
An Indian Response: “Anthropology, Mission, and the Weight of Insecurity”

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In their 2000 essay “Anabaptist Missiology: Anthropological Perspectives,” J. Stanley and Delores Friesen described how anthropology helped Anabaptist missions engage culture. They showed how it encouraged missionaries to recognize cultural difference, question assumptions of superiority, and pay attention to power within mission relationships. They looked toward a future in which leadership would be transferred to local churches, missionary control would decrease, and partnerships between churches would grow stronger. They hoped that these changes would slowly ease tensions inherited from colonial mission structures and allow indigenous churches to grow in confidence, agency, and discernment.

This essay revisits that vision from the Indian Anabaptist context. The main argument here is that while Friesen and Friesen emphasized the value of anthropology in revealing cultural blind spots and power dynamics, their framework did not address how leadership transfer unfolds in contexts marked by long histories of inequality, trauma, and low institutional trust. In such settings, responsibility is often transferred before communities have enough time or security to heal, build trust, develop theological depth, and form stable patterns of shared leadership. Instead of reducing power differences, early transfer under insecure conditions can create new patterns of fear, control, silence, and status-seeking within church life.

From the Indian Anabaptist experience, anthropology must therefore attend not only to culture and mission relationships, but also to how insecurity and social aspiration reshape authority, discernment, and peace witness over time.

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The sections that follow examine how these dynamics have shaped Indian Anabaptist churches. These reflections are offered as an extension of Friesen and Friesen's questions, seen from a context where the consequences of mission transition are still a part of everyday church life.

Premature Transfer of Power Under Conditions of Insecurity

Leadership transfer in Indian Anabaptist churches did not happen slowly or through careful planning. In the mid-1970s, many missionaries were required to leave India with little warning. As a result, Indian churches suddenly received full responsibility for leadership. The churches also inherited mission-established institutions such as schools, hospitals, land, and administrative structures, with little time to receive the spiritual and administrative training required to manage them.

Mission work had developed within a particular operating culture where missionaries had the central role. They often acted as stabilizing figures in church and institutional life. Their presence provided continuity, access to resources, and external authority. Even though power differences were present, the system relied heavily on missionaries to manage problems, resolve conflict, and hold institutions together.

Indian Christians often related to missionaries with a high level of trust. This trust was shaped not only by personal relationships, but also by social hierarchy. In Indian society, trust is directed upward—toward those seen as powerful, resourceful, educated, or connected to global systems. Caution is common toward peers or those of lower status. As outsiders with authority and resources, missionaries naturally received this upward trust.

When missionaries left, Indian churches were expected to manage the same institutions without this stabilizing presence. Many Anabaptist communities had strong faith and local leadership experience. However, they had limited experience in managing large institutions, working with legal systems, or exercising administrative authority. Leadership responsibility expanded suddenly, even while confidence, trust, and institutional skill were still developing.

This transition occurred within the context of low institutional trust and centuries-long histories of caste-based insecurity. Conversion to Christianity often offered dignity and belonging to marginalized communities. However, it did not quickly heal patterns of silence before authority, avoidance of risk, and fear of speaking openly. These patterns remained present within church life.

Before such insecurity could be addressed through formation and healing, leadership responsibility had already shifted, and as a result the growth of security and identity within the church remained stunted. Authority had to be exercised before confidence was built. Leaders made decisions quickly and under pressure, often with serious consequences for institutional survival. Under these

conditions, trust-based leadership and communal discernment, which are central to Anabaptist life, were difficult to sustain.

Indigenization did take place, but it happened under urgency rather than preparation. This shaped long-term leadership patterns. Authority became protective, not participatory and collaborative. Stability was valued over openness, and control replaced shared discernment. Yet these patterns should not be seen as moral failures. They reflect leadership formed under conditions of insecurity, where sudden responsibility met existing hierarchical trust.

Power, Resources, and the Search for Security

The changes described above did not end with the transfer of leadership. They were shaped further by how power and security are understood in Indian society. In this context, power is rarely abstract or neutral. It is closely connected to visible signs of stability such as wealth, land, education, and control over institutions. These signs influence how authority is recognized and trusted, both in society and within church life.

Wealth is often understood not only as economic capacity, but also as a sign of competence and legitimacy. Those with resources are assumed to be capable leaders, while poverty is linked with vulnerability and limited voice. This way of thinking influences how leadership is understood within churches.

Land and institutions carry particular importance. Mission-established schools, hospitals, churches, and offices introduced land ownership and infrastructure into Indian Anabaptist life. These institutions served important social purposes and became visible signs of the church's contribution to education, health care, and public welfare. They also offered a sense of stability and shared dignity to communities that had long been denied security and recognition.

Over time, however, managing these institutions required regular engagement with legal systems, financial regulations, and government authorities. Those who could navigate these systems gained influence and respect. Gradually, leadership authority became closely tied to the ability to protect and manage land and institutions in a difficult and hostile environment. In this setting, protecting property came to be understood as protecting the church itself. Administrative skill became a key measure of leadership strength. The loss of land or institutions was experienced not only as organizational failure, but as a threat to community dignity and survival. Stability therefore began to carry moral weight and shaped how decisions were defended.

Education also became an important marker of authority, but its meaning was shaped by history. For centuries, marginalized communities had been denied access to education. Through mission work, education reached these groups for the first time. While access to education created new possibilities, learning has often been understood mainly as a means of survival—necessary

for employment and economic security. Habits of learning for reflection, questioning, and self-understanding take longer to develop. As a result, theological learning remains fragile, not because of weak faith, but because education itself is still shaped by survival needs.

Other forms of security further shaped leadership. Government employment offered stable income and familiarity with bureaucratic systems, which carried social respect in uncertain settings. Formal theological education also carried authority, especially when linked to recognized credentials. Many leaders were trained in non-Anabaptist seminaries that emphasized professional expertise and hierarchical leadership, influencing church practices over time.

These forms of security were not harmful in and of themselves. However, in fragile contexts they unintentionally concentrated authority among those with access to resources, education, and systems of power. Therefore, leadership became cautious and protective, while practices of shared discernment and mutual accountability became harder to observe. As a result, Anabaptist practices such as collective decision-making and communal discernment were weakened. Questioning decisions related to institutions, finances, or property felt risky, especially when stability appeared threatened.

Shrinking Moral and Theological Space

The growing focus on protecting resources and institutions did not happen by itself. It developed at the same time that Christians were slowly losing space to speak and act freely in public life. Missionaries and Christian institutions were closely linked to education, health care, and service among poor and marginalized communities. Schools and hospitals helped create a positive public image of Christianity. Churches were seen as supporting social development rather than threatening social order. This moral standing gave Christians some freedom to speak publicly about ethics, justice, and peace.

During this period, Anabaptist commitments—especially nonviolence—also found support in Indian society. The freedom struggle led by M. K. Gandhi gave moral value to nonviolence, sacrifice, and resistance without force. In this setting, Anabaptist peace convictions were not easily dismissed. Speaking about peace was understood as serious moral thought rather than weakness.

Over time, however, this moral space became smaller. Political narratives began to value strength, control, and dominance. Power came to be understood mainly in terms of authority and force. As a result, nonviolence appeared impractical or unrealistic, and peace-based traditions slowly lost public credibility.

At the same time, Christian institutions came under increasing suspicion. Activities once seen as service were now viewed through political and ideological lenses. Public trust declined as cases of moral failure, misuse of power, and lack of accountability within Christian institutions became visible. Christianity's

moral authority weakened not only because of outside pressure, but also because churches began to reflect the same hierarchies and compromises found in wider society.

This shrinking space was also present within Indian Christianity itself. Churches established during the colonial period often drew members from educated and socially elite groups. Over time, these churches gained greater public confidence and theological influence, and their traditions came to be seen as mainstream. In contrast, many Anabaptist churches—formed through missionary humanitarian work—were made up of people from economically and socially marginalized communities. This created a hierarchy within Indian Christianity, where some churches carried more theological influence than others.

Within this hierarchy, Anabaptist theology held a fragile position. While practices such as community life and service were partly accepted, key convictions—such as nonviolence, separation of church and state, and resistance to Christian nationalism—remained marginal. These commitments were often seen as politically risky or theologically weak when compared with traditions more closely connected to power and public influence.

This weakness was strengthened by limited theological formation. Although Anabaptist leaders from outside India often visited for seminars and workshops, much was lost in translation—linguistic, cultural, and contextual. Short-term visits rarely led to theological grounding. In the same way, although some Indian Anabaptists were supported for theological study abroad, only a few returned to serve long-term in Indian churches. Among those who did return, some were not given space to lead because their education was seen as a threat to existing leadership. Others, due to financial pressure and lack of stable support, were pushed toward more secure employment.

As a result, sustained teaching of Anabaptist theology remained limited. Anabaptist convictions did not disappear, but they began being expressed in private rather than in public. Peace witness turned inward and became cautious. Silence grew, not only because of political pressure, but also because churches lacked the ability to reflect and teach theology over time.

Insecurity and the Quiet Reshaping of Anabaptist Identity

As moral credibility declined and political suspicion increased, Indian Anabaptist churches entered a period marked by uncertainty and fear. Christian institutions came under closer public and administrative attention. Structures once seen mainly as signs of service began to be viewed as potential sources of risk.

Experiences of pressure, however, have not been the same across Christian communities. Established Mennonite churches, especially those with long-standing buildings used openly for worship, have generally not faced direct violent persecution. For Mennonite churches, pressure is largely indirect and

administrative. Foreign funding is tightly regulated, and even small errors in audits or reporting can result in the loss of government authorization to receive overseas donations. In addition, church-owned land that is not actively used—often land inherited from mission history—faces the risk of government scrutiny or seizure. As a result, fear in these churches is shaped less by physical violence and more by legal vulnerability, financial compliance, and the possibility of institutional loss.

In contrast, violent persecution is more common among newer churches and house churches, especially in rural and remote areas, often started through evangelistic movements of other Christian groups. These churches are frequently made up of economically poor, less educated, and socially vulnerable believers. They face social boycott, intimidation, false complaints, and at times physical violence. These experiences are often local and informal, but they produce lasting fear.

Although constitutional protections for worship remain, enforcement at the local level is uneven. House churches in particular live with constant uncertainty. Fear of complaints, or of sudden disruption, shapes everyday church life. In such settings, decisions are often guided more by risk than by theological reflection. Survival becomes a central concern.

Because of these pressures, many newer churches seek protection by associating themselves with older and more established churches. These churches often have legal recognition, institutional experience, and familiarity with government systems. Extending such protection involves real risk, but it also reflects genuine care and solidarity. These arrangements bring immediate benefits: Newer churches gain legitimacy and a sense of safety, while older churches offer hospitality to vulnerable communities.

At the same time, these relationships are usually formed out of urgency rather than shared theological vision. The primary concern is protection, not formation. As a result, little space exists for theological conversation, communal discernment, or reflection on church identity. Differences in belief and practice often remain unexamined.

Over time, this situation quietly reshapes Anabaptist identity. Practices such as nonviolence, shared leadership, and communal discernment receive less attention than institutional stability and legal compliance. Leadership tends to become more centralized, and caution often replaces participation. This shift does not happen through a deliberate rejection of Anabaptist theology. It grows out of fear and pressure, where survival takes priority over formation; it develops slowly under conditions of fear, pressure, and the need to survive.

At the same time, identity is driven not only by fear but also by social aspiration. Many Mennonite missions were originally rooted in remote regions through humanitarian work. Today, younger generations move to cities for higher

education and employment. In urban settings, church belonging is often shaped more by visibility, size, and perceived success than by theological conviction.

As a minority tradition rooted largely among marginalized communities, the Anabaptist church often carries limited social status. In a society shaped by aspiration, many Christians are drawn to leaders and churches that represent higher social or economic standing. Popular and highly visible churches appear more attractive than smaller traditions shaped by service and discipleship. As a result, credibility is measured through class, education, or public visibility rather than by shared theological convictions.

A Theological Question: Faithfulness Under Conditions of Insecurity

The dynamics described above raise a theological question for Anabaptist churches in India. They also show why Friesen and Friesen's anthropological concerns remain relevant twenty-five years later. They warned that power, resources, and institutional structures would continue to shape authority even after mission leadership was transferred. The Indian experience shows that these tensions did not disappear; they were internalized within the life of the church itself.

Churches in the Global South are often encouraged to learn from the first-century church and from the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, who also lived in vulnerable communities. Indian Anabaptist churches value this heritage and desire to follow these models. However, the comparison has limits. Unlike those earlier communities, Indian Anabaptist churches inherited institutions that require ongoing engagement with legal systems, political authorities, and public regulation. Because of this, the church's relationship to power is not only one of vulnerability, but also of administration.

At the same time, these institutions emerged within communities shaped by long historical insecurity. Leadership responsibility was transferred before trust and formation could mature. Over time, authority became closely linked to resources, education, and institutional protection. As public moral space narrowed and social aspiration increased, stability and credibility began to be valued more than vulnerability and shared discernment.

Taken together, these conditions raise a deeper question: What happens to Anabaptist ecclesiology when insecurity, institutional responsibility, and the search for legitimacy together shape how authority is exercised? When survival depends on protecting resources, maintaining public credibility, and navigating legal systems, how can practices of shared leadership, communal discernment, mutual accountability, and peace witness be sustained?

The question is therefore not simply whether institutions are good or bad. It is whether faithfulness to Christ can remain rooted in vulnerability and communal

obedience when the church must also act as an administrative and protective body. Faithfulness in such a context may lie in learning how to exercise necessary authority without allowing insecurity, resources, or the search for legitimacy to quietly redefine the life of the church.

Conclusion: Continuing the Conversation Faithfully

Friesen and Friesen's essay continues to speak meaningfully twenty-five years later. The Indian Anabaptist experience helps explain why the tensions they identified—around power, partnership, peace witness, and discernment—have not disappeared.

Histories of caste exclusion created deep insecurity. Leadership responsibility was transferred before healing and formation were complete. Over time, wealth, land, education, and institutions became tied to dignity and authority. As moral credibility narrowed, political suspicion grew, and legal vulnerability shaped fear. At the same time, social aspiration and migration reshaped how authority and theological voice were recognized.

This essay does not seek to correct Friesen and Friesen. It extends their questions from a context where mission transition did not remove power tensions but relocated them within the church itself. It suggests that anthropology must attend not only to cultural difference in mission, but also to how insecurity and aspiration reshape authority, silence, and theological formation within the church.

If anthropology is to serve Anabaptist mission in India today, it must take these realities seriously. It must examine how institutional inheritance, legal vulnerability, and social aspiration shape the exercise of authority and the internal life of churches. At the same time, anthropology must help communities name these dynamics honestly—how fear and insecurity reorganize power, and how the search for legitimacy reshapes identity.

Only then can churches begin to discern how practices of shared leadership, communal listening, and peace witness may be sustained within the structures they have inherited. Such renewal will not be quick. Yet it may be through this slow process that the church learns again how to follow Christ faithfully under conditions of insecurity.