
From Skeptic to Proponent

Emerging Support for Emerging Communities of Faith

Doug Luginbill

For much of my life I have been a church-planting skeptic. This may sound odd coming from a conference minister who believes deeply in the charisms of the Mennonite church. In particular, I strongly affirm an Anabaptist commitment to nonviolence and just-peacemaking. Speaking from within the United States, —a country enmeshed in violence of all kinds, with a gun-saturated culture and a political climate of hate—I am grateful for the gift of God’s holistic peace. I resonate with a commitment affirmed by Mennonite Church USA delegates in 2017 that “we are called to extend God’s holistic peace, proclaiming Christ’s redemption for the world with our lives. Through Christ, God frees the world from sin and offers reconciliation. We bear witness to this gift of peace by rejecting violence and resisting injustice in all forms, and in all places.”¹ If I believe this with my heart and soul, why have I been a church-planting skeptic?

As I’ve reflected on this, I recognize the following concerns: First, I wonder if the term “church planting” is sometimes used to put a positive spin on a contentious church split where those disgruntled with the leadership or direction of their current church set off to plant a new church. It is important for church planters and their supporters to carefully discern the motivations, context, and intentions of a church-planting venture.

Second, Mennonite leaders in the United States have had a long and unresolved conversation about how evangelism and peacemaking fit together. Do we diminish our emphasis on peace so that we might draw as large an audience as possible? Do we highlight nonviolence, recognizing that a pacifist ethic may turn away many would-be followers of Christ? My skepticism has been rooted in my own perception that church-planting leaders of the past often responded

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1 *Renewed Commitments for MC USA—Journey Forward: A Living Document for the Journey Forward Process*, accessed September 5, 2023, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/renewed-commitments-for-mc-usa/>.

to these questions in a way that highlighted a more generic evangelism, thus diminishing our peace ethic.

An additional reason for skepticism is rooted in my observation that many church plants failed or quickly drifted away from the conference or church that planted them. Should a conference or denomination put energy and resources into a faith community that may not survive or will eventually distance itself from those who gave it birth?

Below I will reflect more fully on the sources of my skepticism and how I am now rethinking these concerns. I will also share the stories of three emerging communities of faith in which Central District Conference (CDC) has recently engaged. These stories, as well as a growing spirit of openness in my own self, are transforming my skepticism of church planting into active support of new and emerging communities of faith within CDC. But first, I will share a bit of the background and structure of the conference.

Background and Context of Central District Conference (CDC)

Central District Conference (CDC) reorganized its structure in the early 2000s after participating in a failed attempt by four Mennonite conferences to merge into one Great Lakes Mennonite Conference. With few financial reserves and exhausted leadership, the conference no longer had staff or volunteers giving strong attention to evangelism or church planting. At that point, the conference tasked the Missional Church Committee with giving oversight to church planting, along with promoting peace and justice activities and educational resourcing for CDC churches. In 2012, the committee began discussions about how to support emerging churches. Through the encouragement and leadership of John Powell, Gerald Mast, and other members of the committee, the group developed a helpful process for emerging churches to connect with CDC. However, since the committee was made up entirely of volunteers, the group could respond to only one, or maybe two, inquiries at any one time regarding new church development. The conference simply did not have the structure in place to develop a healthy church-planting program.

Shortly after beginning as the conference minister for CDC in August of 2016, I received an email from Karla Minter, who was serving as a Church Relations Representative from Mennonite Mission Network (MMN). MMN was conducting a survey of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) conferences to assess the church-planting efforts and environment within the denomination. Karla wanted to meet with me and our CDC administrator, Emma Hartman, to reflect on CDC's church-planting efforts and commitment. MMN had recently been given oversight and resourcing responsibility for church planting within the denomination. They had also developed the Sent Network—"a six-month curriculum focusing on face-to-face, small-group studies complemented by online

resources and help from facilitators. According to Mauricio Chenlo, minister of church planting at Mennonite Mission Network, the goal of the Sent Network is to create a community of leaders that is trained in church-planting skills.”²

I confess I was a bit skeptical of the visit with Karla and had minimal interest in giving time and effort to the discussion. However, I believed it was important to build goodwill and provide honest feedback to denominational leaders. In addition to concerns outlined above, I also was inherently cautious of standardized approaches and programs for developing communities of any kind, including churches. In my mind, healthy faith communities emerge slowly, organically, and contextually. I was not particularly interested in training individuals to be church planters, sending them to unfamiliar territory, investing significant conference resources, and hoping that they would be successful. At that point, CDC had no designated funds to directly support church planting. Our barebones staff of two full-time and two very part-time persons were stretched thin to serve thirty-nine churches across ten states. Not to mention that I was new in my role and the learning curve was still quite steep. It would take a lot to convince me that CDC should invest time, energy, and resources in church-planting efforts.

However, when Karla, Emma, and I met in the fall of 2016, I was impressed with Karla’s enthusiasm, commitment to the church, and desire for MMN to provide the resources and support that conferences and church planters needed to be successful. It was clear that multiple levels of support and engagement by the denomination, conference, and local congregations would provide church-planting efforts with more opportunity for success. Although I did not come away from the meeting with a new vision or commitment, I did recognize possibilities and opportunities I had not previously considered. The primary remaining obstacles to implementing anything were staff time and resources. Additionally, I did not see myself as having the appropriate skills, training, or temperament to engage in church-planting efforts. But I became committed to paying attention to opportunities that might arise.

Reasons for Skepticism

1. Questions about Church-Planting Motives

I grew up at Grace Mennonite Church in Pandora, Ohio. Grace had a somewhat tumultuous beginning in 1904, as noted by James O. Lehman in his history of the congregation, *A Century of Grace*. Lehman, reflecting on the spirit of the dedication service for the church building in 1905, states, “The whole Mennonite

² Zachary Headings, “Introducing Sent Network,” article and video (0:47), September 16, 2009, <https://www.mennonitemission.net/resources/church-vitality/church-planting/4047/The-Sent-Network-kicks-off-with-strong-participation>.

community of the area had been through stressful times with all the religious ferment that had swirled throughout the farming community and the small towns of Pandora and Bluffton during the previous decade or more. Not all the hurts had been healed, but at least the lawsuits that finally helped bring about the formation of Grace Mennonite Church had been settled amiably out of court. Peace was gradually returning to the large Swiss Mennonite community.”³

Somewhere in my spiritual DNA lay a sense that new churches are often born out of strife, conflict, and division. Were people who identified themselves as “church planters” really rebels, disaffected by the church and convinced they had a better way? Could churches that emerge out of conflict grow into healthy communities of faith? *I confess to some skepticism toward the motives of church plants and church planters.*

Yet, nearly 120 years later, Grace Mennonite Church continues as a committed and faithful CDC congregation. Stuart Murray, writing in *Planting Churches in the 21st Century*, acknowledges both the challenges and opportunities arising from congregational conflict or splits. He states, “These (factors) do not necessarily invalidate a church-planting initiative or jeopardize the outcome—indeed, sometimes these factors combine with missional motives to galvanize a church to action. But, if church planting is an attempt to avert attention from unresolved issues, it can cause serious relational and institutional damage.”⁴

Murray’s perspective assuages some of my skepticism regarding church planting arising out of congregational conflict. While such conflict is painful and confusing, emerging church leaders may be able to help clarify the purpose and mission of a new community of faith while also tending to the emotional scars of the conflict that precipitate the new community. Focusing on a positive and healthy direction while also acknowledging the pain and loss may provide a strong foundation for moving forward. It is important for the emerging church leaders to define themselves *not* by the conflict (or by what they are *not*) but by the mission and vision to which God’s Spirit is calling them.

2. Experience of Congregational Distancing from Mennonite/Anabaptist Identity and Values

In 1976, Grace Mennonite Church in Pandora, Ohio, developed a sister church relationship with Grace Mennonite Church in Chicago, Illinois—another CDC congregation that had started out as a missionary church plant in 1917.⁵ After

3 James O. Lehman, *A Century of Grace: In the Community and Around the World* (Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, Inc., 2004), 230.

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

5 Grace Mennonite Church in Chicago was planted by missionaries from the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren denomination in 1917. In 1939 the congregation joined the Middle

Grace Chicago experienced a major fire to their meetinghouse in 1976, Grace Pandora provided labor and financial support. I recall traveling from Pandora to visit the Chicago church with our high school youth group following the fire. To a young farmer-boy, Chicago could have been a different country and the congregation seemed to be another culture; I wasn't sure they were really "Mennonites." After the Chicago congregation rebuilt their fire-damaged church building, they even renamed their congregation "Grace Community Church." I recall some of the conversations among Pandora Grace folks, questioning the rationale or wisdom of the name change. *I confess some latent skepticism that church plants will eventually distance themselves from Mennonite/Anabaptist identity and values.*

Including "Mennonite" in the name of a congregation affiliated with the Mennonite Church is certainly not the only, or even the most important, way an emerging community of faith communicates its mission and vision. Yet I'm always curious about why some congregations do or don't include "Mennonite" in their name. That said, I'm becoming less concerned about name choice even as I find myself doubling down on the importance of an emerging church clarifying how it understands its mission and vision in light of Anabaptist values.

3. Concern that Emphasis on Evangelism Will Diminish Emphasis on Peace

I hope that new Anabaptist communities will be strongly committed to peace. MC USA, MMN, and CDC have all identified peace as a core value of what it means to be a Mennonite church.⁶ Are we ok with investing in emerging communities of faith for whom nonviolence is an optional value? Do we minimize peace theology initially and introduce it slowly and persistently, offering a perspective that some will receive with joy and others may choose to reject?

When I was a religion major at Bluffton (College) University, Bible professor Burton Yost invited me to attend a "Peace Church Evangelism" conference in Berne, Indiana, in November 1984. While I remember very little of the

District of the General Conference Mennonite Church, the precursor to CDC. The church's name initially was Mennonite Bible Mission and in 1950 changed to Grace Mennonite Church. For more on the congregation's history, see Samuel J. Steiner, "Grace Community Mennonite (Chicago, Illinois, USA)," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (December 2022), [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Grace_Community_Church_\(Chicago,_Illinois,_USA\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Grace_Community_Church_(Chicago,_Illinois,_USA)).

⁶ See Palmer Becker's pamphlet *What Is an Anabaptist Christian?* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2008). Becker emphasizes that peace is a result of the transformation available in Christ. This transformation results in changed behavior. He states that "transformed people work for peace" (17). Emerging churches that seek to claim "Mennonite" as their faith tradition must engage with the understanding that peace is a core value of the Mennonite Church.

conference content, I was intrigued by the idea that peace and evangelism were co-conspirators in the great commission (Matt 28:19–20). Former MC USA executive director Ervin Stutzman comments on this peace conference in his book *From Nonresistance to Justice*. He casts the origins of the conference as a response to the contentious debate occurring in the broader Mennonite church at the time:

Peace advocates accused fundamentalists of not giving enough attention to peace concerns. In a social survey, Mennonite sociologists Kauffman and Driedger found a negative correlation between a Mennonite “orthodox” or “fundamentalist” theology and commitment to peacemaking. On the other hand, some conservatives accused peace advocates of forsaking their first Christian duty—evangelism. They strongly objected to the liberal political leanings of Mennonite institutions and disdained the notion that the church should try to influence government military policy.⁷

It was out of this tension, Stutzman states, that the Peace Church Evangelism conference was held in Berne. Art McPhee, keynote speaker at the event, stated, “Shalom, God’s peace, is at the heart of evangelism. Shalom is, in itself, integration [of these two concepts].” While the specifics of that conference are long gone from my mind, its central message—encapsulated in McPhee’s quote—remains ingrained in my spirit.

As I have reflected on that message, I have also come to see that Menno Simons’s often-quoted explanation of evangelism continues to be a compelling vision for the Mennonite church: “True evangelical faith is of such a nature it cannot lie dormant, but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love.” Being part of a faith tradition that offers a message of God’s peace through Christ, that eschews violence in its many forms, may indeed be good news in today’s violent world. Yet the tendency for some church planting efforts to downplay peace—or to prioritize evangelism over a frank reckoning of the manipulative, colonialist, ethnocentric, and paternalistic history of mission—has continued to make me wary.⁸ *My skepticism about church-planting efforts stems in part from a concern that the Mennonite peace emphasis might be diminished by a strong emphasis on evangelism.*

As I reflect on that 2016 meeting with Karla Minter, I recognize that I brought a multifaceted skepticism to the table. Could I now, as CDC conference minister,

⁷ Ervin R. Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908–2008* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2011), 201.

⁸ Jason Boone raises an additional important question that I do not consider here—that is, whether commitment to peace is sufficient to identify an Anabaptist church plant. See Boone’s article, “What Kind of Church Are We Talking About?,” in *Creating an Anabaptist Church-Planting Culture*, ed. James Krabill (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2019), 15.

engage in conversations around church planting in open and curious ways—laying aside my skepticism—and invest in emerging communities of faith?

A Transformation Begins

Open Table Mennonite Fellowship (Goshen, IN)

In June 2017 the delegates of Central District Conference unanimously welcomed Open Table Mennonite Fellowship of Goshen, Indiana, as a member congregation of CDC. Open Table Mennonite Fellowship began in 2012 and describes itself as “the godchild” of two other Goshen Mennonite congregations—Assembly Mennonite Church and Faith Mennonite Church.⁹

Assembly Mennonite Church traces its beginnings to Epiphany (January 6) 1974. Located in a town with many Mennonite churches and a Mennonite college, Assembly sought to “explore new forms of congregational organization, program, and worship; and to serve as a setting where theoretical believers’ church thought could take on a more visible, concrete expression.”¹⁰ Growing to over one hundred participants within a year, Assembly discovered a way of being church that was compelling and life-giving. The congregation’s unique leadership structure, emphasis on small groups, and consensus decision-making, provided a creative, engaging, and warm welcome to those seeking a new way to be church while emphasizing Anabaptist values.

One of Assembly’s original missions was to reach out to the broader Goshen community. Their rapid growth, which primarily consisted of people with Mennonite background, perhaps inhibited their ability to reach out to non-Mennonites in the community. In 1987 an ad hoc group of Assembly members began meeting “to start thinking about the possibility of Assembly initiating a separate congregation to work more intentionally at mission with people in the Goshen area who did not have a church home.”¹¹ In March 1989 eleven Assembly folk held a Saturday retreat that resulted in a decision to “establish a congregation for people who did not have a church home. The intent from the new church’s beginning has always been to have a good balance/mix of people from all walks of life—folks with little or no church background, along with people who grew

⁹ Sally Weaver Glick, Letter to Central District Conference Board of Directors requesting Membership of Open Table Mennonite Fellowship, December 7, 2015.

¹⁰ “Assembly Mennonite Church History,” Assembly Mennonite Church website, Accessed July 24, 2023, <https://www.assemblymennonite.org/about/history/>.

¹¹ Dan Shenk, “The History of Faith Mennonite Church (as of October 2000),” Central District Conference Files, unpublished paper.

up as part of Mennonite or other church traditions.”¹² This gathering resulted in the birth of Faith Mennonite Church.

It is noteworthy that neither Assembly nor Faith emerged out of significant conflict or heated division. This is not to say there wasn't creative tension or hard conversation as these congregations formed. Yet both congregations emerged primarily out of creative vision and a desire to live faithfully into a way of being church that honored foundational Anabaptist values while exploring new expressions of worship, leadership, and mission. It is within the context of the Assembly and Faith origin stories that Open Table Mennonite Fellowship emerged.

In the mid-2000s, some members of both Assembly and Faith who desired smaller worship settings began meeting together. The metaphors of “sprouts” and “baby spider plants” were used to capture the sense that these smaller worship groups still maintained a connection to Assembly and Faith. By 2012, Assembly was again experiencing significant growth and began looking at a building expansion. Some in the congregation wanted to consider two worship services. “In early 2012, co-pastor Karl Shelly hosted several meetings exploring different options for this. A group coalesced of about twenty who were interested in a smaller, alternative-style worship service. Rather than trying to get all the details figured out ahead of time, Karl encouraged the group to begin meeting, quoting a line from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: ‘The way is made by walking.’”¹³

This group, along with several folks from Faith, began meeting together at Faith House, which was owned by Faith Mennonite Church and served as their offices and emergency housing for the community.¹⁴ The Faith House group brought together “DNA from both Assembly and Faith. Meeting every other Sunday, they explored biblical passages that picked up on the theme of walking, being led, and being ‘on the way.’”

Today, Open Table Mennonite Fellowship continues meeting at Faith House and describes their faith community as follows:

At Open Table, we gather together to worship the Holy One, to hear the biblical stories told again, to listen for the Spirit through song, silence, questions and conversation, to break bread together at table, to open ourselves to mystery and to community. And we go out to encounter God in our daily lives in the world, seeking to follow the way of peace Jesus shows us.¹⁵

Hearing the origin story of Open Table during the CDC Annual Meeting in 2016 inspired me, and my skepticism of “church planting” began to lighten

12 Shenk, “History of Faith Mennonite.”

13 Glick, Letter.

14 Glick, Letter.

15 “Welcome to Open Table Mennonite Fellowship,” Open Table [Mennonite Fellowship] website, accessed July 24, 2023, <https://www.opentablemennonite.org/>.

as I started imagining ways in which new Anabaptist communities of faith might begin to emerge across the conference. Open Table was not the vision of a conference church-planting committee. Neither was it the result of a church split or the dream of a charismatic, entrepreneurial leader. Open Table emerged patiently, thoughtfully, and deliberatively as a handful of faithful disciples of Jesus followed their hearts and passions. Neither Assembly nor Faith stood in the way of leaders exploring a new way. Rather, they provided space for the new community to emerge and develop, not as clones of the two congregations but as their own unique worshipping community.

Grand Rapids (MI) Mennonite Fellowship

In June of 2019 I was surprised to receive an email from Alaina Dobkowski from Grand Rapids, Michigan, explaining that five families who had been worshipping and meeting together in a home for about a year were calling themselves Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship (GRMF). None of them had grown up in the Mennonite church; rather, they had learned about and experienced Mennonite theology and worship in college or other settings. They had become acquainted with Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship (KMF) and were receiving mentoring support from KMF's pastors. Alaina participated in a Sent conference through financial support coming from KMF's conference, Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference (IMMC). Because IMMC at that time was not open to credentialing persons identifying as LGBTQIA+, GRMF wanted to consider CDC as a potential conference with which to affiliate, given that CDC had already made the decision to credential pastors identifying as queer.¹⁶ Because GRMF wanted to be a fully affirming congregation, including at the leadership/pastoral level, they eventually requested to join CDC. In a letter to the CDC board in 2021, they described their mission and vision in the following way:

Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship is a Jesus-centered community committed to peacemaking and doing life together. We are a community that seeks to be a place where all people experience God's justice, peace and joy. We denounce white supremacy and seek to root out its ideology from within ourselves and our systems. We are committed to the work of antiracism and pursuing liberation for all people from oppression. We strive to use inclusive

¹⁶ In 2014 the CDC Ministerial Committee developed a document entitled "Central District Conference—Ministerial Committee Theological Foundations for Credentialing," which has guided credentialing decisions. See https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_HPX-3Idw2_uF3CqS_KoPlpxbaXlFqZSO/view?usp=sharing. For a much longer explanation of the decision-making processes, see the following document, which was presented at the fall 2016 Constituency Leaders Council of Mennonite Church USA: Doug Luginbill et al., "Peer Review Report: CLC Meetings," October 7, 2016, CDC-Report-at-CLC-101716.pdf (mcusacdc.org).

language in our gatherings together. We invite everyone, without qualification, to full participation in our community and life together. We welcome and affirm LGBTQ persons for membership, marriage, ministry, and leadership.¹⁷

In addition to the excellent support they received from Kalamazoo Mennonite, GRMF also reached out to three other CDC congregations, including Open Table Mennonite Church, Milwaukee Mennonite Church (a lay-led congregation), and St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship (also lay led). Alaina expressed appreciation for the counsel, ideas, and support GRMF received from these congregations, as well as for the resources of MC USA and the guidance of both IMMC and CDC.

In January 2021, *Anabaptist World* picked up the story of GRMF. In the article, author Tim Huber noted that

GRMF also got to know MC USA through the Pathways Study Guide distributed in 2018 as part of the Journey Forward renewal process and Future Church Summit at the 2017 convention in Orlando, Fla. While the summit and study guide were intended to stimulate internal conversation for member congregations around shared values and dreams for the denomination's future, it proved just as helpful for this "outsider" group."

"It was really focused on getting to the roots of what Mennonite Church USA was about, getting back to the basics," Dobkowski said. "That helped us learn more about Mennonite Church USA as well as think through who we were and help us decide if this was a good fit."¹⁸

In June 2021 at CDC's Annual Meeting, the CDC board of directors recommended GRMF as a member of the conference, and the delegates unanimously voted to welcome them as a CDC congregation.

As I reflect on GRMF's story, I am deeply moved by the realization that there are disciples of Jesus out there who are looking for a home in the way of being church that Mennonite Church USA and CDC embody. In conversations with Alaina, other members of GRMF, and people outside of the Mennonite church who inquire about CDC, I often hear stories of disillusionment with evangelical, fundamentalist, or nationalistic backgrounds. I also hear longings for a church that takes Jesus's life and teachings seriously, a community that welcomes all regardless of sexual orientation, a people committed to active peace and justice ministries, and a safe space to struggle with difficult theological questions without judgment. I am becoming more and more convinced that, despite our imper-

17 Grand Rapids Mennonite Fellowship, Draft Congregational Description sent to the CDC Board of Directors, February 13, 2021.

18 Tim Huber, "A Church Shows Up Unannounced: Michigan House Fellowship Is a Pleasant Surprise for Central District Conference," *Anabaptist World*, January 9, 2021, <https://anabaptistworld.org/a-church-shows-up-unannounced/>.

fection, brokenness, division, and gatekeeping, there is an important place for Anabaptist values and community in the United States. People are looking not only for community but also for belonging, a place to be fully themselves, and a place to explore and grow in their Christ-centered commitments and values.

Beloved Community Charlotte (NC)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many CDC congregations began offering worship online using Zoom or other video connections. For some congregations, this opened new opportunities for people near and far to “visit” a Mennonite church. Such was the case with a group of individuals in Charlotte, North Carolina, who began worshipping with Raleigh Mennonite Church (RMC) via Zoom in 2021. While a two-and-a-half-hour commute would have been a deal-breaker for the Charlotte folks to regularly join RMC in person, getting to know RMC and their Mennonite values and beliefs via Zoom worship was convenient and meaningful.

In May 2021, RMC pastor, Melissa Florer-Bixler, led worship in Charlotte with twenty-plus people in attendance. Following worship, six individuals stepped forward to provide leadership to explore forming an emerging community of faith in Charlotte. In June, Melissa contacted me about this experience and invited me to connect with Helms Jarrell, one of the six interested in leadership. Helms had earned an MDiv through an Alliance of Baptists seminary and was ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She had also started a local nonprofit serving the marginalized and impoverished community of Charlotte. Helms envisioned a faith community that included a priesthood of all believers, peace theology and nonviolence, an active faith, an anti-racist community, LGBTQIA inclusion, support for local social justice action, and support of those experiencing poverty. She also believed it was important to help ex-evangelicals find a new way in the church.¹⁹

When I asked Helms what would be helpful as the new community develops, she identified the following:

- a mentor,
- learning more about what it means to be Mennonite,
- examples of how other new churches began,
- some financial support for herself and some programming,
- and clarity on CDC’s expectations of a church plant.²⁰

I was impressed by the clarity of Helms’s vision and her expression of specific needs, though I wasn’t sure we could provide what she was seeking, especially regarding financial support. When I asked her to develop a proposed budget,

¹⁹ Helms Jarrell, personal phone call with Doug Luginbill, June 7, 2021.

²⁰ Jarrell, phone call.

she provided an excellent document with realistic requests. However, \$20,000+ was not in CDC's budget and we didn't have a good process in place to quickly discern the request. As I shared this vision with the CDC board and Missional Church Committee, we agreed to cover the costs for spiritual direction and two online courses at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Eventually, the emerging community began meeting twice a month and became known as Beloved Community Charlotte (BCC).

Clarity from emerging communities of faith regarding their needs helped the CDC Missional Church Committee and the board of directors respond in concrete ways. Could we move with sufficient speed to meet the needs and not lose the interest and energy of the emerging church leaders? For BCC, the answer was no. Frustrated with the pace of church institutional decision-making, BCC decided to affiliate with a different denomination with which Helms already had a relationship. When Helms informed me of their decision, I was disappointed but not surprised. I thanked her for helping CDC clarify what was needed to support emerging communities like BCC and blessed her in her ongoing leadership.

Taking Steps to Support Emerging Communities

As CDC leadership reflected on these stories of emerging churches and sought to hear the Spirit's leading, we took some concrete next steps to position ourselves to be supportive of new and emerging communities of faith. In December 2021 the board approved a job description for an associate conference minister for emerging communities of faith, approved a \$350,000 campaign to support the position for three years, and established a search committee. Additionally, the Missional Church Committee adopted a matching-grant process by which emerging communities could request funding for up to three years. In January 2023 CDC hired Matt Prichard as Associate Conference Minister for Emerging Communities of Faith.

From Church-Planting Skeptic to Emerging-Church Proponent

Richard Rohr, a prominent American Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation (Albuquerque, NM), often refers to transformation as an essential aspect of Christian growth. He states:

Transformation usually includes a disconcerting reorientation. . . . Change of itself just happens; but spiritual transformation must become an actual process of letting go, living in the confusing dark space for a while, and allowing yourself to be spit up on a new and unexpected shore. You can see why Jonah

in the belly of the whale is such an important symbol for many Jews and Christians.²¹

While this may be too dramatic a description of my transformation from church-planting skeptic to emerging-church proponent, I resonate with, and am challenged by, the importance of “letting go” during seasons of feeling overwhelmed and inadequate. I was recently reminded that the church is God’s project, not ours. Recognizing that the church is both the result of and the steward of “the wisdom of God in its rich variety” (Eph 3:10, NRSVUE), I am growing in awareness that my skepticism can get in the way of God’s grander wisdom and imagination.

Regarding my skepticism of the motives of church planters, I recognize that God’s call can come in a variety of ways to a variety of people, even through experiences of conflict. For healthy discernment for all involved, we owe it to church planters to be clear about our mission and vision as an Anabaptist peace church that centers Jesus and seeks to follow him. It is also important at some point early in the church-conference relationship for emerging church leaders to go through the credentialing process. Not every church planter who explores a relationship with CDC or MC USA is going to find belonging amid our broken and beautiful Mennonite church.

However, we aren’t in the business of creating cookie-cutter Mennonite congregations. The willingness and wisdom of Assembly and Faith to allow Open Table to become who God was calling them to be, provides an excellent example of letting go and watching God work through creative wisdom. These two established congregations were born with creative and risk-taking DNA that they passed along to their congregants. They walked alongside the emerging church leaders, whose motives were not to distance themselves from their parent churches but rather to affirm and pass along those churches’ spiritual DNA to others.

Regarding my skepticism linked to the probability of emerging church leaders eventually distancing themselves from the Mennonite church, I have learned that open and transparent conversations early on are essential. Conferences must allow a significant amount of freedom for emerging communities to find and claim their own identity. Conferences must also be transparent about their mission, polity, expectations, and values. Beloved Community Charlotte is an example of a community that discerned early on that they would best fit with a church body other than CDC.

There are a number of ways conferences and emerging churches can grow in their relationship with each other and build lasting connections. Conferences

21 Richard Rohr, “Change as a Catalyst for Transformation,” Center for Action and Contemplation, Daily Meditations, June 30, 2016, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/change-catalyst-transformation-2016-06-30/>.

can provide a mentor for emerging church leaders. They can provide support for ongoing theological and leadership training. They can reduce or eliminate costs to attend conference gatherings and denominational meetings. Conferences can also help emerging communities of faith develop relationships with one or two other conference congregations. They can provide—temporarily—financial support for meeting space or material resources. What conferences must not do is leave church-conference relationship-building completely to the emerging community of faith.

Regarding my skepticism that emerging churches will emphasize “evangelism” and diminish “peace,” that’s not been my recent experience. The leaders of emerging communities of faith who have reached out to CDC within the past ten years are coming to the Mennonite church deeply convinced that peace and evangelism go together. It is certainly possible that emerging church leaders may not be convinced that an external and active peace witness is essential to their faith, yet they may still seek a relationship with a Mennonite conference. Again, it is important to have those conversations early in the relationship. And, with a spirit of openness and humility, conferences may choose to support leaders who are not convinced of the importance of peace theology. Mennonites don’t have the corner on truth. Nor does our peace-loving perspective serve us well when we become self-righteous about it. We must be open to the ways God’s Spirit can surprise us!

Leaning into Change

I am not a church-growth expert. I have not been called to create an emerging community of faith myself. I recognize that my leadership gifts are mostly rooted in organizational management and nurturing healthy religious institutions. And I also recognize that without new communities of faith, the future of the church is dim. In fact, when CDC began in 1957, there were forty-one member congregations. Today there are forty-five member congregations. However, of the original forty-one, only twelve congregations remain. If I have learned anything about the church in my seven years as conference minister, it is that churches, conferences, and denominations constantly change. CDC has decided to lean into change, position ourselves to be open to the creative energy of God’s wisdom in its rich variety, and prepare ourselves to support, resource, and encourage leaders who are drawn to Anabaptist peace theology.

Today, Matt Pritchard is in conversation with several emerging communities: Moveable Feast is an interfaith community near Chicago. Olentangy Wild Church meets monthly outdoors in Columbus, Ohio. Another congregation is emerging out of church conflict. Matt is also in conversation with two individuals who are imagining queer inclusive Hispanic congregations. Of course, I have no way of knowing what these emerging communities will look like two, five, or ten years

from now. But I believe there is a greater likelihood of continuation and growth when emerging church leaders and congregations are in relationship with a larger intentional community on this journey.²²

May the wisdom of God, in all its rich variety, continue to energize the church today and into the future!

²² The document “Shared Theological and Missiological Commitments for Church Planting in Mennonite Church USA” provides a helpful summary of Anabaptist peace theology approaches. See Mennonite Church USA website, “Ministry” tab, accessed October 5, 2023, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/ministry/church-vitality/church-planting/#1593800353119-19c22a77-4b86>.