrate the integration between a person's inner life and outer life. "Whatever is inside of us continually flows outward to help form, or deform, the world," Palmer explains, "and whatever is outside us continually flows inward to help to form, or deform, our lives."[2] Bit by bit, we and our world are endlessly re-made in this perpetual inner-outer exchange. Palmer takes the message of the Möbius loop to highlight the absence of a discernable inner or outer surface, such that the two co-create each other.

As I think about the dimensions of Anabaptist witness, I find the Möbius loop to be an apt metaphor. It illustrates the integral relationship between the church's inner and outer lives, reminding the church of what it means to have integrity. The words *integration* and *integrity* come from the same Latin root meaning "whole." The church can experience wholeness in its inner and outer realities when formation and witness are part of an unorientable whole, like the Möbius loop. This, I believe, is what it means for the church to have missional integrity.

The two sides of the Möbius loop are correlated with faith metaphors in a variety of ways. Palmer, from the reference point of the individual person, speaks of the inward and outward dimensions of life. More relevant to our present consideration, my former professors Bo Karen Lee and Richard Osmer identify the two aspects of ecclesiology as spirituality and mission, or the dual calls to follow Christ and serve the world.[3] Osmer bases this ecclesiological formulation on the Barthian upbuilding and sending functions of the church.[4] Lee and Osmer call for nurturing both the church's inner life in Christ—what they

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1 The Dutch artist M. C. Escher created two woodcuts of this image: *Mobius Strip I* in 1961 and *Mobius Strip II* in 1963. See https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.61283.html and https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.61286.html.

2 Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 47.

3 Bo Karen Lee, "The 'Double-Pointed Ellipse:' Integrating Spirituality and Mission," in *Consensus and Conflict: Practical Theology for Congregations in the Work of Richard R. Osmer*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean et al. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 93.

4 Richard R. Osmer, "Formation in the Missional Church: Building Deep Connections between Ministries of Upbuilding and Sending," in *Cultivating Sent Communities:*

term "spirituality"—and the church's outer life of mission, so that the church's formation has both a spiritual and missional character.[5]

Instead of "spirituality" and "mission," I am choosing to use the similar terms "formation" and "witness" to correlate with the two colors that comprise the Möbius loop. In a study called the Missional Leadership Project, pastoral leaders used the language of formation "to describe the ways a congregation shapes the lives of its members and builds up the 'culture' of a particular congregation."[6] From this perspective, formation is a human endeavor, the effect of a group on individuals and the emergence of a common culture. In contrast, Osmer argues that the Holy Spirit is the primary actor in Christian formation, with human-driven formation being secondary.[7]

I affirm Osmer's perspective as the ideal. Yet, formation by God's Spirit largely depends on the community opening itself to being changed by the movement of God among them. In reality, I believe our churches are formed by more human factors than we might want to acknowledge. Cultural shifts and internal conflict exert pressure on communities to abandon or reinforce existing behaviors and commitments, and in these moments of intense emotional anxiety it is difficult to attend to the Spirit's guidance. When the Holy Spirit is the primary actor in Christian formation, wise leadership responses have a prophetic and pastoral quality that builds up the spirituality of the community, rather than a reactive quality that deforms the community.

On the other side of the Möbius loop from formation we have witness. By witness, I mean the communication—through being, saying, and doing—of one's beliefs and values.[8] In the case of Anabaptist witness, I envision this as the communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ to persons both within and outside of an Anabaptist community. (I will elaborate on this further later in this article.) Yet, it is important to recognize that even in naming the two colors in the Möbius loop as distinct identities, we must uphold the seamless transition between the two; when the church engages in witness it will suddenly find itself being formed in that act.[9] Likewise, as the church is seeking to be formed by God's Spirit, it will find itself being called outside of itself to engage in acts of

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Missional Spiritual Formation, ed. Dwight J. Zscheile, Missional Church Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 52.

5 Lee, "The 'Double-Pointed Ellipse:' Integrating Spirituality and Mission," 97.

6 Osmer, "Formation in the Missional Church," 33.

7 Osmer, 49.

8 Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

9 Osmer, "Formation in the Missional Church," 51. Osmer writes, "The congregation and its members are *formed* as they act with and for others beyond the church in partnership, mutual learning, and solidarity with the vulnerable."

witness. The two are experienced in a continuing loop, existing with integrity as two parts of a whole.

Interestingly, Lee and Osmer's spirituality-mission framework stems from a Möbius-like relation developed by Winston Crum. Crum's 1973 description of the mathematical metaphor of the ellipse is as follows:

> The church is rather like an ellipse, having two foci. In and around the first she acknowledges and enjoys the Source of her life and mission. This is an ingathering and recharging focus. Worship and prayer are emphasized here. From and through the other focus she engages and challenges the world. This is a forth-going and self-spending focus. Service and evangelization are stressed. Ideally, Christians learn to function in both ways at once, as it were making the ellipse into a circle with both foci at the center.[10]

A two-dimensional ellipse looks like an oval, with a center point and two points equidistant from the center that serve as dual focal points. Crum identifies one focal point as having the purpose of ingathering and recharging, marked by the practices of worship and prayer. The second focal point's purpose is going forth and spending one's self in the practices of service and evangelization. Crum calls for these two movements to occur simultaneously, so that both merge as a single central focus, which turns the oval-shaped, two-foci ellipse into a circle with a single centerpoint and no other distinct foci. When missiologist David Bosch picks up Crum's metaphor of the ellipse-turned-circle, he adds, "Neither focus should ever be at the expense of the other; rather, they stand in each other's service."[11] In this way, Bosch highlights the retained identities of ingathering and forthgoing that Crum alludes to, even as they shift into a single centerpoint.

A Critical Twist

Revisiting our imagined exercise that opened this essay, we can recognize that a Möbius loop would essentially be an ellipse if it were not for a single important motion—a twist. This critical motion is the twisting of one end of the strip of paper before securing both ends together. An important contribution of the Möbius metaphor, then, is the seamless continuity that also allows the two sides of the strip to retain their distinctiveness. This distinctiveness becomes obscured in Crum's ellipse. While we must acknowledge the limitations of any metaphor, the consequence of Crum's ellipse-turned-circle is that the two foci

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10 Winston F. Crum, "The Missio Dei and the Church: An Anglican Perspective," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1973): 288.

11 David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Twentieth anniversary ed, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 385.

blend together as the shape transforms into a circle. In the Möbius loop, however, there is integration *and* distinction. I therefore advocate for an integration that retains distinction—an integration without erasure or eclipse.[12] The red and yellow sides do not become orange; they maintain their original character within a new, integrated whole. In the Möbius loop metaphor for conceptualizing formation and witness, one twist makes all the difference. I propose this twist as "critical" in two senses of the word: 1) as a critique of reductionist patterns of Anabaptist witness, and 2) as an essential element—that is, a crucial or vital part—of Anabaptist witness.

It is a common impulse in Anabaptist thought to fuse the ingathering and forthgoing foci, or, as I am identifying them, formation and witness. Among John Howard Yoder's many influences on Anabaptist thought that I find problematic is his conceptualization of the inner and outer dimensions of the church as a single reality—collapsing rather than integrating them.[13] When Yoder defines the church as a political entity, he equates the inner life of the body of Christ with its witness to "the watching world."[14] Approaching this type of equation from both directions, C. Norman Kraus argues, "The life of the church *is* its witness. The witness of the church *is* its life. The question of authentic witness is the question of authentic community."[15] Yet when the inner life of the church is conceptualized as its witness, dynamics of power and the realities of social inequality can be too easily dismissed in light of a pure religious vision.

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12 My perspective is informed by the logic of Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger's application of Barth's Chalcedonian pattern, where two concepts exist in a relation "without separation or division [unity], without confusion or change [differentiation], and with the conceptual priority of theology over psychology [order]." I am drawing from the first aspect of this pattern; I depart from Hunsinger's framework in my assumption that one aspect can indeed change the other and that there is no inherent theological priority of one over the other. See Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling: A New Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

13 Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2001), 74–75. In addition to concerns I have with Yoder's thought and practice, not least of which is his sexual abuse of dozens of women, I question the extent of his assumption of a watching world in *Body Politics*. Well into the twenty-first century as we are, to continue claiming the wider world as "a subset of the world vision of the gospel" glosses over the lived reality of many people for whom the theological meaning of Christian practices is not immediately apparent. Distinctive practices like intercultural fellowship, sharing food, and extending forgiveness do not belong to Christians alone, and many who claim the Christian label fail to practice them.

14 Yoder, ix.

15 C. Norman Kraus, *The Authentic Witness: Credibility and Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 156.

Here, it also becomes important to recognize that even inner-outer distinctions are misleading. Formation does not happen only within the church; as I stated above, we are formed by God's Spirit in the act of witness in interaction with persons outside of the covenanted faith community. Moreover, the entity Yoder takes to be "the world" is not the only audience that may be watching. People also watch from within—those who have not yet committed to membership in the believer's church. This includes persons who come to Anabaptism through theological seeking or are drawn by its practices of community, and young people who attend with families and friends, engaging in what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger call "legitimate peripheral participation."[16] The Möbius loop reminds us that when we think we are dealing in formation, without warning we find ourselves in the midst of witness, and when we think we are enacting witness, we find that God is at work forming us. Smooth shifting from one dimension into the other occurs continuously.

The relationship between formation and witness, though not necessarily in those particular terms, is a conundrum addressed by many Christian scholars. In the quasi-Anabaptist Quaker tradition, Parker Palmer wants to integrate the inward-outward dimensions of life to the extent that they form only one reality.[17] Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes makes a compelling case for integrating faith and life, what appears to be collapsing witness into spiritual formation as the subtitle of her book would suggest: *Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*. She identifies her womanist spirituality as self-critical and reflective, vital, and demanding.[18] Yet, Townes's integration is more nuanced than Yoder's collapse, as the result of her spiritual formation is to live a more robust social witness "that involves the skills of social analysis, theological and biblical reflection, ethical examination, and mother wit" as the intersecting oppressions in the Black community are examined and challenged.[19] One impacts the other, and therein lies their inseparability.

I find the collapsing of formation and witness and, relatedly, the inner and outer life of the church, to be an inadequate model for Anabaptist witness. When we collapse formation and witness into one another, either can become lost or overlooked in our theology and practice. I appreciate the way Anabaptist

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16 Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Learning in Doing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). One of my colleagues, Kate Unruh, is exploring legitimate peripheral participation as a framework for young people's Christian formation in her forthcoming 2022 dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary.

17 Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 47.

18 Emilie Maureen Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 122.

19 Townes, 13.

missional theologian Robert J. Suderman claims being and doing as two critical, inseparable entities. He articulates a missional vision for the church as "the formation of a people, *transformed by the loving sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and sent into the world as an agent of the reconciliation willed by God*."[20] For Suderman, Anabaptist witness entails both a formative being and a transformational doing, and they are neither collapsible nor inseparable. He continues, "The agenda of *being is foundational to the agenda of doing*, and the agenda of *doing is indispensable to the agenda of being*."[21] Such careful attentiveness to both sides of the Möbius loop is important for the church's integrity, and they exist in a dynamic interrelation rather than as an equatedness or one-directional cause and effect.

Undoubtedly, the church's inner life bears witness both to persons within the church and beyond it. Our core values and beliefs are revealed most authentically in what we do rather than what we say. Yet, when this leads us to simply collapse witness into formation, we turn our focus solely to the inner life of the church and disrupt the Möbius flow of formation and witness.

A collapse leads to conclusions like the common sentiment I heard expressed in a Mennonite Sunday school session: "If I live my life right, I trust people will take notice and recognize there's something different about me because I'm a Christian."[22] This is like Yoder's assumption, substituting the inner life for witness, living as the quiet in the land. This is neither consistent with the ministry of Jesus and his disciples nor with the apostolic mission of Paul. The gospel demands not merely a quiet life lived rightly but intentional engagement with persons inside and outside the faith community in order to call and act for God's justice and reconciliation, while also communicating the motivation and meaning of these words and actions. Formation in the inner life of the church is incomplete without witness, and witness is hollow without the deep resources of formation. As Bosch and others remind us, the faithful church has a double focus—both inward and outward—on formation and witness.[23]

Anabaptist missional theologian Lois Barrett argues against these divisions between the gospel as outreach or nurture, being or doing, and evangelism or congregational life. She instead advocates for a holistic approach whereby "the community's thought, words, and deeds are being formed into a pattern that proclaims the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. As a result, the good news of God's reign is publicly announced. The proclamation is a 'word

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20 Robert J Suderman, *Re-Imagining the Church: Implications of Being a People in the World*, ed. Andrew G. Suderman (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 47.

21 Suderman, 48.

22 Coincidentally, I heard this comment in an LMC congregation in 2019.

23 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 385.

and deed' proclamation; it is not only audible but visible as well."[24] In this way, Barrett envisions the missional church as identifiable in its character, which is made manifest as "the missional church both *proclaims the gospel and embodies the gospel.*"[25] She thus envisions missional congregations that embody the gospel in a way that makes inner and outer congruent, not just connected.[26]

Formation and Witness in LMC: A Fellowship of Anabaptist Churches

In contrast to this congruency approach illustrated by the Möbius loop, the ease with which Anabaptists may assume the formation-as-witness posture sometimes manifests itself in the inverse—witness-as-formation. This is the opposite distortion of focus that violates the Möbius loop principle I am proposing. When this occurs, instead of collapsing witness into formation, formation is eclipsed by witness, ignored in light of a laser-bright focus on witness.

I have observed indicators of this witness-as-formation posture in one regional Mennonite conference's navigation of the conflict plaguing the inner life of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA). People who are watching, both from without and within, question the integrity of a peace church's witness when its own members cannot stand to be with one another and are embroiled in disagreement, hostility, and plays for power over one another. Importantly, in his 1976 book *Community and Commitment*, John Driver places his chapter on a community of peace before his chapter on being a missionary community. "The very forms of the church's obedience constituted a powerful missionary witness," he explains.[27] For Driver, in the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition peace is experienced as "social relationships characterized by justice" and living together in harmony with God and one another.[28] He concludes, "The true criterion for evaluating our evangelistic practices is the formation of disciple communities obedient to Jesus."[29] On the one hand, outward witness is absolutely affected by the church's inner life; and on the other hand, ecclesiology becomes reductionist if inner formation becomes the primary focus of the church.

24 Lois Y. Barrett, ed., "Embodying and Proclaiming the Gospel," in *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, ed. Lois Barrett, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 149.

25 Barrett, 151.

26 Barrett, 153.

27 John Driver, *Community and Commitment*, Mission Forum Series 4 (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1976), 81.

28 Driver, 70.

29 Driver, 92.

I will now turn to a specific case in which one side of the Möbius loop—outward witness—is emphasized as a strategy for detracting attention from the church's inner life. This is what I identify as using mission as distraction, which I observe in recent leadership strategies of LMC: A Fellowship of Anabaptist Churches, formerly known as Lancaster Mennonite Conference.

As conflict ensued over developments in MC USA, a growing impulse arose for LMC to emphasize mission in language, energy, resources, and branding, which I interpret as both an implicit and explicit strategy to eclipse the presence of conflict within the inner life of the church. In my description of events that follows, I am not suggesting that LMC is the only Anabaptist entity where this strategy is evident or even where it is the most acute, or that this is the only conflict response that LMC leaders have offered. All ecclesial situations are complex, and I do not wish to be reductive in my analysis. Yet, my recent position as a dual member of LMC and MC USA has afforded me proximity to processes, documents, presentations, and leaders' reflections where I have seen a witness-as-formation posture. Exploring LMC as an Anabaptist community in light of formation and witness invites us deeper into concrete practical theological reflection, which is my aim in this article.

LMC has its roots in the Swiss-German Mennonite migration to southeastern Pennsylvania of the early eighteenth century. These descendants of religious refugees established farmsteads and met for worship in homes and meetinghouses scattered throughout Lancaster County.[30] By 1820, a regional district conference had emerged.[31] By the end of the nineteenth century, mission efforts arose with the Home Mission Advocates, the forerunner of Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMM) that was established in 1914 and remains highly active today.[32] Throughout the twentieth century, EMM initiated mission efforts in over fifty countries on six continents, motivated by what A. Grace Wenger in her EMM centennial history book calls "compassion for the poor and hungry."[33] At this 100-year mark, EMM estimated that church-

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30 I wish to acknowledge one line of power in which I live in proximity to this community. My ancestor Hans Herr was the first Mennonite bishop to immigrate to Pennsylvania. He, along with six other Swiss Mennonite men, purchased ten thousand acres in Lancaster County in 1710 to form the first Mennonite settlement in Lancaster County.

31 L. Keith Weaver, "History of Mennonite General Conference," unpublished paper, obtained October 9, 2015.

32 Henry F. Garber, "Eastern Mennonite Missions (Lancaster Mennonite Conference)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1955, accessed March 8, 2022. https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Eastern_Mennonite_Missions_(Lancaster_Mennonite_Conference)&oldid=169413.

33 A. Grace Wenger, *A People in Mission: 1894–1994* (Salunga, PA: Eastern Mennonite Missions, 1994), 14.

es planted by EMM missionaries beyond North American annually "are now baptizing as many members as there are in Lancaster Mennonite Conference."[34] Meanwhile, within the United States LMC expanded beyond its European American membership and gained more diversity as African American, Southeast Asian, and Latinx individuals and congregations joined the conference. Yet, even as LMC engaged in mission and outreach, internal conflict marked these Anabaptists' story for over three centuries as congregations exercised the ban and separated from one another. A 2010 report, for instance, documents twenty-eight different Anabaptist ecclesial groups residing in Lancaster County.[35]

LMC currently operates with a self-governing system of district bishops who supervise pastoral leaders and congregations within the conference and serve on its Bishop Board.[36] The Bishop Board appoints a Conference Executive Council as the official governing body of the conference, which, in practice, shares governance with the Conference Leadership Assembly consisting of all credentialed leaders. It is the Bishop Board, however, that holds the power to ratify and revise the LMC Constitution. It has even overturned decisions of the Conference Leadership Assembly; for instance, in January 2007 the Conference Leadership Assembly failed by four votes to affirm the Bishop Board's recommendation to ordain women for ministry and pastoral leadership.[37] In May 2008, the Bishop Board overrode this vote by granting congregations the autonomy to ordain women.[38] In December 2021, the Bishop Board decided to "acknowledge and affirm that space has been created within LMC for women to serve on Bishop Oversight Teams," recognizing that Hyacinth Banks Stevens had been serving as part of the New York bishop team since 2016. The decision stops short of allowing women to serve as the leading bishop of a district.[39]

As one of the oldest Mennonite enclaves in the United States, LMC has used its membership status to exercise influence while retaining autonomy in relation

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34 Wenger, 15.

35 C. Nelson Hostetter, "Lancaster, PA, City/County Anabaptist Groups," (Lititz, PA: May 12, 2010), accessed December 17, 2015, https://mennonitelife.org/document/pa-stats-2010-05-12-2/.

36 "Constitution of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference," Lancaster Mennonite Conference, September 2000.

37 Keith Weaver, "Ordination of Women Vote Results," January 19, 2007, accessed February 11, 2022, email to LMC leaders, https://lmcchurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/4.15-Ordination-of-Women-Vote-Results.pdf.

38 Celeste Kennel-Shank, "Lancaster Conference to Allow Ordination of Women for the First Time," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, June 2, 2008.

39 Paul Schrag, "LMC Lifts Ban on Women Bishops," *Anabaptist World*, February 4, 2022, accessed February 11, 2022. https://anabaptistworld.org/lmc-lifts-ban-on-women-bishops/.

to national Mennonite bodies with which it has affiliated over the years. For instance, when the Mennonite General Conference was created in 1898 as the first official Mennonite advisory body in the United States, LMC participated in it but never formally joined. Again, when the Mennonite Church reorganized in 1971, LMC resisted joining and instead participated without a formal vote.[40] After the 2001 merger of the General Conference Mennonite and Mennonite Churches that created MC USA, LMC operated under provisional membership status until 2004, when it joined as the largest of twenty-one area conferences of MC USA. By this time, however, it had lost about one-third of its congregations over the internal controversy about joining the denomination.[41]

After joining MC USA, LMC found itself in the uncomfortable position of lacking control over other conferences and congregations with whom it was affiliated across the national church. When LMC tried to hold other conferences accountable to specific aspects of *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995)*[42] and the denomination's Membership Guidelines, it met resistance. In 2013, LMC entered a two-year process to reassess its affiliation with MC USA. Increasing instances of Mennonite pastors in same-sex relationships, without discipline from MC USA leadership, frustrated many LMC leaders and members. A July 2014 survey found that nearly two-thirds of LMC credentialed leaders held serious concerns about LMC's membership in MC USA.[43] LMC's Board of Bishops sought feedback by holding regional "listening and vision casting meetings" across the conference during the summer of 2015. The contentious decade of membership in MC USA was brought to an end in November of that year, when 82 percent of LMC's credentialed leaders passed the bishops' proposal to withdraw from MC USA.[44] L. Keith Weaver, moderator of LMC since 2000, lamented at the end of the process, "Ever since [2000] we've been steeped in controversy and conflict."[45] Relationships within the con-

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40 Weaver, "History of Mennonite General Conference."

41 "Lancaster Mennonite Conference Leaders Vote to Leave MCUSA," *The Mennonite*, November 19, 2015, https://anabaptistworld.org/lancaster-mennonite-conference-leaders-vote-to-leave-mcusa/. When it began withdrawal in 2015, LMC was still the largest conference of MC USA, with LMC's 13,838 members in 163 congregations.

42 General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church, *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1995).

43 "(Regional) Listening and Vision Casting Meetings," booklet, Lancaster Mennonite Conference, August 11, 2015, 15.

44 "Lancaster Mennonite Conference Leaders Vote to Leave MCUSA."

45 Personal interview with L. Keith Weaver, September 23, 2015. I am grateful to L. Keith Weaver, LMC moderator, for granting me a personal interview that informs much of this article, and for clarifying what I have perceived through personal connections in LMC. I grew up as a teenager in LMC and was baptized into membership in 1992

ference were stretched to the breaking point, and the inner life of the conference was shaken.

Mission as Distraction?

LMC called its process of assessing denominational affiliation "listening and vision casting."[46] While the presenting problem of same-sex relationships provided the impetus for reassessing affiliation, LMC introduced the conversation in the context of its 2020 Vision and "the missional call of God." Throughout an informational booklet to prepare attendees for these listening and vision casting meetings, the focus shifts back and forth between a commitment to heterosexual marriage and a missional approach. In this way, LMC leveraged its theological commitment to mission as an alternative to the internal conflict over same-sex marriage. Rhetoric expressing a church-world duality fuels this mission-refocusing strategy. The booklet states, "Worldly pressures threaten to undermine our faith. We are all quite aware of the rapid changes occurring in the culture around us. Few things give evidence of this change more clearly than changing attitudes about same-sex relationships."[47]

This dualistic impulse was echoed in the listening and vision-casting meetings themselves. One member asserted in a public forum, "We need to separate from people who think differently than us."[48] The booklet cites survey data gauging leaders' positions on homosexual practice, which were overwhelmingly negative.[49] This same survey also revealed positive interest in mission-related activities: church revitalization, church planting, congregational multiplication initiatives, and aid for local communities. The booklet concludes, "These survey results confirm that LMC congregations are taking the missional call of God very seriously."[50] Mission is thus presented as a positive alternative to the negative energy around the internal conflict.

As LMC departed from MC USA in 2015, it employed a strategy to shift the focus from the inner life of the church to its outer activity of mission. This is not the first time LMC has used its theological commitment to mission as a

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in an LMC congregation pastored by my father. While holding primary membership in Virginia Mennonite Conference congregations from 2001 to the present, I most recently had associate membership from 2014 to 2019 at an LMC congregation in Philadelphia.

46 "(Regional) Listening and Vision Casting Meetings."

47 "(Regional) Listening and Vision Casting Meetings."

48 Regional Listening and Vision Casting Meeting, Lancaster Mennonite Conference, Elizabethtown Mennonite Church, Elizabethtown, PA, August 27, 2015.

49 According to the survey, "82.7% of LMC leaders do not affirm homosexual practice," "(Regional) Listening and Vision Casting Meetings."

50 "(Regional) Listening and Vision Casting Meetings."

distraction from conflict with the broader church, rallying remaining congregations around the activity of witness. In *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture*, Felipe Hinojosa reports that in 1970 LMC influenced Latino members to create their own Council of Spanish Mennonite Churches rather than join the national Minority Ministries Council (MMC) of the Mennonite church, which LMC perceived as focused on political and church reform. Hinojosa writes, "Under the direction of the mostly conservative Lancaster Mennonite Conference, the majority of Puerto Rican congregations in New York City were openly discouraged from working with or joining the MMC." Notably, in contrast to the MMC, the LMC council focused on evangelism and church planting. This illustrates the strategy to emphasize missional endeavors rather than engage internal concerns, in this case a movement for racial and social justice within the church.[51] Moreover, Moderator Weaver interprets LMC's 2015 withdrawal in terms of mission, citing the parting of Paul and Barnabas even as they served the same greater mission (Acts 15:36–41). As for LMC's relationship with MC USA, Weaver says he hopes "by God's grace, that rather than . . . leave all kinds of trails of pain, we can make space for each other and maintain collaboration for the shared mission of God."[52] As LMC severed its conflictual relationship with MC USA, it concomitantly articulated a hope for a greater mission.

By reshaping the narrative of internal conflict in terms of a missional vision, Weaver seeks to use the conflict as a way to propel the conference forward. He believes the process of withdrawing from MC USA "is productive pain; something is being birthed here."[53] Weaver describes local missional effectiveness, the impacting of neighborhoods, and the church's recovery of the healing ministries of Christ as signs of hope in the midst of crisis. In March 2018, Weaver announced the approval of a new name for the conference and presented the rationale to rebrand as LMC: A Fellowship of Anabaptist Churches. The rebranding primarily emphasized geography, though Weaver also acknowledged LMC's desire to retain its Mennonite identity.[54] LMC now uses the tagline "We empower congregations in the mission of God" and initially described itself as "an expanding fellowship of Anabaptist congregations proclaiming Christ to all peoples."[55] Indeed, LMC is rapidly expanding; the membership boundaries

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51 Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 119.

52 Interview with Weaver.

53 Interview with Weaver.

54 Rachel Stella, "Lancaster Conference Begins New Era," *Mennonite World Review*, April 2, 2018, https://anabaptistworld.org/lancaster-conference-begins-new-era/.

55 "LMC—A Fellowship of Anabaptist Churches," accessed October 31, 2019 and December 3, 2021, https://lmcchurches.org/.

of the conference are pushed well beyond the Northeastern United States, extending to the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua.

When I view LMC's turn toward mission from the perspective of the Möbius loop, the question emerges for me as to whether mission has eclipsed formation. This mission focus seems to lack critical reflection on how persons within the conference are being formed by their most recent conflict. No public attempts at lament, reconciliation, or conflict transformation are evident. The most promising opportunity was the 2018 Celebration of Church Life, with the theme "Rebuild, Repair, Revive." But attention to formation at that event occurred through workshops presented in the context of teaching new believers—turning the focus again to outward mission and evangelism.[56]

While these are worthy gospel-centered goals, they are no substitute for the task of formation—in this case, internal healing and reconciliation within a broken faith community. As Osmer clarifies, "Formation is not something the congregation does to others, especially new members. It is something that must first happen to the congregation itself."[57] Moreover, in order to reach outward in mission, a faith community must nurture its own internal health; otherwise projection will thwart the community's best missional intentions.

We now turn to these considerations with the interpretive aids of missional theology and psychology.

Walking Worthily

As an Anabaptist practical theologian, I have had the honor and privilege of being mentored by missional theologian Darrell Guder, whose scholarship and practice inform mine. Guder identifies two parts to the church's engagement in God's mission: equipping and witnessing, like the two sides of our Möbius loop, formation and witness. Guder writes that gathered Christians "are equipped by God's Spirit to serve God as witnesses to the good news of God's healing purposes to the world."[58] In this equipping moment, the internal practices of the Christian community such as spiritual formation open the community to the possibility of God's transformation, forming it to "walk worthily" in light of its identity and calling.[59] Guder identifies the agent of formation as God's Spirit experienced in the Christian community's biblical engagement. This formation is a continual experience. He explains, "The calling of the missional community

56 Stella, "Lancaster Conference Begins New Era."

57 Osmer, "Formation in the Missional Church," 36.

58 Craig Ott, ed., *The Mission of the Church: Five Views in Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 22.

59 Darrell L. Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 143.

is an ongoing process. . . . Precisely as walking, it is formed by the biblical imperatives that focus upon *how* the community walks, *how* its public conduct is to be congruent with its public testimony, and *how* it incarnates the good news that God wants all people to experience."[60] There are, thus, elements of internal formation and external witness in Guder's understanding of missional theology, and there is congruence between them.

Walking worthily, one of Guder's central concepts, comes from several of Paul's New Testament epistles that present the Christian imperative for walking through life in a manner that is a worthy representation of God and the call of the gospel.[61] Among many texts that refer to this worthy walking, Guder expounds on Philippians 1:27, the admonition to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." Guder uses this passage to address how Christian communities walk in the world, living their lives in public and political dimensions. He explains, "It has to do with how their public conduct provides a credible demonstration of who Jesus Christ is and what his gospel now concretely means."[62] Undoubtedly, when a church's internal actions come into the public eye, as those of LMC's have, their lives are lived in public spaces.[63]

In addition to exploring the outward dimension of witness, as any missiologist would do, Guder also explores the inward dimension. Walking worthily has importance for the internal life of the church that may not explicitly be known outside the Christian community. Though Guder affirms the church's inner life as a form of outward witness, he doesn't merely collapse the two. He gives specific attention to how the inner life of the church is congruent with, but not reduced to or eclipsed by, its outward witness. Citing Jesus's linkage of identity, witness, and his disciples' visible love for one another (John 13:35), Guder levels a heavy charge against the internal character of the church community, naming divisiveness and division within the church as "totally unacceptable behaviors." He bluntly states, "Lovelessness within the community of faith is virtually a contradiction of the gospel. . . . An unreconciled community cannot really be a witness to the gospel of reconciliation. To do the witness to which we are called,

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60 Guder, 135.

61 Guder, 129–30. These references include 1 Thess 2:10–12, 2 Thess 1:11, Col 1:9–10, and Eph 4:1–3.

62 Guder, 59–60.

63 For instance, the local Lancaster County newspaper picked up the story: Earle Cornelius, "Lancaster Mennonite Conference Leaves Mennonite Church USA Effective Monday," January 1, 2018, accessed November 4, 2019, https://lancasteronline.com/features/faith_values/lancaster-mennonite-conference-leaves-mennonite-church-usa-effective-monday/article_5cc14322-ecc9-11e7-b071-531e91668304.html.

then, the Christian community must learn to practice love as it is defined in the New Testament."[64]

What a word for Anabaptist communities that claim a peace theology! Practicing love does not mean ignoring differences but instead learning to "argue Christianly," as I have sometimes heard Guder put it. This allows the church to retain integrity in its witness.[65]

Guder makes it clear that a community's worthy walking does not assume a perfect community but rather a community dependent on God's grace. When those who follow Jesus fail, as his disciples certainly did, they are called to practice forgiveness and reconciliation.[66] Formation in the practices of dialogue, forgiveness, and reconciliation is therefore an important aspect of the church's identity. Indeed, Guder identifies reconciliation as the central theme of the gospel.[67] In Guder's edited volume *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Inagrace Dietterich highlights reconciliation as a key ecclesial practice of missional communities. Entrusted with God's ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:16–21), Christian communities are shaped by this ecclesial practice that includes confession, judgment, and forgiveness. Dietterich admits, "While central to the biblical understanding of the nature of salvation, reconciliation may be the most difficult practice for contemporary Christians even to consider, much less to actualize within their congregations."[68]

Like Guder, Dietterich calls for the demanding work of restoring community through reconciling dialogue, where differences and dissension are recognized and engaged in a constructive manner.[69] This is her vision for mutual accountability in Christian community, living the Christian way of life in a manner that is worthy of God's calling.[70] Guder puts it this way: "If the calling is to be agents of God's peace, then to live worthy of that calling is to live together peacefully as peacemakers. If the calling is to point to the healing that is God's intention for all creation, then to live worthy of that calling is to live together in ways that foster healing, restoration, and reconciliation."[71] This is

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64 Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 125.

65 Guder, 128.

66 Guder, *Called to Witness*, 133.

67 Guder, *Be My Witnesses*, 80.

68 Inagrace Dietterich, "Missional Community: Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 166.

69 Dietterich, 168.

70 Dietterich, 171.

71 Guder, *Called to Witness*, 117.

the vision for the church with integrity of witness, giving attention to both sides of the Möbius strip.

Mission as Projection?

When Christian communities experience conflict and division and do not seek to practice dialogue, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation as Guder and Dietterich call for, they are in danger of operating out of the psychological phenomenon of projection. Among the many psychoanalysts who have studied this, C. G. Jung is the figure whose thought I will engage for this final aspect of analysis in this article. Jung calls negative aspects of the personality the shadow, and they initially exist on a subconscious level.[72] As long as this goes unengaged, the shadow will be projected onto other people. "Projections change the world into the replica of one's own unknown face," Jung suggests.[73]

Probably without intending to invoke psychology, Guder himself alludes to this unconscious process in his discussion of reductionism. He begins by naming the human inevitability of reducing the gospel as it is translated into human language and culture. This is not necessarily a problem; the negative aspect comes into play when control enters the scene and turns reduction into reductionism. "The danger rests in our desire to 'control God,'" Guder explains, "which leads us to regard our unavoidable reductions of the gospel as validated absolutes. We are constantly tempted to assert that our way of understanding the Christian faith is a final version of Christian truth."[74] Guder goes on to describe the historical trends of reductionisms throughout Christian history. He concludes, "The reductionisms of Western Christianity are very deeply rooted in a long history. They are, but now, largely unconscious."[75] I hear echoes of these kinds of unconscious theological absolutes in the calls I mentioned earlier within LMC for separation from cultural changes and persons with different ideas and commitments.

In Jungian analysis, the desire to control others is understood as a manifestation of unconscious, unintegrated, negative parts of the self that one seeks to bring under control in someone else. While we deny these aspects of ourselves, we seem to see them clearly in someone else.[76] Anabaptist pastoral theologian

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72 Carl Gustav Jung, "Aion: The Phenomenology of the Self," in *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Viking, 1971), 145.

73 Jung, 146.

74 Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 100.

75 Guder, 102.

76 Ann Belford Ulanov and Alvin C. Dueck, *The Living God and Our Living Psyche: What Christians Can Learn from Carl Jung* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 16.

David Augsburger explains what happens within groups that possess a collective shadow. He writes, "As the shadow emerges, the group's identity becomes sharply defined, its beliefs more rigid, its convictions more passionate."[77] The longer this goes on, the more extreme the projection gets. The community's "perspectives become compulsively dogmatic, unwittingly arrogant, unadmittedly dictatorial, and increasingly intolerant of diversity or challenge."[78] I see some evidence of these behaviors in the LMC situation. Those negative unconscious aspects that are embedded in the faith community become projected onto neighbors, both within and beyond the church.[79]

A shifted focus on mission brings an array of new neighbors into the reach of a community living with unresolved conflicts. This creates the conditions for additional harm. In his book on church planting, Stuart Murray warns, "If church planting is an attempt to avert attention from unresolved issues, it can cause serious relational and institutional damage," which, if left unaddressed, "will over time become damaging, inhibiting, and destructive."[80] If this is the case, how can a community that has been formed in the crucible of internal conflict bear witness with integrity to the gospel of reconciliation?

The Möbius Vision

While formation is, in part, a human-driven phenomenon, it is also the locus of divine action. Christians are formed both by human community and by God's Spirit. In the Anabaptist context, we could say that formation is the Holy Spirit's shaping of persons into the form of Christ (Phil 2:1–11). Menno Simons identifies this formation as regeneration, an act "of God, through the living Word," so that believers can have the nature, mind, disposition, and "aptitude for good" that Christ demonstrated in his human form.[81] This formation enacted by God is the regeneration of God's image in the believer.[82]

Undoubtedly, human beings play an important role in formation. Jungian scholar Ann Bedford Ulanov invites us to name and face the negative aspects

77 David W. Augsburger, *Hate-Work: Working through the Pain and Pleasures of Hate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 103.

78 Augsburger, 103.

79 Jung, "Aion: The Phenomenology of the Self," 53.

80 Stuart Murray, *Planting Churches in the 21st Century: A Guide for Those Who Want Fresh Perspectives and New Ideas for Creating Congregations* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2010), 48–49.

81 Menno Simons, "The Spiritual Resurrection, c. 1536," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c.1496–1561*, ed. J. C. Wenger, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1956), 55.

82 Simons, 56.

of ourselves and our communities, and consciously struggle with those aspects until we experience transformation. This is work we can engage in even as we await the transformation enacted by God's Spirit. If human conflict can form us in particular ways, so can human attempts at forgiveness and reconciliation, empowered and led by God's Spirit. This hard work means facing what we wish was not true about ourselves, accepting its existence, and then, as Ulanov says, "to come face to face with the astounding fact that Paul announces: God loves us while we are yet sinners."[83] Indeed, this brings us to Guder's claim that "the first form of incarnational witness of the church is constant testimony to its forgiveness, and its need for continuing forgiveness."[84] Embracing God's love of ourselves as forgiven sinners enables us to witness to the gospel of reconciliation in our very being.

Returning to the Möbius Loop as Continuous Formation-Witness

In this article, I have described several models of Anabaptist witness, engaged an extended example of formation and witness in LMC, cited Guder's call to walk worthily, and tapped into the psychological concept of projection. In sum, the Möbius twist I am proposing for Anabaptist witness is the retention of both formation and witness in the life of the church. Each is distinct, essential, and should not be collapsed into the other. The integrity of Anabaptist witness depends on its attention to and congruency with formation.

Even when we engage the formational task of reconciliation in the wake of church conflict, as I hope LMC will do, we do not have to put witness on hold. Jesus, after all, doesn't wait until his followers are perfectly formed to send them out to bear witness to the good news and heal the sick. We see throughout the Gospels this constant movement back and forth between when Jesus spends time forming his disciples and when they engage in witness. Jesus continues to tend to their spiritual practices, teaching, and treatment of one another. Formation and witness continue simultaneously in the disciples' experience, like the continuous motion of the Möbius loop. May it be so among Anabaptist communities.

83 Ulanov and Dueck, *The Living God and Our Living Psyche*, 54–55.

84 Guder, *Be My Witnesses*, 31.