
Anabaptist Witness in the Context of Emerging Communities

Mauricio Chenlo

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

—Isaiah 6:8 (NIV)

1. The Church Is the Fuel of the System

Isaiah 6:8—“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’”— has been one of the scriptures guiding my work for the past decades. This text echoes in my mind when I think about my own call to work with emerging communities and church planting.

In this piece, I will first share my story of how my life experiences led me to accept such a call. Then I will offer three concepts to challenge our thinking about and approach to emerging communities and church planting. For I believe it is up to the churches and those with specific calls to respond to the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

My journey to church planting began a long time ago within the context of a local church in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was there that I became part of a congregation in which leadership development among youth and college students was a natural function of ministry. In that setting, I was part of a group of friends who came to church without any background in Anabaptism or evangelicalism. For most of us, the whole notion of worship, Sunday school classes, vacation Bible school, or any of the typical programmatic church activities was foreign.

For most of my friends and me, church was a lifeboat in the middle of the stormy ocean of life in a country divided by civil war. The Cold War between the USSR and the United States at that time had created several regional instabilities, prompting armed groups identified with the Cuban Marxist revolution

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to attempt to take power. Eventually, the political violence escalated to a point in which the armed forces decided to exterminate the violent insurrectional groups.

Those days, there was not much hope beyond the church. Nevertheless, it was normal for me and most of my friends to engage with other groups and invite them to soccer tournaments and camps. Engagement with the world outside the church was as natural to us as swimming in water is to fish.

After many years of enduring social violence and political instability, I decided to move out of Argentina with my family. We explored two possibilities: using our European passports or re-connecting with the Mennonite church in the United States, where I had attended seminary at AMBS (graduating in 1988) and served with Mennonite Board of Missions (in Ecuador from 1991 to 1996).

After much discernment and several visits to churches that had sent invitations to pastor, we landed in Raleigh, North Carolina. There, by invitation of Raleigh Mennonite Church (RMC), I served in two roles—as the director of a neighborhood peace center and as the congregation’s youth pastor. The mission of the peace center was connected to a fruitful ministry called Building Together Ministries, which had initiated a charter school for underprivileged children within the context of systemic racism. The school and the peace center provided a natural outlet to connect with neighbors and groups interested in peacemaking and justice initiatives. Most members of RMC engaged in local ministries, including a preschool for at-risk children, and had connections to North Carolina State University.

I should mention that I also served part-time as Urban Ministry Director for the Eastern Carolina District/Virginia Mennonite Conference and Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) urban ministries. Part of that role included the task of engaging with emerging leaders interested in exploring the Anabaptist tradition and leadership opportunities.

Occasionally seminary students from the Divinity School at Duke University visited us, and over time I became friends with some of the graduates. One morning after worship two of the Duke grads asked me if I knew of any church in the Carolinas that was searching for pastors. (I was connected to all the churches in the Carolinas—there were five at that time.) “As far as I know,” I answered quite honestly, “there are no churches in the region searching for pastors. If you want to pastor a Mennonite/Peace church, you will have to start it yourself.”

Clearly, church planting for Mennonites—at least in the South—is a necessity. We need more peace churches because we don’t have them. We need bodies of believers who embody the beloved and peace community we want to be part of. No other churches I know in this area are the kind of people we want to be.

My first point here is quite simple: without peace churches there is no Anabaptist witness to peace. I would even go so far as to say that church planting is the fuel of the entire system.

2.A Jesus Model

The context of this work is, for me, a model Jesus offered us.

No matter what we think about mission, church planting, and evangelism, we can all agree that Jesus modeled compassion, proclamation, servant leadership, and sacrificial witness. The historical Jesus was a compassionate prophet/teacher who displayed a merciful attitude in all kinds of circumstances and with all kinds of people. He also articulated the vision of the coming of God's reign in foundational teachings like the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, and other means of proclamation. As a leader, he demonstrated servant leadership motivated by humbleness and a desire to serve the needy and marginalized.

Jesus empowered his followers to follow his example and create life together. The community we call the church is the imperfect embodiment of the Jesus model. Without communities of faith, we lose the opportunity to embody a different way of being community—that of loving each other despite natural differences and disagreements. Church planting and birthing emerging communities is the logical way to witness Jesus's model.

3. What Kind of System Do We Need to Birth Peace Communities?

In 2013, at MMN we created a program named Sent. It was the result of conferences, immigrant churches, and MMN/Mennonite Church USA staff working together for several years to identify what is necessary to create a healthy church-planting culture. Conference leaders, pastors, and church planters concluded we need a system that includes three basic functions: calling, equipping, and sending.

The call and function of empowering emerging communities of faith must be grounded in a sense of purpose and vocation. For this, denominations and structures are needed; there is no question that without their support, leaders cannot function properly. However, in Mennonite Church USA's support system, we short-sightedly assume that needed structures and well-thought-out processes can do the work of planting peace churches. In my experience, leadership comes from the planters. You can design the best support systems, but without the players on the fields there is no game.

It follows then that empowering emerging leaders with creative and innovative ideas is foundational to healthy churches. In turn, structures and systems need to be versatile and driven by dynamic and empowering conversations. As a friend of mine says: "First find the water, then create the pipeline system."

There is also a need for a set of practices and tools to equip planters in a consistent manner. For instance, intake processes must be consistent with the theology and licensing/ordination practices implemented by the denomination. Planters also need coaching on how to navigate the denominational polity and

ecclesial culture. Most planters are not familiar with Mennonite Church USA's system and thus do not know how to get on board with our denomination. For example, let's say a graduate from a school that promotes Anabaptist theology wants to explore the possibility of starting a Mennonite fellowship or Bible study group in an area where there are no Mennonite churches. Where do they go? Whom do they call? Who is going to walk with them as they explore their call to plant a church?

Many in Mennonite Church USA are also aware that some of our "legacy" churches are facing closure. Numbers are decreasing everywhere. But the good news is that there are many people outside of Mennonite circles who are eager to explore their call to either pastor or plant a church. How do we empower newcomers to get excited about developing a productive project that can rebirth and relaunch dying churches?

I invite you to listen to the call—what is the Spirit saying to you?