# Anabaptist Witness

*A Global Anabaptist and Mennonite Dialogue on Key Issues Facing the Church in Mission*

VOLUME 10 / ISSUE 2 / NOVEMBER 2023

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## About


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The editor makes a public call for submissions for each issue of the journal, soliciting contributions that facilitate meaningful exchange among peoples from around the world, across professions, and from a variety of genres (sermons, photo-essays, interviews, biographies, poems, academic papers, etc.). All submissions to *Anabaptist Witness* undergo a double-blind peer review process. For full details of the current call for submissions, visit www.anabaptistwitness.org. Questions or comments about the journal's print or online content may be directed to the editor:


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## New Anabaptist Communities

BOOK REVIEWS

# Editorial

Last summer I spent two weeks teaching at the Meserete Kristos Church's seminary in Bishoftu, Ethiopia. While in Ethiopia I learned of the denomination's growth plans, which involve attracting thousands of new members and initiating many new congregations. I also visited what I was told was a "small" church with a few hundred attendees (among them dozens of children) and a larger church that had around two thousand congregants present. In conversations about differences between the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) and North American Mennonites, I often heard a variation on the line, "We understand that you Mennonites focus on discipleship rather than growth."

I took that statement in part as a sign of respect and in part as a transparent acknowledgment of difference. My students were strongly committed to discipleship and eager to engage Mennonites in a process of mutual learning about following Jesus. At the same time, they expressed a contrast between their own priorities and those I represented as a North American Mennonite. This contrast was typically articulated in response to discussion of the obvious numerical facts about the global Mennonite church: growth in Ethiopia, decline in North America.

Over the past few months as I've contemplated my conversations with my MKC students, I've wondered what it would look like for North American Mennonites to embrace something of the MKC vision of discipleship *and* growth. Many of us have become skittish around the language of "church planting" and even the idea of intentionally seeking to start new Anabaptist communities—and often for good reasons. Concerns about colonialism have rightly motivated Anabaptists and other Christians to seek new patterns of missional engagement since the mid-twentieth century. Mennonite mission agencies embraced a paradigm of partnership with existing indigenous Christian churches rather than a strategy of initiating new communities. Around the same time, Mennonite academics argued for the congregation as the basic unit of mission, with ordinary congregational worship and mutual aid as the primary method of witness. Meanwhile, many ordinary Anabaptists gave up on mission, viewing it as inherently imperialistic, and instead emphasized peacemaking and social activism.

This issue of *Anabaptist Witness* contains articles from Britain, Canada, India, and the United States on the theme of "New Anabaptist Communities." Many of the articles reflect on denominational, conference, and parachurch efforts to start new communities, while some of them narrate grassroots efforts to found congregations outside of any institutional prompting. Many of the articles reflect theologically on connections between Anabaptist identity, mission, peace, and justice. Taken together, the essays suggest various paths forward in making

connections between growth and discipleship, between the intentional creation of new communities and faithful witness to Jesus.

The issue opens with the story of Grace & Peace Mennonite Church, as narrated by one of its founding members Rhonda L. Mitchell. Mitchell tells of how she and other New York City Mennonites with physical disabilities began to ask themselves, and to discuss with conference leadership, "What is the perfect church for me?" Although the congregation initially gathered in Mitchell's apartment, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic it has largely met online.

Grace & Peace Mennonite Church is a wonderful example of how new communities can emerge to meet the needs and desires of Anabaptist Christians for fellowship and worship. The next article, a sermon by Rachael Weasley, similarly narrates the establishment of Community of Hope, an online congregation that "centers queer experience and queer theology." Weasley shares how her search for a new church home after moving across the United States led her eventually to start one—also during the pandemic. Starting online enabled a "diasporic" community to emerge over time, with regular meetings over Zoom for far-flung members and occasional in-person gatherings for those in the same area. The stories of Grace & Peace and Community of Hope give us a glimpse of how digital technologies are shaping new Anabaptist communities.

Stuart Murray's article on Anabaptist church planting in Britain also begins with the pandemic. In 2020 leaders of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network gathered to consider whether to begin intentionally looking to found new communities—a break from its historic commitment to a model that emphasizes partnership and dialogue with other Christians. Although Murray suggests the Network will continue that emphasis, he also tells of efforts underway to begin new congregations that reflect the 500-year tradition of Anabaptist church planting.

Doug Luginbill, conference minister of Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA), tells of his own journey from skepticism to embrace of church planting. Luginbill shares reservations related to church planters' perceived motivations and tendency to downplay distinctive aspects of Anabaptist-Mennonite faith, particularly with regard to peace witness. In the past few years, however, Luginbill has had the opportunity to walk alongside a variety of new communities, and this experience has given him a new hope for healthy Anabaptist church plants.

In the next article, David Boshart, former conference minister of Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC) of MC USA, reflects on changes in the conference's church-planting strategy. Boshart examines CPMC's shift in 2005 from a "transactional" model of church planting—one in which existing congregations focus on providing resources for new congregations—to a "community of practice" model that stresses mutual ministry and support among all of the conference's member congregations, new and old. In Boshart's telling, this

shift reversed a long history of unsuccessful church-planting effort. Together, Luginbill's and Boshart's articles offer a window into the history of Mennonite church planting in the United States in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

Mauricio Chenlo, the minister for church planting at MC USA and Mennonite Mission Network, then shares how his sense of the importance of church planting evolved after moving to the American South, where there are few churches explicitly committed to peace witness. Chenlo describes denominational efforts to support the initiation of church patterned on Jesus's model of peace, justice, and compassion.

Amita Sidh, a member of a Mennonite Church in India congregation, offers a warning to churches that focus on service ministries rather than evangelism and church planting. Although Sidh is strongly supportive of service as a form of Christian mission, she is convinced on biblical and theological grounds of the importance of calling people to faith in Christ—and of forming new communities of new believers.

Finally, Matthew Todd presents research on the formation and history of Chinese Mennonite Brethren churches in Canada. These churches, mostly located in British Columbia and started in the 1990s, have provided a home to Chinese migrants and eventually, through the hard work of their members, have served as cultural and theological hubs for a distinctive identity. Yet as the migrants' children increasingly assimilate to Canadian culture, additional challenges have emerged. Todd's article is a reminder that as new communities age, their struggles and opportunities change. Reviews of books on world religions and martyrdom close the issue.

In the next issue of *Anabaptist Witness*, guest editors Henok Mekonin (Global Leadership Collaborative Specialist, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary) and Abenezer Shimeles (MDiv student, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary) will present articles on "Mission and Peace in Ethiopia." That issue promises to advance our collective understanding of how commitments to peace, justice, and new communities might coalesce. I hope that these two issues together will help us Mennonites learn how to focus on discipleship and growth.

—Jamie Pitts, Editor

# Gathering Virtually, Bound Together Spiritually

Rhonda L. Mitchell

Grace & Peace Mennonite Church, now a primarily virtual congregation, was initially established in 2019 as a house church in the Bronx, New York, after a small group of believers with longstanding ties to various New York City (NYC) Mennonite churches came together to explore possibilities for fellowshipping together. For many of us, chronic health conditions and impaired mobility made it impossible to regularly and/or comfortably attend church services. Working closely with Ruth Yoder Wenger, Atlantic Coast Conference Minister for NYC, we explored the question "What is the perfect church for me?"

Many of our answers reflected the complications and uncertainties of living with physical challenges such as severe asthma, COPD, fibromyalgia, lymphedema, various degrees of mobility impairment, sensory integration disorder, and the physical and cognitive changes that come with aging. For some of us, just getting to and from church on a "good" day was exhausting. Sometimes paratransit logistics or a home health aide's schedule interfered. For others, loudly amplified worship music was problematic. We all wanted to participate fully in congregational life, yet realized that some of our specific limitations made that impossible, even with physically accessible church spaces.

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*Rhonda Mitchell, a native of the Bronx, New York, has been part of the New York City Mennonite community for over fifty years. She has been an active member of three Mennonite congregations in New York. At Good Shepherd Mennonite Church she coordinated and facilitated children's after school Bible Club and Summer Day Camp programs for children ages five to twelve. While at King of Glory Tabernacle, she taught Sunday school for children ages six to eight, and was part of the nursing home ministry. A graduate of Hunter College, she worked for twenty-five years in various New York City social service agencies serving foster care youth, senior citizens, developmentally disabled adults, and people court-mandated to attend impaired driver programs. Due to debilitating mobility issues, Rhonda has been homebound for the past fifteen years. Rhonda rejoices in God's faithfulness and is grateful for new opportunities for spiritual growth and service. Presently Rhonda is a member of Grace and Peace Mennonite Church, a primarily virtual congregation, where she is part of the leadership team. She is also enrolled in a fully online master's degree program at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.*

At that time, my church had a "sick and shut-in" ministry, but it did not meet my needs. Visits were infrequent. And although I appreciated having people come pray for me or have a short Bible study, I often felt isolated and disconnected from the church community. It was important to me to be a full participant in congregational life, not only an observer or a "project." What I really wanted was to have the entire congregation in my home every week for Sunday service!

The meetings that eventually resulted in the formation of Grace & Peace Mennonite Church, and our subsequent worship services in 2019 and early 2020, all took place in my apartment. As we processed an exercise in understanding "the perfect church for me," we developed a statement of identity:

> We are an Anabaptist/Mennonite congregation committed to accommodating the diversity of needs among us. Our faith community values connection and mutual accountability.

We decided to meet two Sunday afternoons each month for worship and to gather once a month for fellowship.

In March 2020, the emerging COVID-19 pandemic resulted in New York State issuing mandatory stay-at-home orders, and on Sunday, March 22, 2020, we held our first virtual service on Zoom. This enabled us to meet weekly for worship, and we quickly realized that meeting online gave us an even better way of "accommodating the diversity of needs among us."

We moved forward by affirming a three-person leadership team consisting of Anita Castle, Rhonda Mitchell, and Naomi Yoder, and expanding our Zoom meetings to include all aspects of congregational life: worship, fellowship, Bible study, and organizational decision-making. We ultimately decided to be a primarily virtual church named "Grace & Peace Mennonite Church." Today we have a core group of ten people who meet together regularly, and an extended church family of thirty.

Because of Zoom, we all grew accustomed to connecting with each other regardless of physical proximity. This became especially important in the fall of 2020, when Monroe Yoder and his daughter, Naomi Yoder, made the difficult decision to relocate from the family's home of forty-six years in the Bronx to his childhood community in Grantsville, Maryland. We were deeply grateful that this upheaval did not need to disrupt our church family. When an article written by Tim Huber about our congregation appeared in the February 2021 issue of *Anabaptist World*, the headline captured our experience: "Virtual Fellowship Is Real Fellowship: COVID-19 Helps NYC Church Become MC USA's First Primarily Virtual Congregation."[1] It also reflected our gratitude for the way the pandemic helped us move beyond our original house church model.

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1 Tim Huber, *Anabaptist World*, "Virtual Fellowship Is Real Fellowship: COVID-19 Helps NYC Church Become MC USA's First Primarily Virtual Congregation," February

By the fall of 2021, Grace & Peace Mennonite Church was accepted into Atlantic Coast Conference of Mennonite Church USA, joined the New York City Council of Mennonite Churches, and held a hybrid service for the ordination of Anita Castle as our pastor. Anita enrolled in Hesston (KS) College's online pastoral training program through the Center for Anabaptist Leadership and Learning, and I enrolled in the Masters of Arts distance learning program in Theology and Global Anabaptism at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, IN), where I am also working toward a graduate certificate in spiritual direction.

In early 2022 our congregation suddenly had to cope with the deaths of two beloved members: Mervin Horst,[2] whose love of Anabaptist history and sacred music was irrepressible, and Monroe Yoder,[3] whose wisdom and guidance over the years had influenced the spiritual formation of many of us, and most recently had been instrumental in "spurring us on" in the formation of Grace & Peace Mennonite Church. The process of grieving Monroe's passing and celebrating his life made us even more appreciative of our virtual church. We were able to be together frequently and meaningfully, and we came to realize that our congregational foundation was strong and that we were well equipped to move forward in faith and love.

Our connections with other New York City Mennonite churches and the broader Anabaptist/Mennonite family continue to expand. We regularly participate in special Zoom events with North Bronx Mennonite Church. This spring we enjoyed participating in the Anabaptist Study Bible project, and we now sometimes incorporate the project's prompt questions into our study of scripture. Some of us were able to attend the annual Camp Deerpark Homecoming in September,[4] which included the dedication of a new cabin named "Wisdom," funded by a gift from Monroe and Rachel Yoder.

A scripture that has special meaning to our congregation is Hebrews 10:23–25 (NIV): "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another." We believe that meeting together as a community

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3, 2021, https://anabaptistworld.org/virtual-fellowship-is-real-fellowship/.

2 LNP|Lancaster Online, "Mervin E. Horst" obituary, Jan 10, 2022, https://lancasteronline.com/obituaries/mervin-e-horst/article_25f7edd8-718a-11ec-9c7b-2327f5c2dcac.html.

3 *Anabaptist World* News online, "Amish Farm Boy to New York Bishop: Monroe Yoder Crossed Cultural Boundaries to Influence Development of Urban Churches," February 10, 2022, https://anabaptistworld.org/amish-farm-boy-to-new-york-bishop/.

4 Camp Deerpark website, "Camp Deerpark Homecoming Festival," Events tab, accessed September 29, 2023, https://campdeerpark.org/events/homecoming/.

of faith is essential as we discern God's leading for our lives, individually and collectively. And we are blessed to be able to give and receive support whether or not we are able to leave our homes, are bedbound, need continuous oxygen, or are hospitalized.

The Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to know that God is in our midst whether we are joining together virtually or in person. Our faith makes God real to us—and the Holy Spirit dwells in all of us, connecting us in ways that are not bound by physical constraints. In many ways our experience is expressed in one of our favorite songs, "We Are the Church,"[5] which was written in 1972, long before high-speed internet made virtual church a possibility. Nonetheless, the first verse is just as relevant for us as for any congregation: "The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple; the church is not a resting place; the church is a people." This is also true of the description of what participants do in church ("When the people gather, there's singing and there's praying, there's laughing and there's crying sometimes"). Sharing our lives, experiences, and emotions makes our Zoom church very different from watching a preacher on television or a service that is live-streamed. We very rarely use the Zoom chat feature, because participants are encouraged to express themselves verbally and engage fully throughout the service—particularly during our sharing time.

For our fledgling congregation, the pandemic revealed a way for us to meet together regularly, regardless of our location or physical capability. We do miss singing together in the same room, eating together, and the warmth of hugs when we greet each other and say goodbye; we have two in-person services each year to make all that possible. And between those gatherings, we have the comfort of connecting multiple times a week, holding unswervingly to the hope we profess, spurring one another on to love and good deeds—and never giving up on meeting together!

5 Richard K. Avery and Donald S. Marsh, "We Are the Church," 1972, Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL.

# How Many Loaves?

Rachael Weasley

I love today's passage, Mark 6:30–44. It's a story that appears six times in the four Gospels, a story of Jesus feeding the multitudes. This version of the story is about intense work bookended by times of rest. Jesus ushers the disciples away to rest, but he also challenges them to ministry they think impossible—providing dinner to the crowd. And the trick of it is, the disciples didn't bring the dinner. The crowd did. Tonight in particular, on this momentous second gathering of our church for a congregational meeting, I'm finding I can relate most to the disciples' experience of surprise. Surprise at what Jesus asks them to do. Surprise at what is possible. Surprise at where the meal comes from. "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asks. "Go and see."

When I sent in my seminary application, I had zero intention of planting a church. If anything, I was against it. It sounds hard. Like the disciples, I assumed the only solution was to send the people away so they could buy themselves dinner. But here we are, at the gathering that will include our second annual congregational meeting! I didn't expect to meet any of you, but here we are sharing Zoom communion and eating our fill! Folks from all over the country and even Canada. Queer folks and parents of queer folks and non-queer folks alike, here at this virtual table to share what we have. I fully trust the abundance I've come to expect from this community.

Some of you were at our first worship two and a half years ago, or made it to the first congregational meeting last summer; but lots of you are new to the church since then, so I wanted to do some storytelling tonight as we reflect on the short and busy little history of this church! To start off, I'm going to back way up.

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*Rachael Weasley (she/her) grew up United Methodist in California and studied music at Oberlin College. During her time at Chicago Theological Seminary she began writing contemplative music with gender-inclusive language in the style of Taizé, and joined a Mennonite church. (Find her songs on OneLicense or at https://rachaelweasley.bandcamp.com.) After several years doing preschool teaching, community organizing, and music ministry, she shifted into church planting in 2020. She is currently the pastor and church planter at Community of Hope Mennonite Church (Bellingham, WA), an online and in-person community that centers queer theology, Just Peacemaking, and family of choice. She and her partner, child, and cat live in Bellingham.*

I graduated from seminary ten years ago, intending to do music ministry and ritual design. My partner and I followed the mysterious call of the Spirit and relocated from Chicago to Bellingham, Washington, in 2015. I got a barista job and a music ministry gig and looked unsuccessfully for a new church home. I found several options that were large, formal, liberal churches, and only one of them had congregational polity. One was cozy and liberal, but the tradition was too clerical. Not my cup of tea. I was looking for a more medium-size church, no clergy robes, walks in the Pride parade, and friendly to visitors. I was looking for a church that did potlucks. I wasn't the only person I knew who had stopped going to church when they moved to Bellingham. I wasn't even the only *seminary-trained* queer person who failed to find a church home in Bellingham. That's when all kinds of random people, who didn't know each other, all started asking me, "Have you ever thought about planting a church?"

I brushed off the first two or three people. But when more and more people, who had never met one another, kept asking me, "Have you ever thought about planting a church?" I decided I should start praying about it. *"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asks. "Go and see."* In 2017 the Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference gave me a few hundred dollars to attend a church-planting conference and buy a few books. I started interviewing people who had planted churches. I finished writing my second album. I got pregnant and gave birth. I came out publicly as queer. Then the pandemic hit.

In the summer of 2020, amid the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, I was on the phone with a young activist friend who was feeling disillusioned. Our conversation convicted me that the church I would plant must offer hope, and community, to young activists like him who struggle with the sustainability of justice work. Over the phone he asked if I would plant the church online during the pandemic. I told him it was impossible. But I couldn't shake his question. Are you going to plant the church online during the pandemic? *"How many loaves do you have? Go and see."*

I was never alone in the church planting. At each step there were angels and partners. But, as I waited for a community to coalesce, I made a lot of decisions without your input. I named the church—Community of Hope. When the money ran out, I paid for the Zoom account myself. I claimed our domain name and started emailing people from the address "pastor@communityofhopechurch.com" before I was really anyone's pastor.

Four months after I declared it impossible, we held our first event online. That was back in fall 2020, and the event was hosted by Hold the Line. It was an online training about how grassroots citizens could prevent a coup and ensure a fair and nonviolent transfer of power after the presidential election. Two people attended. One left because we are too Christian. The other left because we are too Queer.

The next event was our first Blue Christmas service, also over Zoom. And that's when Debbie Bledsoe found me online.

Debbie was the first person who said, I think this church is a good idea and I will help you do it. Suddenly I had a teammate. She recruited half the people to our next event, a 4-week queer theology book group in spring 2021. We read *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* by the Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey.[1] Because Debbie and the people she recruited were students at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Indiana, suddenly our church was half local, half diaspora. As it turns out, not everyone has access to an in-person Mennonite church that centers queer experience and queer theology. As we heard how important it was for folks to be able to access a space like that over Zoom, our vision shifted to include a commitment to continuing online after the pandemic.

By then I had run out of the money from the conference, so I was working for the church for free, doing my barista job for the cash, and footing all the church-related bills. My mentor suggested I apply for the Thrive Grant, but that required me to be in process for ordination, which required that *my congregation* write a letter to the conference. But who even counted as the congregation? In an act of bravery and vulnerability, I asked two members of the book study if they would sign a letter that I wrote requesting my ordination. Rachel Joy, bless her, replied right away. She said yes, and would you like to meet regularly throughout the process? So our leadership team was born: me, Debbie, and Rachel Joy. Now Zoom was not only because of Covid—it was because the three of us all lived in different states! The first decision the team made was to start worshiping regularly, and this is our two-year anniversary—the 25th of those first-Monday gatherings!

We got the Thrive Grant, but the check was made out to the church, and we didn't have a bank account! So for a while it was just a piece of paper while we set everything up. We drafted bylaws in case the bank required them. We evaluated our worship flow and made changes. We strategized and planned and reflected and dreamed together in those meetings. At first the three of us showed up at every event, a community-building core group to welcome newcomers.

Nonprofit status required officers, so Rachel Joy agreed to be treasurer and set up a spreadsheet to keep financial records. Debbie agreed to be administrator; she took minutes during meetings and organized a shared Google Drive with document templates and a flow for our leadership team agendas. Things were getting expensive, so Rachel Joy looked into it and figured out how I could legally receive free-will offerings directly into my Venmo, to help with expenses. That fall, 2021, we met our first financial goal of breaking even. I was still donating my time, but the church—the church! which now existed!—was paying its own

1 Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).

way. We opened a bank account and deposited the Thrive Grant. It was a gray, drizzly day, and as I drove away from the bank, a rainbow appeared in the sky.

My vision was that we would be a community that showed up at picket lines and protests, that threw its weight behind affordable housing initiatives and racial justice work. A community that cared about one another outside of worship, a place to make friendships and find chosen family. When I was sorting through my own identity, I heard queer people preach from the pulpit, but I didn't hear them talk about queerness. I didn't know how to pray through my own journey. I needed help seeing how God fit into my journey, how God could accompany me. "Inclusive churches" hadn't provided me the spiritual tools I needed for my personal journey around queerness, so I was passionate that we resource queer spirituality and make sure we were proactive about exploring queer theology. To have a place where the debate is over and affirmation is baseline seemed obvious, but people kept making it a big deal. I thought, let's have the full belovedness of queer and trans folk be the jumping off point, and see where we go from there! Let's do constructive theology through our liturgy and worship arts! This quickly became our front-running issue. I don't know why this still surprises me. I look forward to the day when this is normal and a low bar for any church.

Rachel Joy moved to Holden Village that winter and resigned as treasurer. Glory joined the leadership team, and Brad Brookins agreed to come on board in spring 2022 as the new treasurer. He's the one who created line items so that we could start tracking expenses by category.

Last summer was our first congregational meeting. People joined the church officially for the first time. The power of that moment caught me off guard. Like the disciples, I didn't see my dinner coming from the crowd. But suddenly, here it was: a few loaves and fish. And that was plenty. A dozen people signed their names to say that the church meant something to them. That they wanted to be part of it. That they would support it to continue. These first members finally formally approved the bylaws and passed the budget. And the budget included fair wages to be paid to me for my time. In two short years I had gone from paying church expenses out of pocket to receiving a salary affirmed by consensus!

I thought we would be a local church that met over Zoom while in-person wasn't possible. And sure enough, now that the pandemic has eased we have grown a local in-person group that started gathering monthly for Wild Church last October. However, the majority of our leadership and members are scattered far and wide—in California, Wisconsin, Kansas, New York. Tonight we have arrived here as a community of folks in four time zones and two countries! We are way more diaspora, Christian, and Mennonite than I thought we'd be when I set out to make a home for unchurched feminist hippies in my Pacific Northwest town. Like the disciples, I never expected this. Maybe you didn't either. We are people who've been burned by church before but still believe in the beauty of church. People who have been kicked out, pushed out, whose children or theologies were

not welcome at our former churches. Hopeful that church still has bread to give us, we show up here tonight looking to one another for the dinner we need.

As we continue to grow into a community that claims and governs itself, I celebrate my own divesting of power and our communal vesting of power. We were once a church run by me alone with my laptop. Now we are about to use consensus to choose our own leadership and a cooperatively designed budget—*for the second time!*—carrying on a proud, hundreds-of-years-old tradition of Anabaptists who value the power of the local community, collective discernment, and non-hierarchical polity. For those of us in Bellingham, we are filling that gap of being a small intimate community that is also Anabaptist and congregationally governed. And sure enough, we do potlucks—after Wild Church in person each month, but once or twice we've done them over Zoom as well!

The more we become organized as a network and less as a wheel with myself at the center, the more set up we'll be for complex ministry in the future. This coming year we're finally ready to put some infrastructure into place, such as a safe church policy to protect the children who aren't here yet, a covenant of understanding for your pastor, and formal supports for small groups.

A congregational meeting means that, even though I'm the founder and church planter, everyone here shares in the responsibility of power and decision-making in the life of our church.

Today we heard a story of Jesus feeding a crowd with food that a few members of the crowd had brought with them. They had brought only a little, but after Jesus blessed their food, there was more than enough for everyone. We're about to spend some time looking at an image of abundance and reflecting on the ways we visualize God. I encourage you to look to this community; the food you need is already here. We gather to share with one another what we have, whether that's kindness or time, a potluck dish, or a financial offering.

Perhaps the most important thing we offer to one another is the strength to continue believing in the reality of hope, despite all the hardship we experience. The audaciousness to look for bread where we don't think there is any. We gather to trust that what we share together is more than enough, if we allow Divine Mystery to guide and bless the feast. Amen.

# Anabaptist Church Planting in Britain

Stuart Murray

## A Change of Strategy

In March 2020, a few days before the British government belatedly announced a lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that was already sweeping the country, representatives of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network met in Birmingham to consider a proposal to plant new Anabaptist churches. We reaffirmed our commitment to work with Christians of all traditions and denominations, to continue offering resources to individuals and communities interested in learning from the Anabaptist tradition. But we also agreed the time seemed right to attempt to plant churches with explicit Anabaptist values and practices. The impact of the pandemic and further lockdowns delayed the implementation of this decision, but the initiative has gained momentum and the first new Anabaptist communities are starting to emerge.

This decision represents a significant change of strategy. North American Mennonite mission workers, who established the London Mennonite Centre in 1953 and laid the foundations for the emergence of an indigenous Anabaptist

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*Stuart Murray spent twelve years as an urban church planter in Tower Hamlets (East London) and has continued to be involved in church planting as a trainer, mentor, writer, strategist, and consultant. For nine years he was Oasis Director of Church Planting and Evangelism at Spurgeon's College, London. In 1997 he founded Urban Expression, a pioneering urban mission agency.*

*Since September 2001 he has worked internationally as a trainer and consultant, with a particular interest in urban mission and church planting. In 2014, he founded the Centre for Anabaptist Studies at Bristol Baptist College.*

*He has written several books on church planting, urban mission, the challenge of post-Christendom, and the Anabaptist tradition. Publications include* Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World *(2004)*; Church after Christendom *(2005);* Planting Churches: A Framework for Practitioners *(2008);* The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith *(2010); and* A Vast Minority: Church and Mission in a Plural Culture *(2022).*

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movement in Britain, had adopted a policy of not planting Anabaptist or Mennonite churches. The priority, they believed, was to offer the insights and resources of the Anabaptist tradition to any and all Christians; setting up new churches might appear competitive and hinder their ability to interact with many others.

The Centre initially offered accommodation to international students who struggled to find housing at a time when racism precluded many other options. Subsequently, the Centre developed as a teaching and resource center—running courses, providing a well-stocked library, and offering many opportunities for informal conversations, often over meals. The Anabaptist Network, founded in 1992, worked closely with the London Mennonite Centre and embraced the same policy of not attempting to plant churches. As a result, the Network has attracted, resourced, and connected Christians from many traditions. Until recently, the Anabaptist Mennonite Network,[1] formed from a merger of the Anabaptist Network and the London Mennonite Trust after the closure of the London Mennonite Centre in 2010, has also refrained from planting churches.

Despite this, some Anabaptist churches and communities were established in the UK. There are currently eleven Brethren in Christ churches[2] in various locations across England and Wales, with plans to plant more churches over the coming years. These churches, the first of which was established in London over forty years ago, are almost entirely Zimbabwean in membership but are eager to become multi-ethnic. Although this denomination acknowledges Evangelical, Methodist, and Pietist roots as well as an Anabaptist heritage, their churches in Britain self-identify as Anabaptist and are increasingly becoming strongly integrated into the Anabaptist Mennonite Network.

There is also a Portuguese-speaking Mennonite church in Eastbourne, on the south coast of England. Comprising Brazilians, Portuguese, Angolans, and others, the church was planted by Brazilian students over twenty years ago.

There are two Bruderhof communities in the southeast of England—one in East Sussex and the other in East Kent. These common-purse communities are branches of an international movement founded in Germany in the 1920s, with similarities to and sporadic connections with the Hutterites. They are by far the largest Anabaptist groups in the UK, although they currently have very few British members and seem unable to attract more.[3]

There was also one other Mennonite church, initially known as the London Mennonite Fellowship and later as Wood Green Mennonite Church. This church, an exception to the policy of not planting churches, emerged from the ministry of the London Mennonite Centre and was integrally connected with the community and activities there. For some years the church thrived, but despite its efforts to

1 See Anabaptist Mennonite Network website at https://amnetwork.uk/.

2 BICC Congregations in the UK, http://westmidbicc.org/bicc-near-you/.

3 See Bruderhof website at www.bruderhof.com.

become rooted in a local neighborhood and more missional, the church remained heavily dependent on the Centre and closed quite soon after the Centre was sold.

Although not explicitly Anabaptist, Urban Expression is viewed by some observers and by many of those involved as a mission agency with Anabaptist values and practices. Launched in 1997 and prioritizing marginalized urban neighborhoods across the UK, Urban Expression recruits, deploys, supports, and networks mission partners in many locations. Some of these are planting churches, others have set up community projects or social enterprises, and all are committed to long-term incarnational ministry.[4] Many of those at the heart of this mission movement espouse Anabaptist convictions and have links with the Anabaptist Mennonite Network. Unsurprisingly, the emerging Anabaptist church- planting initiative has strong relational and strategic connections with Urban Expression.

But this initiative, now called *Incarnate*, is the first time the Anabaptist Mennonite Network has engaged directly in church planting. Before exploring the reasons for this strategic shift, it is worth recalling that church planting was a persistent and highly controversial practice of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists.

## A Church-Planting Movement

One of the practices that differentiated sixteenth-century Anabaptists from the Protestant Reformers—and which infuriated the Reformers—was church planting. While the Reformers concentrated on reforming existing churches, converting Catholic parishes into Protestant parishes in which the gospel was (according to their convictions) properly preached and the sacraments properly administered, the Anabaptists became convinced that such reform was inadequate and that establishing new churches was crucial. These new churches would be free from state control, entered on the basis of believers' baptism, communities in which there was a commitment to discipleship and openness to church discipline. They would be multi-voiced congregations that were not dominated by priests or pastors, communities that shared their resources freely and renounced all forms of violence.

There were a couple of abortive early attempts to convert parish churches into Anabaptist congregations, under the leadership of Balthasar Hubmaier—first in Waldshut and then in Nicolsburg. But these did not survive for long. A very different approach in the North German city of Münster briefly resulted in a distorted form of Anabaptism being imposed on the entire population. The capture of the city and slaughter of many of its inhabitants not only dismantled this initiative but confirmed to the authorities across Europe that Anabaptism was as dangerous as they suspected, resulting in increased levels of persecution.

4 See Urban Expression: Mission in the Margins website at www.urbanexpression.org.uk.

Unsurprisingly, almost all Anabaptists denounced Münster as an appalling aberration and abandoned any ambition of converting state churches or whole communities to Anabaptism.[5] Instead, they planted hundreds of new churches in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

Most of these churches were relatively small, and persistent opposition meant that they met mostly in secret and only occasionally had freedom and opportunity to meet more openly or in larger numbers. They were not uniform, and correspondence between the churches reveals different practices and convictions. Relationships between them varied from great warmth to sharp disagreement and mutual excommunication. Some were charismatic, stirred by visions, and enjoying exuberant worship. Some were more sober, devoted to Bible study, prayer, and ethical reflection. Anabaptists who fled to Moravia to escape persecution formed communities that shared a common purse (perhaps initially as a counsel of necessity on the journey there but then as a practice they believed was biblically mandated) and supported missionaries who traveled all over Europe planting new churches. However, despite these differences, there were many shared convictions and practices in these congregations that distinguished them from the state churches and justified the authorities' conclusion that this was a fairly coherent—and very troubling—movement.

Church planting in the sixteenth century was costly. The expectation of suffering ran through the movement and was presented in the writings of their leaders as a sign that they were the true church (just as the persecuting practices of the Catholics and Protestants indicated that they were not). Those who planted and led these churches were especially vulnerable—subject to arrest, imprisonment, loss of property, torture, and execution. But the missionary zeal of the first-generation Anabaptists—and their conviction that restitution rather than reformation was needed if the church was to recapture authentic New Testament ecclesiology—ensured that this practice would be at the heart of the movement for many years.

In common with many other renewal movements, the passion of the first generation gradually gave way to efforts to consolidate the movement. The missionary zeal abated (although there were exceptions), and their attention increasingly focused on pastoral care, doctrinal and ecclesial conformity, and survival in a hostile environment. The apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic leadership of the early years was succeeded by the ministry of bishops, pastors, and teachers. Flight to escape persecution, underground existence to avoid notice, and formal agreements with the authorities to refrain from evangelizing

5 The history of Anabaptism in Poland-Lithuania, however, demonstrates the possibility of Anabaptism influencing an entire nation through its impact on the rulers. See Michael I. Bochenski, "Polish Anabaptism in the 16th Century: A Story Little Told," *Baptist Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2007): 218–33.

in return for toleration all sapped the strength of the movement and precluded much further church planting in the regions in which Anabaptism first emerged.

As Anabaptist communities moved further east when their places of refuge became unsafe, and eventually to North and South America to find somewhere to practice their faith without fear of persecution, churches were planted to serve these migrant communities. Few of these, however, were missional in intent or effective in reaching out to others. Only in more recent decades has the practice of church planting become more intentional and more missional—initially elsewhere in the world and then in North America and Europe as it became clear that church planting and evangelism were necessary in these regions as the realities of post-Christendom became apparent.

Anabaptist mission agencies have not always engaged in church planting, often choosing to focus on other aspects of mission and wary of cultural imposition. As noted above, this was the stance of Mennonite mission workers in Britain. But church planting has increased in recent decades, with the consequence that the Anabaptist community is now global and increasingly strongly represented in nations with little or no historic Anabaptist presence.

## Planting Anabaptist Churches in Britain

Efforts to plant Anabaptist churches in Britain, then, can claim to be building on the legacy of five centuries of Anabaptist church planting. But there are also contextual, missional, and ecclesial reasons for the strategic change from the policy of the past seventy years.

Although there are many dimensions of the culture shift that Western societies are experiencing, Anabaptists have tended to focus on the demise of Christendom and marginalization of the Christian community and the story it tells. Post-Christendom is a challenging experience and has been disconcerting for denominations with theological and structural roots in the fading Christendom era.

For Anabaptists, however, heirs of a tradition that rejected Christendom as false and corrupting, post-Christendom also represents relief and opportunity. One of the projects of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network since 2004 has been commissioning and disseminating books in the "After Christendom" series, exploring various aspects of this shift and creative ways of engaging with it. Seventeen books have already been published, exploring a wide range of ecclesial, missional, hermeneutical, and ethical issues, and more are being written.[6] We are convinced that the Anabaptist tradition has some helpful contributions to make as we journey with many others into post-Christendom. Planting churches

6 See "The 'After Christendom' Series," Anabaptist Mennonite Network, accessed October 13, 2023, https://amnetwork.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/After-Christendom-series-An-Introduction.pdf.

that embody this tradition will provide us with opportunities to test out this conviction and make such contributions.

One of the hallmarks of post-Christendom is decline in the size and number of churches. In some neighborhoods, there are no longer any active congregations. In areas of new housing, there are often no churches present. Some denominations are maintaining a notional presence in many communities at the cost of exhausting their ministers, who are now responsible for multiple congregations. Many congregations are lumbered with unsuitable buildings that are beyond their means to manage, heat, or repair. The Christian community in Britain is an ex-majority minority struggling with logistical, financial, structural, and psychological issues.[7] Church planting offers opportunities to reach neighborhoods without churches; to explore simpler, creative, and more sustainable ways of being church; and to reflect theologically on the challenges of incarnating the gospel in a changing and complex society. We hope that our experiments in Anabaptist church planting might offer some fresh insights and enable us to participate creatively in conversations about post-Christendom missiology.

During the 1990s, church-planting strategies were endorsed by most major denominations in Britain. In those days, church planting was perceived primarily as an evangelistic enterprise and a means of enlarging the Christian community by establishing more churches. The 1990s had also been designated as a "Decade of Evangelism" leading up to the start of the new millennium. The ambition of achieving significant progress by the year 2000 prompted a precipitate rush to plant churches and the setting of wildly unrealistic goals. While hundreds of new churches were planted in that decade, many lacked effective leadership and failed to thrive or even survive, and most replicated the theology, culture, missiology, and ecclesiology of existing churches. Furthermore, many were planted in more affluent areas where there were already numerous churches and required huge investment of people and finances. Urban Expression was launched toward the end of the decade in protest, prioritizing patient engagement with marginalized neighborhoods and advocating more creative expressions of church.

One of the very encouraging features of what was otherwise a disappointing decade was the ecumenical spirit evident among church planters and between denominations engaging in church planting. Although there were still instances of the competitiveness and arrogance that had characterized church planting in previous decades, this time there was much greater cooperation, mutual respect, and encouragement. Church planting, it seemed, contrary to the fears of Mennonite mission workers, need not hinder ecumenical relationships.

Toward the end of the decade and into the new millennium, another encouraging development emerged as the practice of simply replicating familiar models of church gave way to greater creativity and contextual sensitivity. Phrases such

7 See further, Stuart Murray, *A Vast Minority* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2015).

as "new ways of being church," "emerging church," and "fresh expressions of church" indicated this different approach, and the past twenty-five years have witnessed many experiments and passionate discussions about the interface between missiology and ecclesiology. Anabaptists have been involved in these conversations, and some Anabaptist values and practices have been evident in this season of church planting.[8]

The *Incarnate* initiative is a further expression of this engagement. In addition to contextual and missional incentives for church planting, which we share with many other traditions in our post-Christendom culture, an ecclesial imperative has become increasingly significant for us. Anabaptism is an ecclesial tradition, and community and a shared journey of discipleship are central components in this tradition.

But over the past few decades, Anabaptists in Britain have mostly connected with each other via a dispersed network of individuals:[9] there are some study groups in certain areas, occasional conferences, and a theology forum.[10] Over the past forty years many deep and lasting friendships have been formed. But, as noted above, there are very few Anabaptist churches or communities in Britain. When we are asked for directions to "the nearest Anabaptist church," the best we can usually do is point enquirers toward churches that are open to Anabaptist perspectives. We believe the time is right—and maybe overdue—to plant some churches that are explicitly and unapologetically Anabaptist.

## Convictions and Practices

At the heart of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network are seven "core convictions" that emerged from conversations in the 1990s and have occasionally been revised. The Network is not a membership organization, so nobody has to sign on to these convictions, but they represent our attempt to contextualize the Anabaptist vision in our culture and function as the center of gravity of the Network. These convictions are explored in *The Naked Anabaptist*, which was written to introduce the Anabaptist tradition to Christians in Britain.[11] To our surprise, this book proved very popular among North American Mennonites and was

8 See Stuart Murray, *Changing Mission: Learning from the Newer Churches* (London: CTBI, 2006). This book was commissioned to offer into the ecumenical conversation a distinctively Anabaptist approach.

9 This is true of Anabaptists in Scandinavia, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, in which there are also dispersed networks.

10 See Anabaptist Mennonite Network website at https://amnetwork.uk/theology-forum/.

11 Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2010). The core convictions can also be found at https://amnetwork.uk/convictions/.

translated into several languages (French, German, Spanish, Swedish, Korean, Japanese, and Indonesian). It seemed that our attempt to strip away cultural accretions and uncover the essential elements of the Anabaptist vision resonated with people in many different contexts.

However, the title of the book was, of course, a misnomer. There is no such thing as a naked Anabaptist, any more than there are naked Catholics, Evangelicals, Methodists, Pentecostals, or others. Our theological and ecclesial convictions are always developed within cultural contexts, even if we aspire to be countercultural. But the book was an invitation to identify core elements of the Anabaptist vision and to explain how these were being contextualized in Britain early in the twenty-first century.

In recent years, we have pursued this further by attempting to move beyond convictions to practices, reflecting on how our convictions might be embodied and worked out. As we have discussed this together, it has become clear to us that the "common practices" (we prefer the term "common" as being indicative rather than prescriptive) that we have identified are for communities and not just for individuals. The *Incarnate* church-planting initiative offers us opportunities to test out these practices, refine them, and maybe identify others.

We are also exploring these practices in a new book, due to be published in January 2024, which is both a sequel to *The Naked Anabaptist* and an introduction to emerging communities and projects in Britain and Ireland that are inspired by the Anabaptist vision. *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* introduces twelve practices that we think are likely to characterize Anabaptist initiatives and churches.[12] It includes chapters written by three of my colleagues, who share the stories of projects they have initiated—Peaceful Borders, SoulSpace Belfast, and Incarnate—and testify to the influence of their Anabaptist convictions on the practices these projects have adopted.

Peaceful Borders was founded by Juliet Kilpin.[13] She explains its remit:

> We work to support asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in the UK to build communities of mutual support and solidarity that help new arrivals forge successful lives in the UK. We do this by initiating refugee-led community hubs alongside bespoke one-to-one support to accompany people as they navigate their new life. We currently work primarily with asylum seekers and refugees who are in long-term hotel and hostel accommodation, who struggle to access adequate information and assistance to do the things that will help them build a new life in the UK. We look for what God is doing on the margins and seek to join in.

12 Stuart Murray, *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, forthcoming in 2024), which I have co-authored with three colleagues.

13 "Peaceful Borders: Seeking Peace in the Spaces in Between," Anabaptist Mennonite Network, accessed October 13, 2023, https://amnetwork.uk/peaceful-borders/.

SoulSpace Belfast was founded by Karen Sethuraman.[14] She writes:

> SoulSpace is a peace and reconciliation hub seeking to exemplify good community by looking after each other, our neighborhood, our communities, and beyond. We value people more than programs, and so we are less concerned about maintaining institutional religion. Our aim is to champion peace and reconciliation and to play our part in helping to build a Nation of Neighbors.

The third chapter, written by Alexandra Ellish, tells the story of the *Incarnate* initiative to plant explicitly Anabaptist churches in Britain.[15] Alexandra chairs the steering group that oversees this initiative and is also one of the coordinators of Urban Expression. She and our two "catalyst-coaches," Lynsey Heselgrave and Barney Barron, receive some financial support from the Anabaptist Mennonite Network and are accountable to its trustees. Lynsey and Barney are encouraging people in different parts of the country to attempt to plant new Anabaptist churches and are coaching and supporting those who respond. Online and in-person gatherings offer opportunities for those involved to learn together and encourage one another in these pioneering initiatives. SoulSpace Belfast is one of these initiatives, as is another SoulSpace in Bristol.[16]

## Anabaptist Contributions

The *Incarnate* project is small and very young. We have set no ambitious targets, and we are not expecting rapid progress. In our post-Christendom society, church planting is normally slow (unless the approach is to gather Christians from other churches). Many people have little or no knowledge of Christianity, and one of the legacies of the Christendom era is deep suspicion of the church. Patient, humble, and gentle approaches to sharing our faith will be needed in most neighborhoods. But we hope to make a contribution alongside many others who have greater resources and loftier ambitions.

As well as planting new churches in communities where fresh expressions of the gospel are needed, we hope *Incarnate* can offer some perspectives into continuing conversations about missiology and ecclesiology. We were encouraged by the experimentation and creativity that was evident in the early years of this century (and intrigued by the often unwitting resonances we and others heard with the Anabaptist tradition), but our perception is that much of this has faded

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14 "SoulSpace Celtic Community," Anabaptist Mennonite Network, accessed October 13, 2023, https://amnetwork.uk/soulspace/.

15 "Incarnate: Church Planting and Pioneering Initiative," Anabaptist Mennonite Network, accessed October 13, 2023, https://amnetwork.uk/incarnate/.

16 See "SoulSpace Bristol," Anabaptism Today website, accessed October 13, 2023, https://anabaptismtoday.co.uk/index.php/home/article/view/227.

in recent years. Some of the experiments lasted only a short while. Others that received greater institutional support have persisted but have mostly been domesticated. Those that have been regarded as successful have been copied, franchised, and marketed, discouraging contextual sensitivity and further creativity. Some denominations are embarking on church-planting initiatives that appear to have learned nothing from the past thirty years, setting over-ambitious growth targets and focusing on speed and replication rather than contextual relevance. And, while there has been quite a bit of cultural and stylistic creativity, there has been a disturbing lack of serious theological, missiological, and ecclesiological reflection in much of the church planting in recent years.

Might those who trace their spiritual roots to the Anabaptist church-planting movement of nearly five centuries ago have some contributions to offer on these issues? Might there be resources in this marginalized tradition that church planters from other traditions would find helpful? Might emerging Anabaptist churches model values and practices that others choose to reflect on, learn from, and integrate into their projects and communities?

In the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists reminded the Reformers that reformation was not just about doctrine but also required missional and ecclesial renewal. Today, Anabaptists might encourage church planters in all denominations to remember that church planting is not just about more churches. It is about the renewal of the church and the development of ways of being the church that are biblically rooted and contextually appropriate. Careful reflection on the cultural context within which new churches are being planted and deep engagement with biblical teaching and theology takes time and may result in fewer churches being planted. But those that are planted will have more secure foundations and greater potential for sustainable witness.

By way of illustration, here are a few questions that I, as a British church-planting strategist and coach, suggest the Anabaptist tradition might pose for contemporary church planters:

- What understanding of the nature and purpose of the church undergirds your church-planting strategy and expectations?
- Will you take time to listen to the neighborhood and understand its culture before starting programs and projects? Will you be alert to identify assets as well as needs?
- Through whom will you expect the Holy Spirit to speak? To what extent will the church you plant be multi-voiced and participatory?
- What principles and practices will you build into the new church in relation to leadership, accountability, and church discipline?
- What is the good news in a post-Christendom society?
- What expression of the gospel and what forms of evangelism will be appropriate for encouraging radical discipleship rather than need-orientated congregations?

- What missional and ecclesial principles will undergird your practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper?
- How large and how quickly can the new church grow without jeopardizing its community life? Is numerical church growth always a sign of health?
- Will the church operate as a "bounded set" or a "centered set"? Who will be welcome?
- In what ways will the new church be "good news to the poor"? How might the challenging but liberating biblical principles of Jubilee and *koinonia* be applied?
- How will you decide where to plant a new church? Why would you not focus on places with the greatest social, economic, and spiritual needs?
- Will your focus be on the church or the kingdom of God? How will you avert a church-centered mentality?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of owning a church building and of planning toward this?
- How might issues of peace and justice be built into the foundation of the new church rather than being ignored or tacked on at a later stage?
- Can your church-planting initiative encourage your denomination or network of churches to become more authentically missional and recover the neglected ministries of apostles and prophets?
- How will you assess the "success" of your church-planting activities?

So an Anabaptist contribution to the contemporary church-planting movement might be to urge deeper reflection on the nature and ethos of the churches being planted, the context in which this is taking place, and the relationship between ecclesiology, missiology, theology, and ethics. Anabaptist church planters might be encouraged to draw more explicitly on their own roots in order to establish churches that are as radical in contemporary society as the Anabaptist churches were in the sixteenth century. Church planters from other traditions might be invited to consider Anabaptist perspectives on church and mission as they explore new ways of being church in a changing culture.

It will be some years before we can judge whether the *Incarnate* initiative has borne fruit—whether this is measured in terms of the new explicitly Anabaptist churches it has catalyzed and nurtured or in terms of its contributions to the wider church-planting movement. In the meantime, our hope is that the reflections on "common practices" in *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* will be a resource not only for the *Incarnate* initiative but also for other church planters as well, and an invitation to ongoing conversation as we learn from each other.

But our experience with Urban Expression, now twenty-six years old, is that many church planters and others with pioneering instincts have yearned for a missional approach that is holistic, incarnational, patient, contextual, and creative.

Our core values of relationship, creativity, and humility have resonated with more and more people over the years. Urban Expression is not a "success story" (whatever that means) but a sustained attempt to find ways of incarnating the gospel and, where appropriate, planting churches in neighborhoods that are on the leading edge of post-Christendom. Our hope is that the *Incarnate* initiative will join us on this journey and that together we will keep learning and finding ways of sharing what we are receiving as we welcome opportunities to learn from many others. We all need each other in post-Christendom!

# 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* (Scottdale: 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

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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).

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,

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7 Ervin R. Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908–2008* (Scottdale, 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_KoPIpxbaXlFqZSO/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."
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> "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-

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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

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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.

# Church-Planting Strategy

## Moving from a Transactional Model to a Community of Practice Model

David W. Boshart

Mennonites in the United States have, historically, been ambivalent about planting churches and have had an inconsistent record when it comes to church-planting motives, measures for success, and integrity of funding models. This trend continues today, with church leaders often defaulting to circuitous and indirect conversation about church planting. Among those working on church-planting strategy, two key questions—"*What* is the church for?" and "*Who* is the church for?"—remain largely unaddressed, thus contributing to the ambivalence and inconsistent commitments common to the territory.

Anyone who embarks on planting a church, however, will ultimately be responding to these questions, at least implicitly if not explicitly, and will, in the process, surface theological and ecclesiological values. Whether these values remain explicit or implicit, they will impact the nature of both the relationship and support that the church planter and emerging congregation experience with denominational or regional church entities.

From the outset, it is important to say that, technically speaking, churches are not planted; rather, they are replanted or transplanted. All Christian churches grow from seedlings or grafts; they do not emerge *ex nihilo*. Matthew Swora writes:

> While individuals such as Paul or Barnabas feature greatly in The Acts of the Apostles, Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit multiplies churches through churches, beginning with the first church of Jerusalem, going on to Antioch, Ephesus and beyond. . . .

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*David Boshart was appointed President of AMBS August 1, 2019. He has been a Mennonite pastor for over thirty years. Prior to his appointment to AMBS, David served as Executive Conference Minister for Central Plains Mennonite Conference for nine years and a local congregational pastor for twenty-five years. David was a member of the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA for twelve years, serving as Moderator of Mennonite Church USA from 2017 to 2019. David holds a PhD in Leadership Studies from Andrews University (Berrien Springs, MI) with an emphasis in missional ecclesiology.*

> But churches are not planted; they are *trans*planted from seedlings strong enough to survive in new soil. By "seedlings" I mean groups of people sharing a vision for a mission and a new church. These new church transplants, based on a common mission, may come from one church, or from several. That makes every church or cluster of churches a seedbed of more churches.[1]

Emerging churches are propagated from an existing body of believers who testify to their belief that Jesus is Lord. The faithful emerging community will live in conscious hope for all expressions of the church to exist with a telos of "oneness" (John 17:23).

Even so, church planters often organize new congregations out of a feeling of dissatisfaction with the ecclesiological status quo they experience. They long to be unshackled from institutional conventions and desire to correct insular tendencies of churches that lack a zeal for effective outreach. Those who have been involved in church planting get in touch quickly with the ambivalence expressed by long-established or institutionalized church when emerging congregations criticize the "stuck-ness" of long-established congregations. At the same time, long-established congregations tend to judge the idealism of the emerging congregation as naive and untempered by experience. These attitudes, while quite natural, pose unintended challenges to potential collaboration and mutually edifying support for a strong church-planting strategy.

In response to these challenges, this article examines the journey of one regional conference—Central Plains Mennonite Conference—with church planting within the context of Mennonite Church USA and the conference's attempt to embrace and support emerging Anabaptist congregations with effective strategy and support systems.

## Two Denominationally Initiated Church-Planting Strategies

We can identify two denominational initiatives intended to produce new congregations in the Mennonite Church in the United States in the past seventy-five years.

### Church-Planting Strategy #1: Every Church an Outpost

The first movement, in the 1950s, called every church to have an "outpost." In this initiative, existing congregations reached into neighboring rural and urban communities to hold Bible schools and Sunday schools. They established urban mission centers for food distribution and educational supports. They created communities of support for Mennonite young adults who had migrated to and

1 For further exposition on this concept, see Matthew Swora, *Seedbeds and Orchards,* Central Plains Mennonite Conference website, Mission Leaders, Church Planting tab, accessed on June 30, 2023, http://www.centralplainsmc.org/church-planting1.html.

settled in cities following alternative service terms or college graduation. One strategic pattern in this era seemed to be that ministry in the context *preceded* the organization of a congregation. The Mennonite church experienced significant growth in the number of congregations and members during this time.

Little has been written about the strategy and outcomes of this initiative in historical literature, but one can find many examples of congregations that began as "outposts" of a sponsoring congregation or cluster of congregations.[2] In Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC), for example, nine of the forty-eight member congregations listed on the conference website originated from the outpost era. This number does not include several churches planted during that era that are either no longer part of the conference or have subsequently closed.

## Church-Planting Strategy #2: Five Hundred New Congregations in Ten Years

The second denomination-inspired movement began in 1985 when the General Assembly of the Mennonite Church adopted goals calling for, among other things, five hundred new congregations to be planted in the following ten years. Six months later, prominent Mennonite pastor Robert Hartzler called for a reality check regarding this goal, calling it "almost absurd":

> I believe in miracles. I believe that God can give Mennonites phenomenal growth and generous hearts. But there are some intermediate steps which require some basic changes in us before these miracles will be realized. So, let's not try to fool ourselves with nice-sounding goals if we are not willing to pay the price.[3]

It was clear from Hartzler's assessment that the denomination had not adequately considered the strategic planning needed to succeed in meeting these goals.

The 1995 report on these goals indicated that of "the 200 congregations planted, some later closed, others left their respective conferences and some remained conference participants years later."[4]

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2 See the term "outpost" in GAMEO, accessed June 30, 2023, https://gameo.org/index.php?search=outpost&title=Special%3ASearch&go=Go.

3 Robert Hartzler, "The Goals Are Almost Absurd," *Gospel Herald* 79, no. 3 (January 7, 1986): 34–35.

4 "Ten-Year Goals (Vision '95) (Mennonite Church 1985)," last modified September 6, 2013, https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Ten-Year_Goals_(Vision_%2795)(Mennonite_Church,_1985).

## Recent Denominational and Regional Conference Perspectives on Church Planting

Interviews with various denominational and regional leaders between 2005 and 2009 surfaced a number of themes with regard to church planting as a strategic function of Mennonite Church USA. These themes included (1) the lack of a denominational strategy for church planting, (2) confusion over what structure within the church is responsible for the goal of developing missional congregations, and (3) attitudes of resistance toward church planting.[5]

Even though the vision in the 1950s and 1985 movements was driven by the denomination, the dominant paradigm for church planting in the Mennonite church has been characterized more by individual initiative than by systemic strategy. Even in the two twentieth-century initiatives, little or no strategy was developed to support the stated goals. One denominational leader in 2008 offered a view on the history and current situation: "In past decades, church planting seemed to be an individual matter. The phrase was used, 'So and so has a *heart* for church planting.' Therefore, they went off and planted a church." Another denominational leader said, "We are in a current stage where there doesn't seem to be a concerted effort in church planting."

Reflecting on the regional conference's track record with church planting, regional conference staff members noted the lack of strategy. One staff member said, "We seem to be relatively unprepared for church plants to arise. We seem not to know how to respond; we don't have procedures for responding to people when they come to us saying that they want to plant a church." A regional conference minister reflected: "It wasn't in anyone's portfolio to work on, and it wasn't a particular priority."

A regional conference staff member summarized the lack of strategy this way: "We've been in a time of transition ever since the inception of the conference. . . . We understood that we weren't going to plant churches the way we used to, but we didn't know *how* we were going to."

Mennonite Church USA articulated a mission statement shortly after the denomination formed in 2001: "Joining in God's activity in the world, WE develop and nurture missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures." The statement was not clear, however, about the object of the verbs "develop" and "nurture." One could argue that *developing* congregations referred to developing *new* congregations, while existing congregations were the object of the nurturing

5 The perspectives of church leaders that follow are derived from my doctoral dissertation: David W. Boshart, "Planting Missional Mennonite Churches in Complex Social Contexts as the Denomination Undergoes a Paradigm Shift in Ecclesiology: A Multiple Case Study" (PhD Diss., Andrews University, 2009)—published as *Becoming Missional: Denominations and New Church Developments in Complex Social Contexts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 37–53.

function. When denominational leaders were asked to clarify the object of these verbs, they were unable to specify whether developing congregations referred to *developing new* congregations or *developing existing* congregations into missional communities.

By 2008, denominational leaders identified that the system suffered from ambivalence contributing to a lack of clarity about how each part of the denomination should contribute to the development of missional congregations. A statement by one denominational executive reflected this state of confusion: "Some would even wonder if [church planting is] an appropriate effort of the church." Another leader offered, "Even though there have been declarations made in the past . . . saying that now we are going to have a goal of [church planting] as a church-wide priority, it has been more talk than action." Yet another leader, reflecting the critique of regional constituents' concerns about new church-planting initiatives, said, "We have a negative response because of frequent failure due to gaps in training and accountability [of church-planting leaders] and some gaps in the nurturing process. Therefore, I sense there's some cynicism: 'Well, there's more money going down a rat hole.'"

## A Case Study in a Regional Conference's Attempt to Support Church Planting: Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC) offers a story of one regional conference's journey with church planting.[6] Founded in 2000, CPMC was created through the merger of the Northern District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Iowa-Nebraska Conferene of the Mennonite Church, one year prior to the larger denominational merger that resulted in the creation of Mennonite Church USA. In the twenty years between 1985 and 2005, CPMC and its antecedent conferences invested more than $1.5 million in supporting emerging churches in places where there were no constituent churches.[7]

In the last half of the twentieth century, church planting in Mennonite Church USA followed the trends of mainline Protestant models.[8] In these models the conference provided full-time financial support for a church planter for the

6 The information contained in this section of the article comes from my own participation in the events discussed. Future scholars seeking to do research in this area will find documents related to the events described here and the work of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference church-planting strategy team archived with the Central Plains Mennonite Conference office. Conference contact information can be found at www.centralplainsmc.org.

7 Boshart, *Becoming Missional*, xv.

8 Paul Nixon, "How Much Should It Cost to Plant a New Church?," May 14, 2019, https://www.churchleadership.com/focus/how-much-should-it-cost-to-plant-a-new-church/. In this article, Nixon offers a cost/benefit analysis of planting churches with

first two years with a declining subsidy every following year until no subsidy remained, somewhere around the fifth year. The expectation of the funding body was that within five years the church planter and a collected core group would have grown to become a "self-supporting" congregation. This was the model that CPMC had followed in the twenty years between 1985 and 2005.

Little attention, however, was given to what was meant by "self-supporting." By what metrics should an emerging church no longer be seen as *emerging*? The congregation could afford a salaried pastor? They could afford staff and a building? They sustained a full complement of congregational programs? They had reached a critical mass of attendees to carry their own costs of operation? For more than a century, missiologists have described mission movements to have reached maturity when they demonstrate the "three-self paradigm:" self-propagating, self-supporting, self-governing.[9] Paul Hiebert introduced a fourth self: self-theologizing—that is, churches have the capacity to read, interpret, and apply scripture for themselves.[10]

In spite of CPMC spending over $1 million in the twenty years prior to 2005, no self-supporting congregations had emerged as a result of the conference's church-planting strategy, by any measure of the "four-self model." In fairness, however, it would be a mistake to discount transforming experiences of ministry in the lives of those who intersected with the core of people who were attempting to start a church. Ministry and church planting may go hand-in-hand, but they are not the same thing. Christian ministry and witness that does not result in the establishment of a self-sustaining congregation *matters* whether a church takes root in that context of ministry or not.

After two decades with no emerging churches reaching sustainability, it became clear to conference leaders that it was past time to stop attempting the same strategy while hoping for different results. In 2004 CPMC declared a moratorium on providing salary subsidies to church planters as well as a moratorium on any conference-initiated church plants until a more comprehensive strategy could be articulated. It was a stark declaration, and it appeared that, for the time being, the conference had dropped out of the church-planting business.

In rebooting the conference church-planting strategy, funding was channeled toward the infrastructure needed to develop a more fulsome approach to church planting. At the same time, while the conference did not initiate planting new churches and provided no salary subsidies for church planters, new Anabaptist

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external subsidies in the United Methodist system and advocates for lower cost approaches and longer launch ramps; e.g., five years instead of three years.

9 John Livingstone Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 3rd ed. (New York: Foreign Missionary Library, 1899).

10 See Hiebert's history of the three-self paradigm in Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2006), 193–224.

churches began to emerge in the geographic region. Several neo-Anabaptist and immigrant leaders arriving in the region began to organize local Mennonite congregations and, at the same time, to seek conference affiliation.

One of the emerging congregations was planted by a Hispanic couple who relocated to a small city with a large Hispanic community made up of first- and second-generation immigrants who were beginning to establish long-term ties to the community, as well as more recently arrived undocumented immigrants who were much more tentative about their long-term residence in the community. After a couple years in this location, one of the spouses continued to lead the original church while the other spouse started a second Hispanic congregation forty miles away.

Another Hispanic church was initiated by an undocumented immigrant husband-wife couple who had been forced to leave their former Mennonite congregation due to leadership conflicts. Five years into their new ministry, the husband was arrested and unjustly deported to Honduras. The wife continued to lead the congregation. Interestingly, the deportation mobilized the conference congregations into an advocacy movement that brought national attention to the situation.

Two other congregations were established by neo-Anabaptist leaders who were introduced to the Anabaptist tradition as seminary students. One of these congregations took the form of a new monastic community where all members resided in the same neighborhood. A second emerging community was initiated by a neo-Anabaptist leader who gathered together people with Mennonite backgrounds and convictions who were living in the city for career reasons, where there were no existing Mennonite congregations.

These five emerging congregations, originating outside of a conference-initiated strategy, provided a profound laboratory for conference leaders to re-examine the conference's assumptions about church planting. What was happening in the vision of these leaders who were seeking affiliation with an institutional church structure? What did they need? What were they hoping to gain in relating to the wider church structure? These leaders were already organizing congregations without salary subsidies from denominational sources. There must have been another motivation for their interest in affiliation.

The conference began to organize gatherings for these church planters, and, after several gatherings, it became apparent that the church planters' first priority was not seeking financial support (though they would not turn it down if it were offered!). They were seeking mutual support, wise counsel, prayer support, places to ask their questions, and theological solidarity with others who were championing the same missional vision. Retreats focused on providing space for reflection on the experiences of church planters and extended times of prayer. This activity resulted in increasing camaraderie among the church planters and increased self-confidence in their ability to be effective in their work.

Between 2005 and 2019, eight new congregations emerged in CPMC. Five of them remain in existence as of the writing of this article, and all five remain affiliated with their conference and denomination. None of the five have received financial subsidies directly from the conference.[11] While the record of reaching sustainability was imperfect, the results were substantially better than the previous twenty-year record. How might we account for this shift in results?

## 1. Building Trust and Aligning Values

First, the conference began to "frontload" the process of formalizing relationships with leaders of emerging churches with time spent clarifying the theological/missional and contextual commitments of the church planter. This work built trust between the church planter and conference leaders and assurance that there was strong alignment between the missional trajectory of the church planter and the conference's core values.[12] And instead of starting the church-planter-to-conference relationship with an infusion of salary support, a substantial amount of *time* was invested to understand and clarify the theological and missional commitments of the church planter and the alignment of these commitments with the conference's theology. With that alignment clarified, church planters and conference leaders could bond in a supportive relationship at deeper levels than had been previously seen. There was an authentic sense of being in this work *together*.

## 2. Ending Salary Subsidies and Beginning Reflective Practices

Second, the conference reframed its understanding of the kind of support that the conference was best positioned to offer. This reframing involved leaving behind a dependency-inducing model where the conference primarily offered support through salary subsidy while leaving the church planter to organize their congregations as they saw fit. Though it seemed draconian at the time, the end of salary subsidies to church planters opened new opportunities for more meaningful and relational supports.

A reflective practice model began to emerge. Reflective practice finds its roots in the work of educators David Kolb and Donald Shön and continues to grow

11 These five churches are Iglesia Cristiano El Balsamo (Muscatine, IA), Iglesia Menonita Centro Cristiano (Washington, IA), Iglesia Torre Fuerte (Iowa City, IA), Shalom Mennonite Church (Eau Claire, WI), and Third Way (St Paul, MN).

12 The history of church planting in CPMC included a number of stories where the conference endorsed a leader of an emerging church only to find a few years later an insurmountable divergence in theology and ecclesiological commitments between the leader and the conference. These relationships ended painfully.

as a practice of professional development for leaders.[13] Kolb's model involves four interlinking stages of reflection: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. New competencies emerge when leaders step back from the intensity of new challenges and consider what has happened, what is happening, what could happen, and *what needs to happen* in order to increase leadership and organizational effectiveness.

Financial resources from the conference were allocated to support theological and leadership education of church planters, and micro grants were made available as seed money to support ministries of the emerging church as they engaged their context. The conference also organized annual retreats for these leaders to focus on theological/missional reflection, their church-planting experiences, intercessory prayer, and inspiration. The conference covered the cost of church planters' participation in these retreats.

### 3. Strengthening Conference Connections

Third, as greater theological alignment was tended, conference leaders began to elevate the profile of these emerging congregations and their leaders in the conference through the conference publications and spotlighting them at annual conference meetings. Rather than assuming that church planters didn't have time to participate in conference organizational structures, conference leaders invited church planters to participate more fully in those structures. As church planters became more known to the existing congregations of the conference, new conversations emerged between members of emerging congregations and existing congregations. Individually, church planters began to express their desire to be known and more intimately connected to other congregations in the conference; they wanted to be taken seriously as emerging congregations who were engaged in vital ministry and witness.

As their confidence as members of the conference grew, church planters began to assert their need for more financial support to free up time to lead their fledgling congregations. Through a careful discernment process, the conference began to connect church planters with leaders of existing congregations to develop multiple "communities of practice" made up of members from emerging church partners and representatives of four to six long-established congregations, with the goal of renewing the mission of all involved.

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13 Barbara Bassot, *The Reflective Practice Guide: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Critical Reflection*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2015). See also David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984); Donald A. Shön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic, 1983).

## A Community of Practice Model

These communities of practice formed by bringing together representatives of one emerging congregation with representatives of four to six long-established congregations in a covenant of shared commitments for the purpose of reflecting on the experiences of each partnering congregation. This involved decentering the emerging church as the strategic focus of the relationship. The covenant explicitly structured the relationship to minimize the image of long-established *sufficient* congregations *pouring into* the *insufficient* emerging congregation. Tending to this dynamic through specific commitments in the covenantal agreement increased the self-esteem with which the leaders of the emerging congregation came to the table.

In quarterly meetings over a shared meal, each congregation represented in the community of practice reflected on their concrete experience in ministry. Following this sharing, the conversation turned to the framing question of *abstract conceptualization* for each gathering of the learning community: "Based on what we are experiencing in each of our local contexts of mission, what are we learning that can help us be more faithful and effective in our context of ministry?" A conference minister responsible for church planting facilitated the reflective conversations of each community of practice. The hope was that such reflective practice would lead all partners involved to active experimentation in their respective contexts of ministry.

To balance the dynamics of well-resourced congregations and to decenter the emerging congregation as the "object" of the community of practice, the covenants of understanding were structured using assets-based community development (ABCD) principles.[14] That is, the emerging church was asked to name the gifts and strengths (assets) it brought to the relationship. The strengths and gifts of the long-established churches were also named. The needs, or deficits, of both the emerging church and long-established church partners were also named. By framing the covenantal relationship in this way, everyone at the table offered their considerable gifts as well as acknowledged their insufficiencies.

This approach also strengthened the reflection of these communities of practice in important intercultural ways. Because all partnering congregations had first explicitly named their assets and their deficits, it followed that race, class, educational level, and culture differences were less likely to be seen as tacit dynamics to manage in the relationship and more likely to be lenses that enriched the corporate reflection of all involved.

The second part of the covenant of understanding involved relational commitments that each party made to the community of practice. These commitments

14 John P. Kretzman and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago: The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 1993).

involved the long-established congregations sending people on a regular basis to worship and fellowship with the emerging congregation. Fears that a group of visitors dropping in on the Sunday worship service would overwhelm the emerging congregation were quickly dismissed when all experienced the burst of energy and good will that came with these regular visits.

Long-established congregations also committed to inviting the emerging church leaders to preach in the long-established congregation once per year. The expectation was that the visiting preacher would offer a typical sermon rather than use the time to update the church they were visiting on the progress of their fledgling community. While this required four or five Sundays away from the emerging congregation each year, it provided the leader of the emerging church an opportunity to address the long-established church from a position of authority (sufficiency) rather than dependency.

Only after the congregations enacted these commitments were existing congregations invited to make financial commitments to the emerging congregations. While the conference served as the conduit for the exchange of money, its leaders emphasized that the community of practice should understand that if a contributing congregation forgot or stopped providing funding, the conference would not make up the difference. The covenantal commitments for the communities of practice were limited to three years, with the potential for renewing the covenant for a second three years. After six years, the formal covenant would end along with any financial support.

## Assessment of the Community of Practice Model

The community of practice model reframed the conference's role in church planting in seismic ways. Ten years out from the onset of this model, several important observations can be made:

- Establishing patterns of mutuality with the communities of practice was hard-won. It took at least one year of quarterly meetings to mitigate the tendency of members from existing congregations to see their role as problem-solving when church planters shared their experience in the group.
- Representatives of existing churches tended to be more pessimistic about the future of their own congregation's mission. Sometimes this attitude brought negativity to the group's reflective practice and members of existing congregations unintentionally put pressure on the emerging church leaders by projecting their hope for the future of the church on the successful fresh witness of the emerging congregation.
- While the relational design of the community of practice intended to emphasize mutuality, the financial support that existing congregations were providing was a palpable, if tacit, dynamic in the relationship. On

the other hand, when an existing congregation dropped the ball on their contributions and the emerging congregation suddenly had a shortfall in support, honest and forthright conversations were needed among the partners. It can be argued that these conversations ultimately fostered a greater level of transparency, vulnerability, and trust than may have emerged otherwise.

Challenges notwithstanding, a number of positive outcomes emerged from the community of practice model. First, strong, stable, rich relationships developed over time among the congregations in the community of practice groups, particularly when many of the same representatives from existing congregations made visits to the emerging congregation and quarterly meetings. Evidence that these relationships moved beyond "sponsorship" to authentic friendship came from several observations: Every community of practice enthusiastically renewed the first three-year covenant with only minor funding changes for a second three years. In one case, though the conference staff announced the covenant could not be renewed for a third time, one community of practice renewed their commitment anyway without the financial sharing component. Community of practice participants demonstrated "bonded" relationships when they encountered each other at larger conference assemblies and in some cases traveled together to national assemblies. As the communities of practice matured, friendships deepened and became less symbolic as members of immigrant congregations began to invite Anglo participants from the community of practice to their birthday, wedding, New Years, and quinceañera celebrations, while Anglo participants invited members of Hispanic communities to traditional family meals and gatherings.

Second, community of practice members experienced three-dimensional hospitality.[15] Where community of practice gatherings happened in conjunction with visits to the emerging congregation, concern was expressed by participants of existing congregations that their presence might overburden the small emerging congregation if lodging and meals during the visit were needed. When participants from existing congregations allowed themselves to be hosted, however, the act of being host increased the emerging congregation's self-esteem and morale. Members of existing congregations arrived on the scene in a receiving rather than delivering posture. Members of the emerging congregation would repeatedly ask that the visits continue and that they be allowed to provide hospitality. When leaders of emerging congregations made annual visits to partner congregations, they were given a place of esteem in the pulpit. This act of giving and receiving hospitality balanced the power between dominant and minority racial identities in natural ways. As the facilitated conversations matured through

15 David W. Boshart, *Planting Missional Mennonite Churches in Complex Social Contexts as the Denomination Undergoes a Paradigm Shift in Ecclesiology: A Multiple Case Study* (PhD Diss., Andrews University, 2009), 195–96.

reflective practice, partners began to think more deeply and consciously about such hospitality—that all had received from a loving and redeeming God—as a core value in their missional commitments to each other and within each of their contexts of ministry.

## Progress toward Reversing a History of Unsuccessful Church Planting

Prior to 2005, Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC) and its antecedent conferences did not have a good track record of successfully nurturing sustainable churches. During the next fifteen years, CPMC supported leaders of emerging churches through providing theological and leadership education, sharing a limited number of micro-grants to support contextual ministries, and developing covenantal communities of practice involving partners from emerging and existing congregations. This new model decentered the insufficiency of the emerging church while minimizing the perceived sufficiency of the existing congregations through a facilitated reflective practice focused on central questions equally relevant to all partners. This practice resulted in rich, authentic relationships; validated the legitimacy of emerging congregations and their leaders; increased and expanded the experience of missional hospitality; and appears to be an intervention that reversed a long history of unsuccessful church planting.

While the shift in the conference's role did not mean that every emerging congregation reached sustainability, the results were far better than the experience of the prior twenty-year history, and at a much lower financial cost to the conference. More research is needed, however, to understand how much the reflective practice model has moved existing and emerging congregations toward new levels of mission vitality and how that practice can be further adapted in support of a more successful church-planting strategy.

# 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?

# Breaking the Comfort Zone

Amita Sidh

Which is the better or correct approach to sharing the love of Jesus Christ with this world? Evangelism or social action? Saving souls from hell or taking care of the marginalized?

We often lean toward the latter, attributing hardly any importance to evangelism and discipleship. Thus, we have not equipped believers to witness about Christ through sharing the good news.

Mennonites are known for charitable work, for being in-step with Ephesians 2:10 (ASV): "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." The Mennonite Church in India has contributed significantly to society in the fields of education and medicine by running schools and hospitals as well as nursing and paramedical training centers. Recently the church has come forward to also help and support persecuted believers and evangelists nearby as well as in remote areas. Thinking we have now engaged in evangelism, we've tended to pat ourselves on the back and remain silent as before.

We should not limit ourselves, however, only to good works, helping and supporting others. It is not enough. Almost all of the congregations of the Mennonite Church in India are seeing a decline in membership. The only churches that have not been affected much are those situated in locations where education and medical boards are still running their institutions or where there are opportunities for employment. The churches established by pioneer missionaries in rural areas are struggling to stay alive, both because the boards are not active there now and because members are migrating because of lack of education, health, and employment.

The existence of the Mennonite Church in India up to this point has depended on biological growth. A majority of young people are being baptized only for the sake of church membership so that they may enjoy all the rights and privileges of a bonafide member. This is affecting the spiritual growth of the church. Young people are failing to identify and respond to God's call, which has led to a leadership crisis in the church. With the number of full-time

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ministers now on the decline, the church is often unable to tend the flock or serve society.

Those of us who have heard and welcomed the good news are saved—but what about those who are still unaware of this good news? Before leaving this earth, Jesus Christ delegated to us the responsibility of extending his kingdom (Matt 28:19). He not only commanded us to do so but he also did this himself while he was on the earth (Matt 9:35; Luke 8:1; Mark 1:38).

As Christians, we are to follow the footsteps of our master and to obey the Great Commission. Evangelism—proclaiming the good news—should be the mission of every believer. Unless we tell people about the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, how will they be saved?

Evangelism and other activities should go side by side. That's what Jesus modeled during his earthly ministry; he healed the sick, fed the hungry, and helped the downtrodden. There are many verses in the Bible that tell us about Jesus's ministry—how he preached about the kingdom of God and at the same time took care of the needs of the people. We can clearly see how he balanced both of these primary aspects of the ministry.

A positive change seen in India now regarding evangelism is that churches, including the Mennonites, are concerned about outreach programs. Mennonite Church in India has recently organized an evangelism training program to encourage members to share the gospel with others and to establish new communities and churches. It is teaching us to create an opportunity to share the gospel with those whom we meet and talk with every day and to pray for them.

This program has succeeded in bringing together some of our members who were already individually engaged in evangelism and is equipping them to share the gospel in a more practical and systematic way. Previously the church was not serious about evangelizing, but now it is recognizing and supporting individuals to "officially" evangelize on behalf of the church for its growth.

Most members, however, are still hesitant or not committed enough to join this training program; they feel more comfortable extending financial support for evangelism. One of the reasons for this is that in the context of persecution, consumerism, and self-centeredness, evangelism is much more difficult to engage in than charity because it carries risk and requires courage.

The church needs to encourage church members to become more intimately involved with evangelism, by teaching and arranging mission trips to help people understand the importance and urgency of proclaiming the good news. Cross-cultural evangelism may force us to come out of our comfort zones. It might separate us from our dear ones and deprive us of our luxury as well as our needs. But our God is with us, standing with us in all circumstances. And it is good for us to stand together with people who are being persecuted or are affected by natural calamities or going through difficult situations. At

the same time, sharing the good news by tongue is equally important for the extension of the kingdom.

Let's hold the hands of the needy; let's support others with all our resources; let's stand with the poor, downtrodden, and brokenhearted; let's feel the pain of others. But let's not neglect evangelism.

# The Impact of Assimilation upon Chinese Canadian Mennonite Brethren Immigrant Churches

Matthew R. S. Todd

Immigration is a significant factor in Chinese Canadian Mennonite Brethren church growth, and as the churches mature and move through the life cycle, they are faced with the challenge of retaining the next generation. This next generation's assimilation into Canadian culture and their resulting so-called Silent Exodus from the Chinese church is impacting parents and the mission of the church, creating a gap that needs to be addressed.

The Mennonite Brethren Chinese Churches Association (MBCCA)[1] presents a historically compact case study of the life cycle of church movements: pioneers of church planting only half a century ago are chronicled along the next generation; successive waves of immigration and cultural realignment occur within the Chinese Canadian communities; and ecclesial impact is felt as the Canadian-born adult children assimilate into ethnically unmarked Canadian society. Systematic qualitative research with Chinese Christian pastors and parents confirms the impacts upon parents when their children separate from the Christian faith and/or the Chinese church—impacts that have been exacerbated by a paucity of

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1 The Mennonite Brethren (MB) church, having navigated the transition from a European ethnic base to a missional stance, was well fitted to minister to Chinese-speaking Christians—especially in British Columbia—who were creating new Anabaptist communities.

public acknowledgment and pastoral response.[2] Because the MBCCA[3] churches are part of a young movement, I will briefly report on the earlier historical Chinese church growth and movement in British Columbia and Canada given that the development of Chinese churches in Canada has more historical depth and scope in other denominations.

This article thus (1) reviews foundational personalities who responded to Chinese immigration in the MBCCA churches and resulting pioneer churches; (2) documents the life cycle of the Chinese MB church in Canada; and (3) explores the sociological dynamics of acculturation of the Chinese church's second generation, consequent challenges of the church's retention of this second generation, and missional implications of subsequent impact on parents.

## 1. Mennonite Brethren Chinese Churches Association (MBCCA) History and Context

### A. Reorientation of the Mennonite Brethren: From Ethnic to Missional

Although the "Canadian Mennonite Brethren movement was birthed in mission" that dates back to 1888,[4] the establishment of a Chinese Mennonite Brethren (MB) church plant comes late in the MB missions initiative because it was not until the period between the 1940s and 1970s that the Canadian Mennonite Brethren church "exchanged German for English as their primary language of religious usage . . . [a] first step in the transformation of a unilingual German religious community in 1910 into a multilingual multiethnic denomination by century's end."[5] The MB denomination concurrently began removing its

2 The full study can be accessed by permission through Bakke Graduate University, Dallas, Texas, Matthew R. S. Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents in Ethnoreligious Communities Who Have Been Impacted by Generational Assimilation" (PhD, Bakke Graduate University, 2023). Methods used include ministerial and scholarly publications, autobiographies, published historical secondary sources, structured interviews, and focus groups.

3 The MBCCA has been given official status by the British Columbia Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches (BCMB) and led by various senior pastors where the role of the MBCCA executive board in the history of these churches has been to support them in relational, missional, communication, and educational ministries. The MBCCA has functioned as a link between Chinese churches and the BCMB.

4 Willy Reimer, "Executive Director: Looking Back—Looking Forward," *MB Churches of Canada Ministry Booklet* 2016, 4–5, https://issuu.com/mbherald/docs/ministry_booklet_-_issuu_-_smaller. Rooted in our historic priorities, the Canadian Mennonite Brethren movement was birthed in mission.

5 Gerald C. Ediger, *Crossing the Divide: Language Transition among Canadian Mennonite Brethren 1940–1970* (Winnipeg, MB: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2001), 3.

"protective boundaries" used to "conserve their historic identity" and develop "a theology of missional activism."[6] Although the "first Chinese church in Canada was established in 1892"[7] and "the first Mennonite Brethren congregation in Canada founded in . . . 1888,"[8] the first MBCCA church was established just over fifty years ago. Contrary to Li Yu's documentation that "in the 1920s . . . a number of Protestant denominations, such as . . . Mennonite Brethren Churches, joined in the mission to the Chinese community,"[9] there is no historical documentation of the establishment of a Chinese Mennonite Brethren church until the early 1970s.[10]

One MB leader who contributed to changing "the way Canadian Mennonite Brethren related their witness to people of other ethnic origins"[11] was George Peters. Peters is credited for influencing, inspiring, and helping "shape modern missions for the Mennonite Brethren"[12] and known for his emphasis on "keeping church and missions together."[13] He noted that "missions were a part of Mennonite Brethren thinking from their beginning in Russia [and it has been evolving] over the years" and identified in various "entrepreneurial approach[es] to new starts [like] Henry Bartels going to China."[14] The road to change would be a long one as MB churches adjusted their witness to people of other ethnic origins, but that journey would end up paving a road for thinking differently about local home missions with newer immigrants to Canada and an MB response such as supporting ethnic church planting.

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6 Ediger, *Crossing the Divide*, 1.

7 Bruce L. Guenther, "Ethnicity and Evangelical Protestants in Canada," *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, eds. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2008), 379.

8 Ediger, *Crossing the Divide*, 13. The Mennonite Brethren traces its church growth in Canada back to large "Mennonite migrations . . . dating from the 1870s and the 1920s" (11), later incorporated in Canada under the name Mennonite Brethren in 1946 (Donald B. Kraybill, *Concise Encyclopedia of Amish, Brethren, Hutterites, and Mennonites* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010], 132).

9 Li Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief," in *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, eds. Larry DeVries, Don Baker, and Dan Overmyer (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2010), 237. See also Guenther, "Ethnicity and Evangelical Protestants in Canada," 380.

10 Guenther, "Ethnicity and Evangelical Protestants in Canada," 380.

11 Harold Jantz, "Created a Road We Are Still Upon," in *Canadian Mennonite Brethren: 1910–2010: Leaders Who Shaped Us*, ed. Harold Jantz (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2010), 112.

12 Jantz, "Created a Road," 118.

13 Jantz, "Created a Road," 119.

14 Jantz, "Created a Road," 119.

Guenther has "explored . . . [the history of] MBs who were culturally Dutch, German, Russian (DGR) and concluded [that the MB] denomination had an underdeveloped theology of culture from the very beginning."[15] MBs without the DGR ethnicity had to learn to seize the opportunity to explore denominational multiculturalism.[16] Isaac Chang, a retired MBCCA clergy, has noted that it could be very important for non-DGR Mennonites to be familiar with the culture of DGR Mennonites to learn from their degree of assimilation to Canadian culture. "It may help the Chinese MB churches increase their ability to assess cultural change [and be cautious of] holding to traditions only."[17]

One parallel experience between the German- and Chinese-speaking MB churches has been the impact of acculturation on their English-speaking youth and the resultant need for cultural change. The history of intergenerational tension over acculturation and language and cultural issues in the German MB churches and the need to make changes to eclipse the youth leaving is well documented.[18] The MB church would first have to deal with the "basic contradiction between the emphasis on ethnicity and the missionary nature of the church."[19] And it would take an MB pastor in proximity to the Chinese community to exercise this quality of theology in outreach mission to the Chinese.

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15 "Study Conference Reports, Culture, Gospel and Church: From Cultural Isolation to Multicultural Diversity," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* 46, no. 12 (December 2007), 16.

16 "Study Conference Reports," 16.

17 "Study Conference Reports," 16.

18 See Cornelius F. Plett, *Hindrances to Growth, Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 1985). Plett cites acculturating youth leaving over "cultural narrowness" in the MB ethnic churches (332). John H. Redekop, "Ethnicity as a Problem in Church Ministries," *A People Apart* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred, 1987), 131–39. John A. Toews, "Facing Cultural Change," *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren, 1975) cites thirty-two congregations in Canada concerned over losing youth if the churches didn't change from German to English in next-generation ministries—a painful process for the parent generation (329, 323–41). Gerald C. Ediger, "Canadian Mennonite Brethren and Language Transition," in *Crossing the Divide: Language Transition among Canadian Mennonite Brethren 1940–1970* (Winnipeg, MB: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2001) cites the "tension and pain" (249) and "strain" (253) over the cultural assimilation (259) and language and cultural issues with the youth (250). Gerald C. Ediger, "Introduction: The Contours of the Divide," in *Crossing the Divide: Language Transition among Canadian Mennonite Brethren 1940–1970* (Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2001), 1–37, 192–94.

19 Ediger, "Canadian Mennonite Brethren and Language Transition," 132. "Non-ethnic Mennonites, at times, seem to perceive what many traditional Mennonites miss. Speaking as a 'non-Mennonite' Mennonite, David Chie challenged a large gathering of Canadian Mennonite leaders to take seriously the desire of his Chinese Mennonite church, 'We just want to be a church with Anabaptist essentials'" (132).

## B. Pioneers of the Chinese MB Church

The Chinese MB church history and beginnings of the Pacific Grace Chinese and English ministries can be traced to the willingness of Rev. Henry G. Classen and Mrs. Sara Classen to respond to the request of the British Columbia Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches (BCMB) for Henry to come to Vancouver as a city missionary November 1949 to 1950.[20] When the Classens arrived, Rev. Classen focused on visitation, street meetings, and Sunday school work. Almost seven years later, in July 22, 1956, the MBs built a new chapel named Pacific Grace Mission Chapel of the Mennonite Brethren. Pacific Grace Mission was founded to reach all the residents of the area surrounding the mission, including the Chinese from Chinatown.

Initially, only one out of seven people attending Pacific Grace Mission were of Chinese extraction. During the 1960s, however, that ratio began to change and reflect the increased Chinese immigration and movement into that sector of the city. Eventually the region became predominantly Chinese, and, according to Wayne Bremner, "by the late 1960s the majority of the children in Sunday school were of Chinese origin."[21] Eventually Rev Henry Classen and Sara began taking Chinese language lessons to use in the ministry.

It was becoming apparent that a Chinese assistant for the mission was needed. In efforts to reach the parents of the Chinese children attending Sunday school, Sara and co-worker Sue Neufeld started taking Cantonese language lessons, and a short-term Chinese worker, Rose Wong, was hired to assist with home visitations. By the autumn of 1972, twenty-two Chinese people were attending church.[22] The congregational and community response to the home visitations was positive, and in 1972 Henry asked Paul Li (Li Him-Wor), a student of Northwest Baptist Bible College, to work at Pacific Grace upon graduating. In May 1972, the MB conference appointed both Paul and Great Li as workers in the Chinese section of Pacific Grace.

By 1973 the Chinese fellowship at Pacific Grace Mission had grown from a small group to a large fellowship sharing the Sunday school and sanctuary space

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20 Matthew Todd, "Port Moody Church Celebrates and Looks Back," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (July 1, 2005), https://mbherald.com/port-moody-church-celebrates-and-looks-back/.

21 Wayne Bremner, "Henry G. Classen: City Missionary in Vancouver," on Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission website, *Profiles of Mennonite Faith* 47 (Fall 2010), http://www.mbhistory.org/profiles/classen.en.html.

22 Joseph Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, November 9, 2001, https://mbherald.com/we-are-in-the-same-family/. (This article was adapted from a February 2001 issue of the Chinese *MB Herald*, edited by Joseph Kwan and written by various members of the Chinese MB churches. Translation into English was done by Ed Leung of Richmond Chinese MB.)

with the English members of the church. The following year, in 1974, "a Chinese department was established with meetings conducted in Cantonese."[23] Notably, no major tensions ever developed between the Chinese and Caucasian believers in the mission; it was absolutely peaceful.

"Paul's ministry grew to include 45 people attending the Chinese speaking congregation, but his ministry was cut short due to cancer and his sudden death in 1975. Eddie Chu (Chu Yu-Man) assumed leadership for the Chinese congregation"[24] but left shortly after to answer a call to pastor the Hebron Chinese Church and continue his studies. Pacific Grace continued without a pastor for two years.[25]

On September 28, 1975, Pacific Grace Mission Chapel celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary with the motto "25 years of Grace at Pacific." While the Chinese work continued to grow, the English Caucasian membership decreased, and on April 30, 1977, Pacific Grace dissolved as an organized church. In its place emerged a blossoming Pacific Grace Chinese church.[26] English-speaking Christians stayed behind until 1983 to help the Chinese church develop and to teach children in Sunday school,[27] but ultimately Rev. Classen's fruitful and visionary ministry was handed over to the Chinese Christians to carry on the gospel work.

In 1977 Rev. Classen "retire[d] from full-time service . . . due to failing eyesight."[28] He and his wife, Sara, had been MB denomination's first English ministries workers for a Chinese group. When the honorable Rev. Enoch Wong and his wife, Grace Wong, assumed primary leadership within the Pacific Grace Chinese church on August 1, 1980,[29] they built upon the Classens' legacy.

### *1. Pacific Grace Mennonite Brethren Church (Pacific Grace MB)*

Converted to the Christian faith in 1945,[30] Rev. Enoch Wong (Chinese name Cheung Ho)[31] would eventually become a key figure in leading, advising, and

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23 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

24 Bremner, "Henry G. Classen."

25 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, November 9, 2001, interview with Dr. David Chan.

26 Walter E. Fast, "Apostle to the City," *The Life and Ministry of Henry G. Classen*, prepared for the Culloden MB Church, 1987, 347–70.

27 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

28 Fast, "Apostle to the City," 350.

29 Grace Wong, *Ripples: Eight Decades of God's Grace* (publisher undocumented, unknown, 2005), 32, 36. I have a personal copy of this unpublished book.

30 "Heart to Heart" Port Moody congregational members' discussion with Rev. Enoch and Grace Wong, May 15, 2010, 2:00–4:30 p.m. Translated notes taken by Matthew Todd.

31 Wong, *Ripples*, 25, 26.

promoting the future nurture of multiple young Chinese MB churches in BC and two in Venezuela. In August of 1976 he and his wife, Grace Wong, immigrated to Canada, where Enoch did itinerant work for Scripture Union Canada.[32] Eventually, he became full-time pastor of the first Chinese MB church in Vancouver. His deep love for the Chinese MB church and for church planting would influence the missional DNA and development of the MBCCA growth. His influence over the leadership, direction, church planting, and strategizing of the Cantonese, Mandarin, and English ministries of these churches has reverberated across several generations. MB denominational leaders outside the Chinese MB circle have sometimes affectionately referred to Enoch as the "pope of the Chinese MB churches."[33]

In 2010 when Enoch was asked to describe a bit about the history of the Chinese MB churches planted during his years of ministry, he said:

> I was in Toronto Canada with the Scripture Reading Society (Scripture Union Canada); I was to fly back via Vancouver to Hong Kong. . . . [However,] when I arrived in Vancouver, I was invited to preach—there was no [Chinese] pastor, only 30 people; God gave us the burden to stay.[34]

Grace noted that "the deacons from Pacific Grace MB church . . . invited [Enoch] to preach" at this church that had not had a "pastor for eighteen months [and where] attendance [had] dropped drastically. . . . We accepted the invitation . . . and set to work on August 1, 1980."[35] Pacific Grace MB "was officially registered in 1981, and the membership grew from 30 to 105 in 1983, and 240 in 1989."[36] Grace notes:

> There were not many young people [teenagers, young adults], in our church, yet they were eager to start a fellowship. Enoch challenged them to bring more friends and he would lead this fellowship if there were at least eight people. In the end nine were committed. The first meeting was a BBQ at Burnaby Centennial Park on the first Saturday of September 1980.[37]

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32 Wong, *Ripples*, 29–30.

33 Matthew Todd, translated notes, "The Close of a Chapter: Celebrating the Ministry of Enoch Wong, Senior Servant of God," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (November 25, 2005): 26–27.

34 "Heart to Heart" discussion.

35 Grace Wong, "A Short Journey to Accomplish Great Things," *Ripples: Eight Decades of God's Grace*, (publisher undocumented, unknown, 2005), 32.

36 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

37 Grace Wong, "Remain in Him to Bear Fruits," *Ripples: Eight Decades of God's Grace*, (publisher undocumented, unknown, 2005), 37.

In 1989 Valerie Yiu began an "English worship service for English speaking Chinese youth."[38] Keynes Kan and Miller Zhuang joined the pastoral staff, with Zhuang eventually "sent to Venezuela where two Chinese MB churches were established."[39] Under the leadership of Rev. Enoch at Pacific Grace MB, during a period when "many Hong Kong peoples were immigrating to British Columbia on account of fears over the takeover of Hong Kong by China and the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989,"[40] the Pacific Grace Chinese Church grew rapidly, to the point of seeking to initiate a church plant in 1990 with a congregation of approximately 50. Yu cites Pacific Grace as an example of the rapid growth of Chinese Canadian Protestant churches that became "capable of producing several generations of descendent churches in a short period."[41]

*2. Bethel Chinese Mennonite Brethren Church (Bethel Chinese MB)*

According to Joseph Kwan:

> Although Pacific Grace MB was the first Chinese church to be established, the first Chinese MB church that was registered with the government was Bethel Chinese Christian MB church, established in 1978 by the B.C. MB Conference Board of Church Extension under the leadership of David Poon. . . . It officially joined the B.C. MB Conference in 1980, becoming the first registered Chinese MB church in North America.[42]

Rev. Poon formerly had pastored at an Alliance church in Hong Kong and at Christ Church of China in Vancouver.[43] In 1978 Poon was formally accepted as a church planter and pastor of Richmond Chinese MB church, subsequently known as Bethel Chinese Christian MB church, where he would pastor until 2007.[44]

After several relocations, the church settled in Vancouver[45] and, by 1997, planted another church called North Shore Bethel Christian MB church. Poon

38 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

39 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

40 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

41 Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief," 235. Much of this new growth was fueled by immigration (236).

42 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

43 David H. Leung, "Not I, but Christ," in *Canadian Mennonite Brethren: 1910–2010; Leaders Who Shaped Us* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2010), 274.

44 Leung, "Not I, but Christ," 278.

45 Leung, "Not I, but Christ," 282.

has also had an advisory role to the MBCCA.[46] The church has had multiple English ministry pastors.[47]

## C. Waves of Immigration Shape the Next Generation

The church that Pacific Grace MB established in September 1990 was called Burnaby Pacific Grace. Those congregants then planted another congregation, and by February of 1995 the Port Moody Pacific Grace Chinese Church began their first services.[48] In 1998, an English ministries (EM)[49] congregation began forming from a small class of English junior high students as Helen Chia (née Yueng) was helping with the Canadian-born Chinese (CBC) youth. In the autumn of that year, Matthew Todd became the charter EM pastor with Port Moody Pacific Grace, and by 1999, there were 46 attendees in the EM. By 2009 there were 125, and by 2010 there were 130-plus.

Previously, in August 1987, Enoch Wong, because of health reasons, had turned over the executive pastoral leadership of Pacific Grace MB (also known as North Side Pacific Grace) to Rev. David Chan.[50] Enoch continued to serve as a volunteer honorary advisor among the Chinese MB, however, with a vision of building up missional churches and church planting.[51]

Although the growth of the Chinese MB churches is rooted in evangelization and church planting, there were many Cantonese-speaking Christians who joined a Chinese MB church either because their original denomination in Hong Kong did not have a branch church in the Greater Vancouver area or because of invitations from friends.[52] As Kwan notes, "Most Chinese MB members were [from] . . . immigrant famil[ies] from Hong Kong."[53] The mother tongue of the

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46 Leung, "Not I, but Christ," 281.

47 Notably, Ping On Cheng, Philip Yung, Kam Foon Tang, Nick Suen, Justin Yap, Derek Tou, and Tim Tse. Esther Poon, email interview by Matthew Todd, Vancouver, BC, October 11, 2018. Esther Poon (wife of Rev. David Poon) on the history of English ministries at Bethel Chinese MB church.

48 Port Moody Pacific Grace MB Church, *20th Anniversary Album: In Prayer We Multiply 1995–2015* (Port Moody, BC, publisher unknown, 2015), 5. Around 2003, the name of the church changed slightly such that the word "Chinese" was dropped and replaced with the words "Mennonite Brethren."

49 From this point forward EM refers to the common acronym that Chinese MB churches use to refer to their English ministries congregations.

50 Grace Wong, "Blooming and Blossoming," *Ripples: Eight Decades of God's Grace*, (publisher undocumented, unknown, 2005), 39.

51 Wong, "Blooming and Blossoming," 39–40.

52 Kwan, "Building People Takes a Hundred Years?," *MB Chinese Herald* (January 2010), 11–12, 11.

53 Kwan, "Building People Takes a Hundred Years?," 11–12.

MB Chinese churches' initial groups and congregations was Cantonese. New immigration from China would later prove to be a challenge for these congregations when large numbers of Mandarin-speaking Chinese immigrated into British Columbia and Alberta. Once the Cantonese congregations were planted, they pragmatically discerned their mission work by establishing English- and Mandarin-language congregations.

Canadian social trends indicate that the larger concentrations of Chinese population are found in both the Vancouver and Toronto areas[54] but that the Chinese MB church plants have been largely a Metro Vancouver phenomenon—with the exception of Chinese MB congregations in Winnipeg, Regina, and Calgary, and two Chinese MB church mission plants in Venezuela.

Eventually Hong Kong immigration numbers declined and MBCCA churches began determining new directions. In 1997, on account of the large influx of Mandarin-speaking Mainland China immigrants coming to British Columbia, Port Moody became the first church to initiate a vision to focus their outreach on Mandarin immigrants,[55] with Mandarin fellowship and worship services. The plan to reach Mandarin peoples was put in place by Rev. Keynes Kan and his advisor, the honorable Enoch Wong, with Rev. Hua providing oversight. By 1998, Leo Chia began pastoring the fellowship (targeted to be a congregation). The group grew to seventy in 1999, becoming independent (and off subsidy) by 2000 under the name Pacific Grace Mandarin Church, then moved in 2002 to Burnaby. Chia eventually planted two more Mandarin church offshoots—Maple Ride in 2006 and Surrey in 2009.[56] By "1999 simultaneous translation for Mandarin-speaking Chinese was being added to many worship services."[57]

Church planting in the MBCCA churches became a passion.[58] As Kwan observes, "Chinese MB churches are especially keen in church planting and overseas missions."[59] Thus, rapid growth has been a constant theme for the MBCCA. By 2016 there were "19 Chinese congregations, [and] . . . exploring the possibility of partnerships between Chinese and Caucasian churches in Richmond and Prince George."[60] By 2018 the British Columbia Mennonite

54 Calgary and Montreal are about tied for the third-highest Chinese populations.

55 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

56 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family," 5. The data here was obtained in a personal interview with Rev. Leo Chia, March 11, 2020.

57 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

58 See Appendices for the list of MBCCA church plants.

59 Kwan, "Building People Takes a Hundred Years?," 12.

60 MB churches of Canada 2016 National MB report, 20, accessed January 3, 2020, https://www.mennonitebrethren.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/MB-Churches-of-Canada-Ministry-Book-download-3.pdf [registration required]. These 19 churches sit in a Mennonite global community of 470,000 members in 3,000 congregations (30).

Brethren Chinese churches constituted twenty congregations; the Manitoba Conference included the Winnipeg Chinese MB church (developed in the 1980s for refugees and students); the Saskatchewan MB Conference included the Regina Chinese Community church (registered in 1989), and the Alberta MB Conference included Mountain View Grace Church (1995). In 1991, the Pacific Grace Chinese church established a church in Porte la Cruz, Venezuela, and a second mission church in Caracas, Venezuela.

When society thinks about people from a Mennonite denomination or Anabaptist tradition, Pat Johnson observed, it generally evokes pictures dating back to the Reformation of the 1500s; in Metro Vancouver, however, "the word [*Mennonite* has] increasingly conjure[d] images of newcomers from China, Hong Kong, and elsewhere in Asia who have discovered an old form of Christianity and made it their own."[61] In the past several decades, "twenty Chinese MB churches [have been established] in seven cities in three different countries. . . . Fourteen of these churches are in Vancouver's Lower Mainland."[62] Chia has established several Mandarin-speaking congregations, while some of the other Chinese MB churches have provided some form of Mandarin ministries.[63] And Kwan reported that the MB denomination was determining to do a Chinese church plant in the province of Ontario.[64]

## 2. The Life Cycle of the Canadian Chinese MB Church

### A. Immigrants Creating Churches as Community

The Canadian Chinese Mennonite Brethren churches interface with the historical narrative history of Chinese immigration—an experience all immigrant Chinese Canadian Christians share regardless of denomination. One aspect of the development of the Chinese church is their utilitarian approach to joining ethnic faith communities; looking for community is a "characteristic path of

61 Pat Johnson, "Pacific Spirit: Chinese Mennonites Reflect West Coast Mix," *Vancouver Courier*, May 16, 2014, https://www.vancourier.com/news/pacific-spirit-chinese-mennonites-reflect-west-coast-mix-1.1064330.

62 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

63 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family." Leo Chia, phone interview with Matthew Todd, Burnaby, BC, March 12, 2020. Alice Leung, email interview communication with Matthew Todd, Vancouver, BC, March 11, 2020. Both Chia and Leung noted that the MBCCA currently has two Mandarin congregations (NSPGMC and PGMC), and approximately eight Mandarin ministries in its sphere that include Bethel Chinese Christian MB, House for All Nations, Maple Ridge, Pacific Grace MB, Port Moody Pacific Grace MB, Richmond Chinese MB, Surrey Grace Mandarin, and Willingdon Church.

64 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

adaptation of immigrants" to the North American context,[65] [where] . . . one of the first acts of [many] new immigrants is to found [or join a] . . . church."[66] Yaxin Lu et al. note that "the Chinese Christian church plays an important role in coping, acculturation, and assimilation processes for many Chinese immigrant families."[67] In the church, they are able to find "material, social, and emotional support," relationships, and communities that "correlate with positive outcomes in marriage and family life."[68] H. B. Cavalcanti and Debra Schleef note that while some ethnic peoples turn to religion to aid in the process of acculturation to the host country others use religion to maintain their own ethnic and cultural ties.[69]

Will Herberg recognizes that ethnic churches frequently are an outgrowth of ethnic immigration,[70] as they help provide support for a sense of identity[71] along with "continuity and security" through the disorientation period of "migration and resettlement."[72] The churches create communities where initially the "primary expression of . . . unity [is] language" and a shared culture.[73] Immigrant churches "represent a fusion of religion and culture that [is] of the very texture of immigrant life . . . more a racial and cultural than a religious institution."[74] Charles Hirschman agrees with Herberg's analysis that ethnic churches provide immigrants "cultural continuity and . . . psychological benefits of religious faith following the trauma of immigration."[75] He argues that "the centrality of

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65 Charles Hirschman, "The Role of Religion in the Origins and Adaptation of Immigrant Groups in the United States," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2004), 1207.

66 Hirschman, "The Role of Religion," 1208.

67 Yaxin Lu, Loren Marks, and Lorenda Apavaloiae, "Chinese Immigrant Families and Christian Faith Community: A Qualitative Study," *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (December 2012), 118.

68 Lu et al., "Chinese Immigrant Families," 118–19.

69 H. B. Cavalcanti and Debra Schleef, "The Case for Secular Assimilation? The Latino Experience in Richmond, Virginia," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 4 (2005), 480. See Fabian Dawson, "Religious Connections Help New Immigrants with Social Integration," *New Canadian Media* (November 2, 2021), https://newcanadianmedia.ca/religious-connections-help-new-immigrants-with-social-integration/. Dawson reports that immigrants tend to see "religious communities as a place of social integration [transitional institutions], especially in the first years after arriving in the country."

70 Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press Edition, 1983), 14.

71 Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, 12.

72 Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, 16.

73 Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, 11, 13.

74 Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, 110.

75 Hirschman, "The Role of Religion," 1206.

religion to immigrant communities can be summarized as the search for refuge, respectability, and resources."[76] Herberg's and Hirschman's sociological theory on the role of religion in the origins and adaptation of immigrant groups applies to the planting and growth of the MBCCA churches.

As we turn to British Columbia's Chinese community—the specific context of the current study—Li Yu shows how since 1858[77] Christianity has come to be seen less as a Western religion than as a belief that could now be endogenously Chinese.[78] Yu notes that the Chinese churches flourished numerically only after the Second World War, when "the assimilating role of the churches gradually weakened as the mainstream denominational churches withdrew from the community and self-managed Chinese churches came into being."[79] These cultural churches now provide holistic sociological and spiritual functions in supporting the Chinese family and cultural heritage.[80]

## B. Assimilating into the Host Culture

Classical theories on phases of immigrant assimilation plausibly explain why the needs of various youth outgrow the ethnic church.[81] Milton Gordon theorized that immigrants go through up to seven types of assimilation.[82] One important category is "cultural assimilation, involving a change of cultural patterns to those of the host society."[83] A rebuttal to earlier more monolithic classical models of assimilation is that there are multiple routes to assimilation.[84] As ethnic churches go through life cycles, assimilation challenges the retention of the second generation. Research suggests that if the church "resists" "adaptations" over

76 Hirschman, "The Role of Religion," 1228.

77 Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief," 237.

78 Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief," 245.

79 Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief," 245.

80 Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, "Structural Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations," *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 2 (2000): 135–53.

81 Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, and Milton Gordon, "The Nature of Assimilation, in *Incorporating Diversity: Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age*, ed, Peter Kivisto (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), 95–110. Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964),

82 Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, 70–71, 76.

83 Russel A. Kazal, "Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History," *Majority and Minority: The Dynamics of Race and Ethnicity in American Life*, ed. Norman R. Yetman, 6th ed. (Needman Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 292.

84 David G. Embrick, "Assimilation," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. William A. Darity, Jr., 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI: MacMillan Reference USA, 2008), 190.

"cultural" and "linguistic preservation," youth may leave, which is a "problem of organizational adaptation."[85]

Assimilation theory has been evolving to include differences among Asian families.[86] Cavalcanti and Schleef, for example, identify various trajectories in Asian assimilation.[87] Current theorists studying Asians and acculturation conclude that the "acculturation strategy" of the second-generation immigrants is "associated with" immigrants' drive toward "well-being."[88] Ruth H. Gim Chung's research resonates with the point that acculturation impacts parents,[89] pointing out that the "cost of migration" is acculturation of the second generation[90] and that the first generation feels the impact of acculturation the most.[91] In these more secular times many immigrant youth are opting for secular trajectories that negatively impact parents.[92]

In light of this challenge, many Chinese parents are looking for help raising their children in the way of their own cultural values[93] and are bringing their families to church because they see the positive influence the church is having on families and children.[94] It has been noted that "second-generation Asian [North] Americans who grew up as Protestants convert [to Christian faith] at higher rates . . . than . . . Protestant peers in the general population."[95] Evangelizing second-generation youth is a fruitful field. The challenge has to do with generational assimilation when they become emerging young adults.

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85 Gordon, "The Nature of Assimilation," 325, 326.

86 Peter Kivisto, ed., *Incorporating Diversity: Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005). See also Cavalcanti and Schleef, "The Case for Secular Assimilation?," 473.

87 Cavalcanti and Schleef, "The Case for Secular Assimilation?," 473–84.

88 John W. Berry and Feng Hou, "Immigrant Acculturation and Wellbeing in Canada," *Canadian Psychology* 57, no. 4 (2016): 254–64. John W. Berry and Feng Hou, "Acculturation, Discrimination and Wellbeing among Second Generation of Immigrants in Canada," *International Journal of International Relations* 61 (2017): 29–39, 30.

89 Ruth H. Gim Chung, "Gender, Ethnicity and Acculturation in Intergenerational Conflict of American College Students," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 7, no. 4 (November 7, 2001), 377.

90 Chung, "Gender, Ethnicity and Acculturation," 377.

91 Chung, "Gender, Ethnicity and Acculturation," 384.

92 Cavalcanti and Schleef, 473, 480.

93 Lu et al., "Chinese Immigrant Families and Christian Faith Community," 119.

94 Lu et al., "Chinese Immigrant Families and Christian Faith Community," 121.

95 Carolyn Chen and Jerry Z. Park, "Pathways of Religious Assimilation: Second-Generation Asian Americans' Religious Retention and Religiosity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, no. 3, (2019), 676.

## 3. Sociological Dynamics of Acculturation

### A. Maturation of English-Language Ministries of Chinese Churches

The growth of self-managed Chinese churches combined with the history of Chinese immigration since the 1980s[96] has contributed to the growth of the Chinese Christian community as Chinese churches have "adjusted their mission strategies to meet the needs of Chinese immigrants"[97] and provided a context to "solidify the Chinese identity of their members."[98] Feedback on the Chinese MB churches in Canada indicates that, amid this growth, all of the MBCCA churches have had to grapple with generational assimilation and the emerging young adulthood of their English ministries.

Some have suggested that a dynamic besides assimilation in the equation of the Silent Exodus is a reaction by emerging young adults in the Chinese church against pressure to preserve and retain Chinese identity and language. Some have referred to this pressure as keeping the church Sino-centric or as Asian radicalization. In response, one should not overlook the fact that Chinese transnational immigrants coming out of Hong Kong and China have been a part of a country with a colonial and xenophobic history.[99] The national aspirations of China, for example, are xenophobic and Sino-centric. Given China's history with foreign imperialists, including the humiliation and loss of control of their country, this is

96 Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief," 240.

97 Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief," 234.

98 Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief," 242.

99 Xenophobia can be an irrational or unreasoned fear of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange. It can manifest in how an ingroup perceives and relates to an outgroup, including a fear of losing identity, suspicion of the outgroup's activities, and a desire to secure a presumed purity. It can also be exhibited in the form of an uncritical exaltation of another culture. Xenophobia is an appropriate term to use in this context given that the origin of segregated Chinese churches was due to historical bigotry and injustice against Chinese. Jonathan Tan notes that some xenophobia toward Caucasians exists (Jonathan Y. Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008], 111–33). Tan argues that the history of segregated Asian churches is "primarily because of discrimination and stereotyping arising from [Asians'] physical inability to blend in with the dominant white American society" (60). This has resulted in many Asians "choos[ing] to establish and maintain their own churches . . . rather than assimilating into existing white . . . churches," though the two groups may speak the same language and share the same doctrine (59). Curtis Paul DeYoung et al. also concede that even if racism had not been part of the Chinese experience, the move for separation exists because "culture and ethnicity are . . . central concerns" (Curtiss Paul DeYoung et al., "Separate but Equal," in *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003], 113).

scarcely surprising. It is reasonable to assume the transference of such sentiments to some of the Canadian Chinese immigrant churches, and this may factor into a Chinese church's posture against assimilation.[100]

Kwan once commented on this demographic, asking, "Should these young Christians be members of English-speaking departments in existing churches, or should they form separate churches?"[101] A couple of the English ministry pastors chose the latter route, taking initiative to form separate churches: Pacific Grace MB church merged a group from their English congregation with the Vancouver MB church, creating South Hill MB Church in November 2007. The merger was classified as a venture into a multicultural church model. Pacific Grace sent English pastor Mike Nishi to give leadership to the merged congregations. The union of these two congregations lasted for six years until dissolving in 2013.[102] Another English ministry church planter, who formerly served with Bethel Chinese MB church, was Nick Suen, who, with the blessing of the BCMB planted an English-speaking church called Faithwerks in 2008.[103]

By this time (2008), the Chinese MB churches in British Columbia and English ministries membership "constituted more than 10 percent of the Mennonite Brethren in the province."[104] The 2008–2009 period represented a high-water mark for the MBCCA English ministries congregations as reflected by a survey conducted between July and October 2008 to profile the English ministries of twelve of the English congregations in the Greater Vancouver area. The findings were quite revealing: those twelve Chinese MB churches[105] represented a total group of approximately 3,000 Chinese MB congregants, all from Cantonese

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100 See Fenggang Yang, "Preserving Chinese Culture," *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation and Adhesive Identities* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 132–62.

101 Kwan, ed., "We Are in the Same Family."

102 "South Hill Mennonite Brethren Church (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada)," Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, November 8, 2016, https://www.gameo.org/index.php?title=South_Hill_Mennonite_Brethren_Church_(Vancouver,_British_Columbia,_Canada).

103 "Faithwerks (Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada)," accessed January 19, 2020, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Faithwerks_(Vancouver,_British_Columbia,_Canada)&oldid=155557. Nick Suen, "No "'In-crowd' at Neighborhood Church," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, May 1, 2011, http://mbherald.com/tag/nick-suen/.

104 Guenther, "Ethnicity and Evangelical Protestants in Canada," *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, 380.

105 The MBCCA churches represented were Bethel CCMB, Burnaby PG, North Shore Bethel, North Shore PG, Pacific Grace MB, Port Moody PGMB, Richmond CMB, South Vancouver PGMB, Tricity CC, Vancouver CMB, and Vancouver Christian Logos.

language-based churches.[106] The English ministries represented 21 percent of the total congregants surveyed, of which 20 percent were identified as being in the career and family categories, 28 percent had attended college, and 52 percent had attended high school.[107] In 2008 the participating churches had been in operation anywhere from three to thirty years (by 2022 the churches' duration of operation ranged from seventeen to forty-four years). The participants in the English ministry congregations in 2008 had been operating for periods of 2 to 22-plus years (by 2022, between 16 and 34 years). With the exception of Port Moody Pacific Grace and Vancouver Chinese MB, which in 2008 had approximately 125 and 75 people respectively in their English ministries, all other Chinese MB churches had an average of 42 people in their English ministries. And, again with the exception of Port Moody Pacific Grace and Vancouver Chinese MB, most of the English ministry (EM) full-time pastors had served fewer than 5 years with their current churches. Churches like Bethel Chinese MB and Pacific Grace MB had already experienced having multiple EM pastors (EM pastoral attrition was becoming a pattern). When documenting what the participants considered to be their major sources of future growth for English ministries, the majority cited the Awana[108] and children's ministries (9 out of 12 churches had Awana); only 2 English congregations cited expectations for future English ministries growth to come from multicultural outreach.

The survey also asked questions regarding the EM church mission and vision and future goals. Results showed leadership development and outreach as being among the highest needs in the EM. One of my research focuses at the time was "to portrait the development of an English ministry from beginning to teenage, to self-responsible adult and take care of others stage."[109] On October 15 and 16, 2008, a significant MBCCA English pastor's retreat was held at Loon Lake, British Columbia, with representation from fourteen of the English pastors who filled out the EM profiling survey. The meeting minutes[110] noted that the gathered

106 The Mandarin congregation of Rev. Leo Chia was not included in this survey because it was a young church plant.

107 David Leung, MBCCA English ministry profile document "English Ministry at a Glance as of 2008/9" (Abbotsford, BC: unpublished, 2009).

108 "Awana is an international, nondenominational, Bible-centered youth organization that provides weekday clubs and programs for 3-year-olds through 6th grade. The acronym Awana comes from the first letters of the phrase 'Approved workmen are not ashamed' (II Timothy 2:15)," accessed October 30, 2023, https://awanacanada.ca.

109 Matthew Todd, "The Development and Transition of English Ministry in the Chinese Canadian Church," *MB Chinese Herald* (October 2009), 16.

110 MBCCA English Pastors (2008). MBCCA English Chapter pastors meeting minutes, October 16, 2008, Loon Lake, BC, MBCCA English pastors retreat, October 15–16, 2008.

group had expressed collective interest in exploring what could be mutually done among them. Attending EM pastors also expressed concern about the church model and that none of the Chinese MB churches had a clear vision statement that included the English ministries. They recognized that the vision for the whole church was primarily crafted by executive clergy and boards and not by the English-language pastors.[111] Understandably, there was not a single case where the EM pastor could autonomously strategize a destination vision in a Chinese MB church to address acculturation and adaptation to Canadian-born Chinese (CBC) culture and CBC networks, or CBC outreach and mission potential. It was noted that, for the most part, EM congregations have been started in Chinese churches to keep the second generation with their families in the church and that there was a need for a paradigm (church model) flexible enough for a vision held in common by Chinese churches and their respective EM congregations.[112]

In 2008 and 2009, the English Chapter of the MBCCA pastors assessed a "profiling [of] what age groups existed in [their Lower Mainland] churches." It was stated then that "all but two of our English language congregations had college, university, career, and family couples in them. Only two were exclusively teen ministry congregations."[113] In 2011, Rev Yiu Tong Chan of Vancouver Chinese MB church noted that "we are all experiencing an exodus of the English-speaking second generation . . . [and a] shortage of second-generation church ministers."[114] Warren Lai sharpens this observation, stating:

> As immigrant families of previous years mature, the Chinese Canadian churches (like many other immigrant churches in North America) experience an increasing, if not massive, loss of their second and third generations; and for those so-called CBC's who stay, they pose questions about the *raison d'être and the mission of the Chinese Canadian Churches.*[115]

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111 I want to acknowledge that currently in 2023 one emerging trend related to the Silent Exodus and assimilation in Chinese MB churches is that there are now more church boards including representatives from English ministries as deacons. However, in an August 20, 2023, phone interview with MBCCA lead pastor Dr. David Chan, it was noted that no one from the English ministries is an executive lead pastor in the MBCCA churches.

112 MBCCA English Pastors, MBCCA English Chapter pastors meeting minutes, October 16, 2008.

113 Matthew Todd, "The Development and Transition of English Ministry," 16.

114 Foreword by the Rev. Yiu Tong Chan, "Looking Back, Looking Forward: A Dialogue among North American Asian Christians," in *Asian and Multicultural Ministries in Canada Conference proceedings 2011 and 2012*, eds. Joyce Chan et al. (Richmond, Canada: Asian and Multicultural Ministries in Canada, 2015), viii.

115 Warren Lai, "Is There a Future for the Chinese Canadian Churches? Challenges, Opportunities and Responses," in *Looking Back, Looking Forward: A Dialogue among*

The more recent event of a new wave of immigrants coming from Hong Kong[116] because of pressure from Beijing has opened up opportunities and growth for Cantonese and English congregations, but the Silent Exodus issue remains.[117]

This Silent Exodus of CBC young adults away from their family congregations merits more consideration given the anecdotal recognition of its reality and the associated challenges, especially the resulting impact on parents. Now, in the year 2023 and following, is a good time for these churches to reflect on the dynamics of the development and transitioning of assimilating youth. Timothy Tseng encapsulates the problem: "The Silent Exodus of younger Asian[s] . . . from immigrant Asian churches has continued unabated since the 1970s. . . . Asian Christians in Canada . . . now face a critical 'tipping point' regarding their ministry to emergent adults (late teens, college age to late 20s)."[118] The impact on overseas-born Chinese (OBC) [119] parents appears to be the most underreported part of the story.

## B. Impacts of the Silent Exodus

David H. Leung points out that comparative perceptions of the overseas-born Chinese (OBC) fell outside the scope of Todd's 2015 research[120] on the Silent Exodus of emerging adults from Chinese churches in British Columbia and

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*North American Asian Christians*, eds. Joyce Chan et al. (Richmond, Canada: Asian and Multicultural Ministries in Canada, 2015), 67.

116 Ian Young, "Thousands of Hong Kong-Born People Move Back to Canada, Once Again Reversing a Migration That Has Shaped Cities across the Pacific," June 13, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3014256/thousands-hong-kong-re-returnee-migrants-move-back-canada.

117 This past spring (2023) I was in a discussion with the BCMB conference minister where the pressing need was expressed to gather Chinese church leaders to strategize about the Chinese MB churches' future and how to tackle challenges that include the Silent Exodus. See also Paul Lam, "The Chinese Mennonite Brethren in Vancouver," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 37 (2019), 45–52. Lam notes the challenge of "hemorrhaging faith" (49) and youth leaving because they feel the "church is not theirs [but rather ] their parents'" (50). Furthermore, there continues to be "resistance to change" and a struggle to implement a "clear vision and detailed long-term plan" to doing "neighborhood and multiethnic ministry" (49).

118 Timothy Tseng, "Intergenerational Mission: The Tipping Point of Asian North American Churches," *Looking Back, Looking Forward: A Dialogue among North American Asian Christians* (Richmond, BC: Asian and Multicultural Ministries in Canada, 2015), 50.

119 OBC is the common acronym used in Chinese MB churches to refer to overseas-born Chinese, particularly first-generation Chinese adults and parents.

120 Matthew R. S. Todd, *English Ministry Crisis in Chinese Canadian Churches* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

Alberta.[121] From this observation emerged the current 2023 study of OBCs, which includes Mennonite Brethren Chinese Church Association (MBCCA) clergy and parents impacted by the Silent Exodus.[122] The qualitative research involved three phases: (1) a survey of Canadian MB Chinese clergy on how MB Chinese parents are impacted by the exodus; (2) a survey of Canadian MB Chinese parents; and (3) a set of interdenominational Chinese focus groups—one each for clergy, parents with young children, and parents whose children had left the church. Each phase solicited perceptions of why emerging adults had left; the emotional, spiritual, and social impact of these departures upon parents;[123] and participants' recommendations for action.[124]

Findings from the three phases were strongly convergent.[125] There is a significant difference in the intensity of impacts and subsequent reactions between the parents who are affected by their CBC children dropping out of the family church and those who are primarily affected by their children moving on to another church. Findings showed conclusively that parents are intensely impacted emotionally when the second generation leaves their ethnoreligious community and the faith. Pastors and parents reported parental experiences representing four primary overarching emotional response themes: surprise (includes initial shock, confusion, disillusionment, and stress); fear (includes anxiety, worry, feeling overwhelmed and inadequate, and the absence of harmony); anger (includes frustrated, upset, hurt); and sadness (includes disappointment, grief, hurt, and sense of loss). The research showed that these

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121 David H. Leung, "Research Addresses 'Silent Exodus,'" *MB Herald* (November 20, 2015), https://mbherald.com/english-ministry-crisis-chinese-churches/.

This data was generated in the findings and included in Todd's PhD study in Appendix B (Matthew R. S. Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents in Ethno-religious Communities Who Have Been Impacted by Generational Assimilation" [PhD diss., Bakke Graduate University, 2023]).

122 Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents." See Appendix B, tables A28, B29, B82, B83, B84, and Appendix C pre-focus group questionnaire table C22, "Why the Next Generation Leaves," found in Appendix C raw data.

123 Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents," Table 20, 261. Impact definitions: Emotionally—feelings, upset, fear, absence of harmony, unhappy, emotional experience. Socially—embarrassment, saving face in community. Spiritually—impacts on faith, belief, hope, willingness to serve, and connectedness to God, community, and family (494).

124 Todd, "Recommendation and Conclusions," in "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents," Table 21. Transformational Interventions, Strategies, and Solutions from Recommendations to Help Impacted Parents, 280–81.

125 See tables B27, B28, B32, and B34 on how CBC Exodus of the Chinese church affects the OBC parents—in Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents in Ethno-religious Communities Who Have Been Impacted by Generational Assimilation."

emotional impact themes are internalized and manifested and may lead to a sense of failure in parenting.[126]

The Chinese culture is a shame-and-honor culture, so when Chinese youth leave their ethnoreligious community, this can embarrass the parents, especially if they are serving in leadership positions. The practice of saving face in Chinese culture reportedly manifests in avoiding vulnerability, transparency, and deeper levels of community related to embarrassing family matters. Parents tend to conceal from the faith community what they are experiencing. They often become less willing to serve in leadership positions and either withdraw from serving or leave for another church.[127]

Parents also reported feeling less connected to God, community, and family. Social impact further manifests in parents feeling judgment, stigma, shame, blame, guilt, and failure;[128] they may alternatively blame themselves, their spouse, or the church.[129] Survey participants reported observing parents suffering in silence[130] and blaming church staff.[131] Participants also noted that parents struggle with regret and feeling helpless. Some of the feelings come from their own inner internalizations of shame-and-honor culture values, and some stem from social interaction in their communities. Their confidence is shaken as to the extent that preaching continues to apply to their families and youth. Parents might be helped in shifting away from an expectation that they can precisely determine how the church's ministry shapes their families and toward a broader sense of the probable outcomes of ministry.

### C. Missional Implications Regarding the Silent Exodus

Research participants broadly agreed that there has been a deficit of caring ministry to deal with the impact of the Silent Exodus within Chinese churches. Recommendations for reducing harmful impact on parents who are part of a shame culture included the following:

- Reduce stigma by recalling a theology of grace;

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126 Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents," Table 5. Clergy Categories of Impact Based off the Clergy Top Findings List, 219.

127 Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents," Table C124. Comparison Chart of Three Focus Groups on the Word and Phrase Comparisons, 751–52.

128 Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents," Table C124. Comparison Chart of Three Focus Groups on the Word and Phrase Comparisons, 751–52.

129 Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents," Table 5, 219, Table C124, 751.

130 Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents," Table 7. Summary of Top Five Thematic Findings from OBC Parents' Surveys, 222.

131 Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents," Table 5, 219, Table C124. Comparison Chart of Three Focus Groups on the Word and Phrase Comparisons, 751–52.

- Break the code of silence; limit the effects of shame and comparison and help congregants be more open about their lives and struggles. This could be done through things like training parent mentors, teaching, counseling, and creating safe spaces for listening.
- Convene workshops at which parents could work through their difficulties together.

It is imperative that Chinese churches equip parents with a theology of family and parenting in the life cycle to help them understand why youth leave ethnoreligious communities and why parents are impacted.

## The Ongoing Mission of MB Chinese Churches in Canada: Addressing the Silent Exodus

Chinese Canadian Mennonite Brethren (CCMB) churches in Canada share a common history rooted in the immigration experience and founding of congregations that function not only in the traditional sense of a spiritual community but also as a cultural hub, helping families cope and acculturate in their new country. Henry and Sara Classen and Enoch and Grace Wong were foundational personalities within this group of church plants, providing a missionary legacy that capitalized on the Chinese immigration and resulted in rapid church growth; they could be viewed as pivotal to the present work in the Chinese MB church in Canada. They served the purpose of being missional to Chinese diaspora families during one phase of the life cycle of the Chinese churches.

Now the CCMB are in a different life-cycle stage, with new evolving spiritual/social needs of the Chinese diaspora in Canada. The development of language-based congregations in the Chinese church has brought new opportunities to address an underdeveloped theology of culture, an emphasis on ethnicity, and the missionary nature of the church. New challenges have also arisen in this context, foremost of which has been the so-called Silent Exodus of the second generation, precipitated by acculturation to the host culture as the Chinese church has entered a new phase of its life cycle.

The Chinese MB churches in Canada can and must learn from the past fifty years of history, adjusting their mission strategies to not only meet the new waves of immigrant families in 2023 but also address the missionary challenge of generational assimilation of the second generation into the Canadian host culture. Creating new Anabaptist communities in MBCCA churches today demands addressing the impact of the Silent Exodus of emerging adults on the health and mission of the church.

Notably, this qualitative study is the first to examine how Chinese parents are impacted by the exodus of their youth from church. This original contribution to the gap in knowledge corroborates that parents are variably impacted

emotionally, spiritually, and socially on an intensity spectrum by generational assimilation when youth abandon their ethnoreligious communities and faith.

The study can serve as a resource to the Chinese church because it reveals a need for the church to improve their support systems for impacted parents—a need that typically is exacerbated if more than one child leaves the church. The Silent Exodus affects both parents and the mission of the entire MB Chinese church in Canada, making it imperative that parents be equipped and leaders strategize on how to address caring ministry, shame culture, and the scope of impact on parents.[132]

## Appendix

### MBCCA Church Plants

- 1989 - Abbotsford Chinese Christian Church; Vancouver Chinese MB Church
- 1991 - Tri-City Chinese Christian Church
- 1995 - South Vancouver Pacific Grace MB Church
- 1997 - North Shore Pacific Grace MB Church; North Shore Bethel Christian MB Church; Vancouver Christian Logos Church
- 1998 - Pacific Grace Mandarin Church
- 2005 - Richmond Pacific Grace MB Church; North Shore Pacific Grace Mandarin Church
- 2006 - Maple Ridge Pacific Grace Mandarin Church

#### North Shore Pacific Grace MB Church

Although each of the MBCCA church plants has an exceptional story that can be accessed on the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online website,[133]

132 A discussion on the recommendations in this study are outside the scope of this article but can be accessed for strategies that can be used to minimize the impact of generational assimilation and contribute to healthier parent and family ministry.

The full study can be accessed by permission through Bakke Graduate University, Dallas, Texas, Matthew R. S. Todd, "Empowering Chinese Canadian Parents in Ethnoreligious Communities Who Have Been Impacted by Generational Assimilation" (PhD diss., Bakke Graduate University, 2023).

133 See Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Welcome_to_GAMEO.

the North Shore Pacific Grace MB Church growth story is one that was born out of deep hardship for the church planter.[134]

The church work was started September 1, 1997,[135] by To Wang Hui, who interned with Pacific Grace MB church under David Chan (1994–1997) as an "associate pastor in Cantonese ministry."[136] He was supported by some people from Pacific Grace North and South site mission departments and a "few core families in the [North Shore] vicinity."[137] Backing also came from the Board of Church Extension in the BCMB. In 1998 the church was registered. By 2000 To Wang Hui was ordained (with Rev. Enoch Wong present).

In 2004 To Wang Hui was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease and later liver cancer. Despite these difficulties the church grew in "quality and quantity."[138] To Wang Hui's legacy is a thriving Cantonese ministry currently led by Rev. Peter Teh, and a robust English ministry with the most recent English ministries pastor being Eileen Li.

134 See To Wang Hui, *A Hot Stream Beneath the Frozen Man*, trans. by Priscilla Yuk Kit Yung (Vancouver, BC: Eternal Media Inc., 2009).

135 Hui, *A Hot Stream*, 154.

136 Hui, *A Hot Stream*, 6.

137 Hui, *A Hot Stream*, 62.

138 Hui, *A Hot Stream*, 85.

# Book Reviews

**Arvind Sharma, ed., *Why I Am a Believer: Personal Reflections on Nine World Religions*, New Delhi, Penguin Books India, 2009. 378 pp. $24.38. ISBN # 9780143066873.**

*Why I Am a Believer: Personal Reflections on Nine World Religions* is a very useful book about core dimensions of diverse religions, conveyed by individuals who stand within each of the world religions reviewed: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam.

A major strength of this book, edited by the noted informant of world religions Arvind Sharma, is that writers loyal to a specific religion creatively explain why their chosen religion matters to them. The book's contributors (identified by location at the time of writing) make clear why they believe in and belong to a particular religion. Free to learn from others' religious truth, they persist with their own choice, further motivated to claim and improve that religion. Although each religion has shortcomings—like Hindu caste practice (with their potential for social divisions) or Christian imperialism (arrogance toward and ignorance of other religions)—most believers remain loyal to their chosen religion, finding that their religious traditions meet personal needs. And in today's context of religious pluralism, many believers choose to be allies or co-travelers with other religious adherents rather than religious rivals.

This book's chapters follow historical sequence—from most ancient Hinduism to more recent Islam. Although most chapters provide extensive information about the respective religion being discussed, the chapter describing Sikhism seems comparatively short. Women writers introduce Buddhist and Jain(a) thought. Brief reference to each writer and chapter follows below.

Editor Sharma, in addition to writing the introduction, authored the opening chapter on Hinduism, covering the complexity of the religion with quite succinct language. Sharma, Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University in Montreal, shares three reasons for choosing to be Hindu: the religion's (1) subtlety, (2) charity, and (3) creativity. Subtle distinctions, for example, include those between emptiness and openness, the absolute and universal, single and narrow-mindedness, one and only. Readers do well to realize that Hinduism reflects a culture meaning "how things are done," Sharma notes.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who teaches at the University of San Diego, has edited a number of books about women and Buddhism and authored *Into the Jaws of Yama, Lord of Death: Buddhism, Bioethics, and Death* (2006). Her chapter

here endorses the mind. Cultivating a wholesome mind and critical thinking become methods for arriving at truth. Freedom to question personal certitudes or to weigh opinions reveals an open mind. While the Buddhist discipline of *mindfulness* develops awareness of the present moment, meditation can enable a believer to achieve calmness.

Sandhya Jain, a postgrad in political science from Delhi University, has been a professional journalist in leading newspapers for decades. She writes of the Jain(a) universal belief in welfare for all beings. She believes in the supremacy of *ahimsa* (non-injury) toward all creatures, each with a soul. Priorities for Jain(a) link perfect faith, perfect knowledge, and perfect conduct.

Naming several of the ten Sikh Gurus, writer Kartar Singh Duggal includes the founder Guru Nanak along with Guru Gobind Singh, who declared that the eternal Guru would continue to live mystically in their scripture (Holy Granth) and in their community (the Panth). Duggal—skilled in four languages, master storyteller, and recipient of multiple awards before his death—believes in and discusses the Sikh faith's main expectations: Justice, Love, Compassion, Truth, and Working Hard.

Whether the Confucian Tradition is a belief system, philosophy, or way of life more than a religion is discussed by Vincent Shen, professor of Chinese philosophy in Taipei for two decades before moving to the University of Toronto in 2000. In addition to distinguishing Ultimate Reality, Shen believes and explains key terms like *ren*, *li*, *qi*, *shu*, *tian*, *yi*, *xin*, and *zhi*. The Confucian Tradition is not exclusive of any religion, he explains.

A seventh-generation Gold Mountain Daoist, Bede Bidlack began studying Daoist meditation in 1995. At one time a Benedictine monk of St. Anselm's Abbey, Bidlack earned a PhD in 2011 in comparative religions. His chapter in this book explains how disciplined followers of the Dao, or, the Way, refine energy *qi*, already absorbed into the body, to become more like the unknowable Dao (Christ, for Bidlack). The "universe moves by the interaction of yin and yang symbolized by the familiar taiji diagram" (199)—circle of black (yin) and white (yang) teardrops, each containing a dot of the other. In Daoism, through intense contemplation the practitioner becomes the mysterious force, the agent of salvation or immortality. Bidlack believes that he is a better Christian because he is also a Daoist.

Jacob Neusner, author of hundreds of books, finds a variety of Judaisms within the religion of ethical monotheism known as Judaism. His chapter gives most of its attention to Rabbinic Judaism, which took shape after 70 BCE and culminated in the Dual Torah—written and oral. In conflict with Rabbinic Judaism, the mystical movement called Hasidism began in the mid-1800s. Neusner says, "While Judaism is the religion of most Jews who practice a religion, it is not 'the religion of the Jews' viewed as a group" (268). While believing "there is only

God's truth: the Torah" (243), Neusner values features in other religions: Islam's simple liturgy, Christianity's aesthetic strength, Hinduism's dignity and variety.

For contributor Harvey Cox (recently deceased), Hollis Professor of Divinity at Harvard, Christian faith is undergirded by the incarnation (God being present within human life) and God's love via a kingdom of radical inclusion. Cox describes two personal epiphanies: (1) singing freedom songs with black youth in a North Carolina jail several days after protesting racial segregation and (2) experiencing oneness while receiving the Eucharist along with handicapped children during a visit to Martha's Vineyard. Cox does not try to convert people to Christianity (288); to the contrary, he is honest enough to note features of other religions that tempt him—Gandhi's relentless pursuit of religious synthesis, Vajrayana Buddhism's discipline of sitting in meditation for an hour or two each day, Muslim validation of Jesus compared to Christian failure to know Muhammad's strengths.

In the final chapter, Amir Hussain explains why he is a Muslim, why he believes that the Qur'an is "the very word of God" (329). Born into a Sunni family in Pakistan, Hussain grew up as a religious and national minority in Canada before moving to the United States in 1997 to teach. He was married several years to a believer who lived within a Christian framework that enabled him to claim his Muslim themes of love, mercy, peace, justice, and compassion. Such plural vision enables contrapuntal being, he says.

I recommend this book for seminary students and ministers as well as for Anabaptists intent on forming new communities. Being informed, committed, and loyal believers in our multifaith world matters, and many individuals within communities of Anabaptists, as part of Christianity, wish to be more duly informed about people loyal to diverse paths of wholeness or salvation.

Anabaptists who want to be faithful followers of Jesus must take seriously his prime emphasis on knowing, proclaiming, and patterning the One Compassionate Universal God. This will lead to becoming inclusive of difference, to being committed to specific religious understandings while valuing those who express sacred belief in diverse ways. That task involves being grateful for Divine love for all peoples who live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.

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**Charles E. Moore and Timothy Keiderling, eds., *Bearing Witness: Stories of Martyrdom and Costly Discipleship,* Plough, Walden, New York, 2016. 226 pp. $14.00. ISBN 13: 978-087486-704-6.**

While it is no secret that Anabaptists have a complex relationship to the martyrdoms of the sixteenth century, the connection to persecution and martyrdom has not been as well documented in succeeding centuries. *Bearing Witness: Stories of Martyrdom and Costly Discipleship* attempts to provide a more comprehensive narrative with a global perspective on Christian persecution, particularly for those who proclaimed principles of nonviolence. Ably edited by Charles E. Moore and Timothy Keiderling, the book draws together pieces from a variety of sources to tell compelling stories that expand the narrative of those who have endured suffering for the sake of the gospel.

This book is not a collection of primary sources but rather contains retellings of stories either from historical sources or first-person interviews. Each of the narratives is accessible to a wide range of readers—from those casually interested in Anabaptism or Christian martyrdom to those who study the subject from an academic perspective. The book follows a chronological arrangement with four parts. The first two parts focus on accounts with which many readers may be familiar, including stories of persecution from the early church period, radical reformers, and many well-known martyrs like Stephen, Polycarp, and Perpetua. From the early modern period, the Anabaptist and Radical Reformation martyrs Weynken Claes, Anna Janz, and Dirk Willems will be familiar to the presumed audience. It is important to note, however, that the editors include not only Anabaptists but also William Tyndale and Jan Hus, again exemplifying an attempt to demonstrate the scope of martyrdom and persecution during these time periods.

Part Three of the text focuses on early modern witnesses beyond the immediate Reformation era of the sixteenth century, particularly in transatlantic and global perspective. This section stretches the early modern period into the first half of the twentieth century, including those who suffered during the World Wars at the hands of a variety of power structures. As such, it demonstrates the ongoing problem of persecution, particularly for those who composed minority groups, whether Mennonites in Russia, Moravians in the Virgin Islands, or Hutterites in America. This section indicates that while martyrdom of individuals happened, the suffering involved in these martyring incidents often extended far beyond an immediate individual to encapsulate whole communities that experienced lasting trauma. These events, however, also strengthened the community's witness and resolve to remain nonviolent in the face of persecution.

The final section of the book examines more recent witnesses from the mid-twentieth century to the present, again from a global perspective that includes stories from eastern Europe, Africa, South America, and the United States. These stories often demonstrate the challenges of living as part of a minority

Christian population. The accounts demonstrate what happens when Christian communities encounter challenging political or religious authorities who find their nonviolent witness upsetting to social structures. While many of these stories focus on individuals—such as Richard and Sabina Wurmbrand, Samuel Kakesa, and Katherine Wu—the inclusion of particular groups, such as the Meserete Kristos Church and the Ekklesiar Yan'uwa a Nigeria, demonstrate that not only individuals but also entire groups have suffered for their nonviolent Christian beliefs and practices.

The book has an accompanying website, *Bearing Witness Stories Project*, which can be accessed at https://martyrstories.org. While the website has not been updated regularly in recent years, it contains a variety of resources that expand on additional martyr and persecution stories, both historical and contemporary. Of particular note is a collection of recordings made at the Mennonite World Conference Assembly (Harrisburg, PA) in 2016 (https://martyrstories.org/category/interviews/) in which Mennonites told stories of their own experiences of persecution from all over the world. These recordings provide insight into the ways that peacemaking and nonviolence have continued to pose countercultural threats to other religious and political authorities. This resource provides additional tools that remind Christians, particularly in the United States, that persecution continues in other parts of the world on a regular basis.

Anabaptists in recent years have posed many questions about the continuing way that martyrologies have shaped Anabaptist identities, whether they actually glorify violence and whether they promote a sense of victimization while stigmatizing the descendants of those who were involved in the persecution. These are all important questions for reflection as we employ these stories in our ministry contexts. I teach a class that focuses on how to read historical primary source texts. One text I consistently use is *Martrys Mirror*.[1] The last time I taught the course, a student living in Nigeria reflected on how difficult those texts were for her to read. For her, they were not texts from distant times and places but stories that closely resembled the current, often violent, persecution and displacement of her EYN[2] brothers and sisters at the hands of Boko Haram. Her reaction should alert us to the importance of context and how these stories impact readers in complex ways. While many of these stories seem far removed from the firsthand experiences of American and Canadian Anabaptists, for Christians in other parts of the world these stories form a living and breathing encouragement to continue to live their convictions faithfully and accept the risks of a nonviolent way of life.

*Bearing Witness* is a useful collection of biographical and group narratives that can enrich sermon preparation or teaching ministries in the academy or

1 Thieleman J. van Braght, ed., *Martyrs Mirror: The Story of Seventeen Centuries of Christian Martyrdom, from the Time of Christ to A.D. 1660* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1938).

2 Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria.

congregational settings. While the website could use further updates to reflect the ongoing issues of persecution, the written collection and website cover a broad time frame and convincingly make the case that nonviolent followers of Jesus have frequently suffered. This collection makes an accessible contribution to the available literature on martyrs from a particularly Anabaptist perspective.

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