

Nonviolence as a Call to Creativity: Anabaptist-Mennonite Reflections from Peace Work in Africa

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How does the church witness in conflict spaces? What is the relationship between mission and conflict, and the church's responsibility in addressing conflict? Reflecting as a Mennonite peacemaking practitioner in international settings, I hold these timely questions up against a backdrop of pacifist Anabaptist tradition and practice and listen for answers from my African colleagues.

When my South African friend Nicole Joshua said, "The concept of nonviolence is actually a violent act for those who have been silenced," I took notice. Nicole, a colleague of mine from the Anabaptist Network in South Africa, was repeating what young Xhosa participants had said at a recent international workshop on nonviolence. These young people, disenfranchised even now as they live with the structural and systemic violence in the current South Africa, quickly identify the problems with limited definitions of violence. Nicole added her own concern with the White church not listening to or affirming the painful stories of those living in daily violence; our theories sounded limiting and judgmental. "We must redefine nonviolence so that it is an invitation to be creative," she said.

Isn't that what we are doing? I wondered.

How have we lost this key message of the Good News of reconciliation? I am a Mennonite missionary who has worked in five countries as a peacemaker, and this direct challenge gave me pause to reflect on the North American Mennonite Church and its message in global conflict arenas, and my own input. Through Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), my husband and I served alongside Bishop M. B. Ochola in northern Uganda, supporting the Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative mediating with the Lord's Resistance Army and bringing child soldiers back home. Our second MCC term was with the

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Association for Non-violence in Chad, training leaders in community mediation across the Muslim/Christian divide. We do not plant churches but intentionally work with and support people of different faiths; we feel we are living the mandate to simply serve in the name of Christ, fitting Lesslie Newbigin's definition of mission as "the crossing of a frontier of strangeness."¹

Surely this modern peacebuilding work was avoiding the pitfalls of early church missions—the colonizing and politicizing of the church to support the status quo. We shudder reading Barbara Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* and watching denominations tied to the state struggle when liberation theology takes root in the grass and conflicts with staid church authority. But thinking we are not supporting the status quo is far from dismantling it. Is there a neutral space between these two? It is possible that the way we teach and practice peacemaking is primarily for individual conflicts and that, even when it is contextualized in social justice and speaks to forms of structural oppression, we are missing the bigger picture, to our global neighbors' detriment.

As an urban North American Mennonite, I grew up in inner-city California and discovered that my dad's conscientious objection to the Vietnam War was radical in a cool way. Studying politics, I thought my Mennonite roots were responsible for my activist spirit. But I heard discontent from my peers—why didn't Mennonites support Martin Luther King and play a more prophetic role in the fight for civil rights? I reluctantly agreed—Mennonites don't fight; they run away. Born out of violent persecution, we bought peace with our silence. While we rejected Luther's dualism, we were still figuring out how to be submissive to authority when we disagreed with it. Thus, "submission to ruling authorities did not include obeying them. It meant only accepting the punishment the rulers meted out."²

South Africa has a painful history of the church supporting the oppressor and the oppressor's state, and we can learn from this. Theologians such as Louise Kretzschmar have studied both mainstream and Pentecostal denominations in South Africa and found that dualism and individualism were correlating dynamics that led to the church distancing itself from social and political concerns. As Kretzschmar says, faith becomes privatized in this way: "Religious authority is first opposed by the growing secular powers, then becomes more and more alienated from social affairs and is, finally, limited to the existential realm of individual persons."³ As the apartheid state came under increasing

1 David A. Shank, *Mission from the Margins: Selected Writings from the Life and Ministry of David A. Shank* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2010), 272.

2 Duane Ruth-Heffelbower, *The Anabaptists Are Back! Making Peace in a Dangerous World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1991), 61, 68.

3 Louise Kretzschmar, *Privatization of the Christian Faith: Mission, Social Ethics, and the South African Baptists* (Accra, Ghana: Asempe Publishers, Christian Council

criticism, dominant Christians felt their very identity and way of life threatened by church leaders such as David Bosch, who said that Jesus's way was an "alternative community" embodying its prophetic message—an idea he borrowed from Anabaptism.⁴

Early European Anabaptists intentionally lived in radical community that denied both state *and* economic authority. This way of life was part of what made them seem dangerous and an enemy to those in power. "The church is an alternative community that embodies kingdom values. It is not a chaplain to the state, blessing the current order . . . not merely an association of people interested in spiritual things, but a community that embodies an alternative economics and politics."⁵ Living in "common purse" connection with each other was one way to prevent individualism and perversion of wealth accumulation, encourage contentment with what one had, and acknowledge one's relationship and interdependency with others. But most importantly, by sharing their possessions with those among them in need, Anabaptists were taking on justice as an economic and spiritual act, not merely a charitable one.⁶

North American Mennonites helped introduce Anabaptism to Africa, and specifically South Africa.⁷ While their contribution was small-scale and didn't counter apartheid directly, they taught and modeled allowing space for imagining the church, Christian values, and confronting "the powers" of this world in a different way. Andrew Suderman, a theologian and former fellow Mennonite service worker in South Africa, succinctly summarizes what Anabaptist teachings brought:

Put simply, Anabaptism offered a theological and ecclesial vision that rejected apartheid logic, encouraged the struggle against the injustice and oppression of the apartheid system, and called upon those who embraced such a faith—e.g., Mennonites living in that particular context—to be

of Ghana, 1998), 19.

4 Andrew G. Suderman, "Mennonite Experience in South Africa: An Alternative Imagination," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 (April 2015): 270–72.

5 Jamie Ross and Andre Gingerich Stoner, "What Anabaptists Bring to the Inter-church Table," in *Fully Engaged: Missional Church in an Anabaptist Voice*, eds. Stanley W. Green and James R. Krabill (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2015), 259.

6 Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2010), 121–22.

7 For more, see John de Gruchy, "Radical Peacemaking: The Challenge of Some Anabaptists," in *Theology and Violence: The South African Debate*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio (Johannesburg: C. Skotaville, 1987); David Bosch, *The Church as Alternative Community* (Potchefstroom: Instituut vir Reformatoriese Studie, 1982); and also Cobus van Wyngaard, "The Public Role of the Christian Community in the Work of David Bosch," *Missionalia* 39, no. 1–2 (April 2011): 151–67.

present alongside those who were suffering and struggling. It also challenged apartheid in a way that did not lead to or justify counterviolence against the apartheid state, thus stepping outside of the ongoing cycle of violence.⁸

South African theologians, practitioners, and activists have picked up on this vision and are molding a South African Anabaptism that takes the best of these teachings and makes it their own, such as through the Anabaptist Network in South Africa (ANiSA). There are many ways that their engagement with the principles of Anabaptism in the broken South African context speaks even more effectively to the violence of our modern world. The 2018 ANiSA Conference, the majority being people of color, discussed Anabaptism in relation to race, gender, love, and power. Young theologian and activist Nkosi Gola talked about the need to decolonize Jesus's parables: for example, Nelson Mandela was the "prodigal father" giving the whites what they didn't deserve, and the two "brothers" are still not reconciled.⁹

Nonviolent responses are needed for the violence caused by global capitalism, environmental degradation, mass migration, and widening gaps between rich and poor. Early Anabaptists experienced personal persecution, but their stand for justice usually did not extend to the Other and so was limited in scope. This may help explain why modern American Mennonites have largely moved from being marginal to mainstream, from radical to pluralistic, and have become willing to incorporate civil religion. Many believe they are responsible citizens rightly supporting a system that gave them freedom of religion, not realizing that "when the status quo is accepted and the operations of a system of government are seen as givens, the violent coercion which underlies those systems is adopted as given."¹⁰

This capitulation is known innately by those abused under the current global power structures, and they are calling out this hypocrisy of the church. When peacemaking is made primarily about the individual, that limitation is oppressive and difficult to apply in broader contexts. If privatization of faith results in missing the call to social justice because of tunnel vision, surely privatization of peacemaking does the same thing?

Early Anabaptists shared material possessions with their brothers and sisters as a point of justice, and this reminds me of what I have seen in several

8 Andrew G. Suderman, "Believers' Church and the (Counter) Political: The Promise of Anabaptist Ecclesiology in the South African Context," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 92 (Oct 2018): 511.

9 Nkosi Gola, "Black Pain in All Its Manifestations in a Modern Day Parable," Anabaptist Network in South Africa Conference (Johannesburg, South Africa, September 20, 2018).

10 Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist*, 45.

countries in Africa—caring for your neighbor-in-need as a matter of communal responsibility, not as pity or an act that takes away dignity. At a recent peace training for church leaders, our partner Oscar Siwali said, “There is an isiXhosa saying: ‘When your neighbor is hungry, you give him your cow so he can milk it, and he milks it but while looking over his shoulder as he knows some day you will come to take it back.’ This is what we need to teach white people—you cannot just drive your big car when your neighbor is hungry. Capitalism has failed us, and we need to find ourselves as Africans to find peace as a nation.”¹¹

The developing world has been critical of capitalism, especially as the global dynamics of the system oppress and dehumanize so many. Christians in places like South Africa see the need to decolonize the church and understand how it has gone wrong supporting the oppressor instead of the oppressed. The mission era in South Africa was fundamental in the subjugation of indigenous people into the colonialists’ structures—removing pastoral people from the land and distorting identity and culture, for example.¹² The South African church, across the range of denominations, has historically contributed to the degrading of people of color and is still trying to find its prophetic voice against the current status quo of structural and economic injustices. When state administrations such as South Africa mimic the US governing systems by privatizing health-care and dehumanizing immigrants, where is the Christian voice to care for the “least of these”?

Church and state supporting the oppressor is not new to Mennonites; in fact, North American Mennonites can claim some of our own history of being recipients of violent persecution and forced emigration as parallel experiences. However, it has been too easy to hide behind this history and let it blind us to the situation of our brothers and sisters living with daily violence and to our own contribution to their painful story.

Mennonites in North America took land from indigenous people who, as a result, have suffered economically, socially, even spiritually. Mennonite teachers in indigenous schools supported the breakup of families and jarring isolation of broken identities and lost language.¹³ This largely unacknowledged history is something we are beginning to learn and mourn, apologize for, and seek to make right. As we do so, we are offering a relevant nonviolent response; we are peacemaking. As one ANiSA member and theologian, Alan Goddard, responded recently to a friend posting his personal confession on Facebook,

11 Oscar Siwali, “Church Leaders Conflict Mediation Training,” SADRA Conflict Transformation (Durban, South Africa, August 28, 2018).

12 Crain Soudien, *Realising the Dream: Unlearning the Logic of Race in the South African School* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2012), 103.

13 For resources such as study guides and Bible reflections on this topic, see *Dis-mantling the Doctrine of Discovery* materials, <https://www.dofdmennon.org>.

“Thanks for publishing your prayer of repentance and of petition for a restitutional discipleship! Millions of white South African Christians need to do the same, to be set free from the shame of apartheid, and to walk into the freedom Christ gives us to live restitutionally.”

Global capitalism has damaged traditional community frameworks, including those of Mennonites, and I believe this has affected us across the world. “It is important to understand globalisation because, in addition to all its other effects on identity-making processes, it has reconstituted traditional systems of trust . . . it has broken the protective frameworks provided by community and tradition and replaced these with larger and more impersonal frameworks.”¹⁴ As we strive for understanding, we might discover that those of us living in postmodern locales have also been adversely affected by the “impersonal frameworks” that break community; perhaps our early Anabaptist identity and values have even been affected? We must be careful to not simply restructure the same unjust paradigm. Reflecting deeper, we might find that our desire for community is actually a desire for control.¹⁵

Becoming a reconciling church at home is directly related to our being a church of reconciliation in mission. Doing our homework and admitting our part in economic and racial oppression is essential to defining conflict and injustice and our role in addressing it. Beyond our individual confessions, those of us in the dominant culture are also part of systemic injustices that cause daily conflict for our neighbors.

As North American Mennonites today, we need to clean up our own house. Can we revise and rebirth the early Anabaptists’ ideas of mutual aid, radical communal living, and a shalom that “encompasses both a grace that nurtures and wrath that insists on justice”?¹⁶ As Suderman asks, do “Mennonites themselves remember or recognize these characteristics as part of their own faith identity? Do contemporary Mennonites continue to seek ways of living according to these characteristics?”¹⁷ With a log in our own eye, how can we define violence and nonviolence for others? Because of our own brokenness and blindness, it is more important than ever to listen and let others lead the way forward, even in helping us develop appropriate responses to injustice and conflict in North America.

Anabaptism is now a global phenomenon, and North Americans can take the humble posture of listening, learning, and unlearning from our cousins

14 Soudien, *Realising the Dream*, 48.

15 Cobus van Wyngaard, “Exploring Theology and Desire: Power and the Risk of Love,” Anabaptist Network in South Africa Conference (Johannesburg, South Africa, September 21, 2018), 6.

16 Ruth-Heffelbower, *Anabaptists Are Back*, 38.

17 Suderman, “Mennonite Experience in South Africa,” 274.

who are grappling with how to apply Anabaptist principles to current times, including care for the Other. Africa has not only spaces of conflict but also a more holistic vision of peace and understanding of the centrality of relationships.¹⁸ We must listen and learn so that, among other things, we can redefine nonviolence as an invitation to be creative.

¹⁸ John Paul and Angela Lederach, “Let Us Talk: African Contributions to Peacebuilding,” in *Building Peace from Within: An Examination of Community-based Peacebuilding and Transitions in Africa*, eds. Sylvester Bongani Maphosa, Laura DeLuca, and Alphonse Keesley (Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2014), 50.

