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CANADIAN MENNONITE

SEPTEMBER 2024

EXIT



INTERVIEWS

IN SEARCH OF HEALING, WHOLENESS AND GOD

An olive branch to conservatives

WILL BRAUN



I recently saw a guy in the grocery store who used to attend the same church as me. I had heard he now frequents a church my liberal friends find too showy. I've wondered why he left,

but I didn't say: "No pressure, but I'm curious about your decision to leave. And how are things working out?"

I was scared to risk awkwardness.

From the other side of that dynamic, I know well the experience of leaving a church and living with painful loose ends.

In the feature section of this issue, we attend to voices of those who have left a church or are part of a church that has left a denominational body. Why listen to those who leave?

First, in an age of division, listening is one of few constructive responses. Second, I want people who may have the urge to leave now to know their voices count. Third, just like a business or NGO, we can become stronger by learning from people who walk out the door. Exit interviews are good practice, even if they are awkward.

My wish was to hear specifically from people who have left Mennonite Church Canada toward the conservative end. Regrettably, we did not compile as many of those voices as I had wished.

Still, I am grateful for the ones we have—Brent Kipfer of Maple View Mennonite Church, which joined the Mennonite Brethren (MB) conference; Charlotte and Ernie Wiens, who also joined the MBs, though for different

reasons; and Wally and Waltrude Gortzen, who left a Mennonite Church B.C. congregation.

I thank these people for sharing.

Our rationale for wanting to focus specifically on conservative exiters is that over the past two decades, MC Canada has become significantly more liberal. Our institutions lean increasingly left, with some outliers.

As room for liberals has increased, space for conservatives has shrunk. Many conservatives have left or now keep their heads down.

Other people have left on the liberal end, and some people in our pews today believe the church is still shamefully conservative.

Of course, a certain number of people and churches join MC Canada as well. By our count, 24 churches have joined since 2019 (page 24). A few come from more conservative denominations. Many are new churches from diaspora communities who may see tensions between progressive and conservative views differently.

While I tilt liberal myself—though I'm a disillusioned liberal—I lament the loss of conservatives and the corresponding loss of that diversity within MC Canada. Though it may seem convenient when people with different views go elsewhere, the gain is far outweighed by the loss. We are poorer for the departure of these people. It is a wound to the body of Christ—one for which we all bear responsibility.

Too often, *Canadian Mennonite* magazine has contributed to reducing space for conservatives. Too many stories have assumed a progressive

audience and not acknowledged a range of views. Surely some readers have felt excluded.

Unfortunately, many of those people will not hear this because they have left or tuned us out. To the remaining conservatives I say: Hold us accountable to a standard of diversity that includes you.

The diversity within MC Canada is staggering. Very few conglomerations of people within Canadian society are made up of young and old, rural and urban, liberal and conservative, newcomer and established Canadians, blue collar and white collar. This breadth is a vulnerability, but surely it is also an invaluable gift.

We are perfectly positioned to be an ever-so-desperately-needed witness to the power of humility and unity.

I am willing to take communion beside someone who is gay and someone who thinks homosexuality is a sin, the woman at the well and a imperialistic Roman centurion, an MB and a proud progressive. It's not that I think truth is relative or ethics don't matter; I'm just not sure the shortcomings of others are worse than mine.

A secret spiritual practice of mine is to watch people I find difficult take communion. They partake of the same loaf and cup. No lightning strikes any of us.

It softens my heart. It makes me more open to hear their story. It makes me more open to God.

Listening to people who have left has a similar effect on me. I pray it does for you as well. ●

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PHOTO: (TOP) MANKI KIM/UNSPLASH



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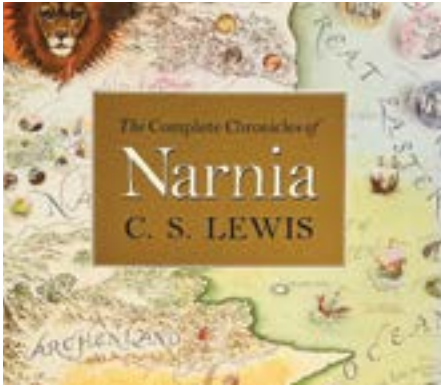
Stephen Kennedy reports on the trip Avon Mennonite youth took to Montreal.

About the cover Photo: Josh Sorenson/Pexels

See masthead on page 39.



What in the World



Pope promotes poetry

In a July 17 letter, Pope Francis encouraged the reading of novels and poetry as part of the training of priests. In the letter, he quotes C.S. Lewis, Marcel Proust and T.S. Eliot. *Source: The Guardian*



Fasting in a land of plenty

An April study found that one in five Americans fast for religious reasons. This includes 80 percent of Muslims, 49 percent of Jews and 27 percent of Christians. *Source: Pew Research Center*
Photo: Rachael Gorjestani/Unsplash



PETA interrupts Pope

Two people from the animal rights group PETA disrupted a papal audience in Rome to call on Pope Francis to denounce bullfighting and to cut Church ties to the “blood sport.” According to PETA, tens of thousands of bulls are killed in bullfighting festivals annually, and many of these events are dedicated to Catholic saints.
Source: AP
Photo: WikiCommons

50 YEARS AGO

MENNONITE REPORTER, SEPTEMBER 2, 1974

Should women be ordained?

Should men?

The role of women in the church rated explicit agenda time on at least two conference floors this summer and the same concern was implicit on many more as the public consciousness is being sharpened continually by discussions both inside and outside the church.

Who is a minister of the good news anyway? Are not we all — all we who have entered a new life and accepted a higher purpose — as described and exemplified by one Jesus of Nazareth? Are we not together a priesthood, ordained to good works?

Have we not all received a commission to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, and to announce the year when the Lord will save his people?



Hospice for inmates

In response to reports of rising cases of Canadian inmates requesting medical assistance in dying, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Toronto is devoting \$15,000 toward hospice services for inmates with terminal illness. Their hope is that this care will reduce the number of people who choose MAID out of fear of dying alone.

Source: *Catholic Register*

Photo: Bret Kavanaugh/Unsplash



Moses meets *The Office*

A new TV show tells the story of Moses in the mockumentary style made famous by *The Office*. But *The Promised Land* does not mock Moses. Show creator Mitch Hudson, who graduated from Liberty University, wants the show to both entertain and make people re-read the stories of Moses. Source: *RNS*

Photo: The Promised Land Series FB



Rwanda shuts churches

Rwandan authorities have closed 5,600 churches and mosques that did not comply with a 2018 law requiring certain levels of training for clergy as well as basic hygiene and safety standards. The move walks a line between government overreach and taming the proliferation of churches that some say exploit poor people. Source: *RNS*

Photo: WikiCommons

Like other news sources, we present information because we deem it worthy of consideration, not because we necessarily agree with it. – Eds.



A moment from yesterday

In August 1970, Project Bridgebuilding brought Japanese youth to Winnipeg, where they lived with Mennonite families and toured sites in the area. Christian pacifist Dr. Gan Sakakibara wished to expose Japanese youth to the idea of “biblical non-resistance,” and enlisted the help of Mennonite Central Committee to create these tours.

Text: Laureen Harder-Gissing

Photo: The Canadian Mennonite/
Mennonite Archives of Ontario



archives.mhsc.ca

✉ Questions about MCC ethos

I appreciate *Canadian Mennonite's* reporting on the open letter from terminated Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) workers (“Involuntary,” July 2024). Well done.

When I first read the open letter, I was distraught, but I shouldn't have been; the appeal for accountability should be heard by leadership in all of our organizations. I've witnessed abrupt terminations in other Mennonite institutions and churches, carried out as if this was acceptable practice.

I have heard too many stories about traumatic dismissals, often without explanation or recourse. For the one so ignominiously dismissed, the wound is deep.

I speak from nine years of experience as country representative with MCC in Indonesia and Cambodia, and four years as the senior advisor for peacebuilding with World Vision Indonesia. I have also worked on a number of personnel policies, harmonizing them with national labour standards. I don't recall hearing about cases quite like those in the open letter.

In post-war Cambodia, MCC bent over backwards to support MCC workers in stressed situations. Area directors were caring and had a high regard for good process. Still, PTSD was always just around the corner.

It pains me particularly to learn about MCC workers in highly stressed conflict situations seemingly not being heard nor supported, and then dismissed while under duress.

I am offended that Anicka Fast and John Clarke were offered substantial sums of MCC constituency funds in exchange for signing a non-disclosure and non-disparagement agreement. They did not sign, choosing instead the path of holding MCC accountable.

While being interviewed for a position with MCC Canada, I was asked: “Would you be willing to fire someone?” The question disquieted me enough that I was relieved when I did not get the job.

Is MCC's ecclesial ethos being eroded by increasing dependence on a corporate personnel management culture in which expediency trumps respect for each volunteer and staff?

There is no place for heavy-handed, non-restorative HR practices. Otherwise, I'm concerned that distrust will creep in, and workers may begin looking over their shoulders. I dearly hope that the MCC organizational culture is not drifting away from the ecclesial identity upon which MCC was founded.

Thankfully, a majority of MCC workers have good experiences, but close attention needs to be paid to the hurting minority.

In my 25-plus years working with non-profits, I've come to the conclusion that an organization is only as healthy as its HR culture.

I wish MCC grace, wisdom and courage. I still have MCC in my heart.

– ALLEN HARDER, ABBOTSFORD, B.C.
(EMMANUEL MENNONITE CHURCH)

✉ Conflict v. abuse

In response to “MCC executive directors respond to concerns of former workers” (August 2024), yes, there is a difference between abuse and conflict. Conflict is a human constant; every organization has conflict. Abuse can happen in the context of conflict, particularly when the conflict is poorly understood and power imbalances are ignored.

The authors of the open letter named their experiences as abuse, based on established understandings of that term.

At this point, there are literally dozens of people alleging some experience of abusive treatment during their time working for Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). They use the term “abuse” because it is the most accurate term for the things they report having experienced and had reported to them. As of this writing, those reports encompass many forms of abuse, including sexual abuse.

I think these execs are trying to make readers (and donors) suspect that the writers of the open letter are overreacting, overstating the case and/or providing information that is not to be fully trusted.

All abuse allegations are complicated. It's part of the nature of abuse that it's hard to describe succinctly. This kind of both-side-ism in the face of abuse allegations is a way of vaguely casting doubt on people who do not have institutional power. But you don't have to fully understand everything going on to recognize a pattern when it's staring you in the face.

We've all seen what happens when leaders refuse to entertain the possibility that they have systemic problems with abuse, and I think that's what happening here, despite all the posturing. It doesn't end well for anyone. MCC deserves better.

– STEPHANIE KREHBIEL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, INTO ACCOUNT

✉ Public explanation please

As a former Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker, I am greatly concerned about the charges made against MCC concerning terminations (“MCC executive directors respond to concerns of former workers,” August 2024). Of course, MCC will have its own version of events, but the charges are serious and deserve a public explanation.

Most alarming are the non-disclosure agreements (NDAs). It seems that MCC has adopted some of the worst policies of secular business. It appears the approach is less about mediation or reconciliation than: “Take the money and keep quiet.”

How does this possibly fit with Christian ethics, let alone Mennonite principles? I suspect the NDA issue alone will cost MCC millions in lost donations.

– DAVID NICHOL, SUDBURY, ONTARIO

✉ Saddened

I have rarely read an article that disappointed or saddened me as much as “MCC executive directors respond to concerns of former workers” (August 2024). Seven individuals who committed years of their lives to the work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) wrote an open letter talking about their suffering, pain and trauma (“Involuntary,” July 2024). They were courageous enough to be vulnerable and cite specific examples from their experiences. And the article of response does not even acknowledge their pain or express sorrow and compassion for their ongoing suffering.

I see MCC as an arm of the church. If we as church cannot show compassion for those we hurt, we are guilty of trying to take the specks out of others’ eyes while ignoring the log in our own.

To the authors of the open letter, I am sorry that we as the larger church have not been there when you needed support, compassion and understanding.

– PAM DRIEDGER (ONLINE COMMENT)

✉ Calgary Inter-Mennonite update

The article “From ‘the centre of the military universe’ to central Alberta” (May 2024) resonated with us. It was interesting to read about Debbie Bledsoe’s journey, which culminated in her finding an affirming congregation in Edmonton.

This story reminded us of the step in the journey that our church, Calgary Inter-Mennonite, took in 1997 when we not only became affirming but also formally joined the Supportive Congregations Network, a program of Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests.

However, our decision was problematic for the three conferences to which we belonged: Northwest Mennonite Conference Alberta, Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches and Mennonite Church Alberta. Over the course of a painful nine-year process, all three revoked our membership.

At the time, one of our members said that in 20 years this would not be an issue in many Canadian Mennonite congregations. It is encouraging to note that this is beginning to happen, with the knowledge that change takes time.

It appears that, in recent years, some Mennonite churches have become affirming without negative consequences to their relationships with their conferences. Edmonton First Mennonite Church’s affirmation of Debbie and her wife, Emily, demonstrates a greater inclusivity for those who identify as LGBTQ in Alberta Mennonite congregations.

We are updating *Canadian Mennonite* readers that our congregation continues to grow around spiritual and social justice concerns, including affirmation of, and solidarity with, LGBTQ persons. Their presence and participation as members in our faith community have been enriching and enlightening.

– BRENDA DYCK, EVELYN NEUMANN, LINDA SHANTZ-KERESZTES (CALGARY INTER-MENNONITE CHURCH)

Be in Touch

• Send letters to letters@canadianmennonite.org. Our mailing address is on page 39.

✉ **Growth can solve poverty**

I read Zach Rempel's article, "A recipe to reverse the economy" (August 2024), with great interest. I, too, believe that doing more with less is important. For my wife and I, living simply meant raising our family on one income, owning only one car and living in a relatively small house.

(I did, however, get tired of hearing from my environmentalist friends, with their two cars, two incomes and large homes, how my views on carbon emissions were wrong.)

I live in the business world, and in that world doing more with less is an everyday goal. Keeping input costs low is pursued daily. In most industries, labour is the highest input cost, so we must get as much production as possible to keep prices competitive.

Before you condemn the business world for trying to make labour as productive as possible by increasing energy consumption, I ask you this: Do you have an electric coffee grinder? Grinding your coffee manually would save electricity, which in much of the world is produced with fossil fuel. To save labour you use cheap energy.

However, cheap energy is not available in many countries. According to the UN, 2.7 billion people cook with wood, charcoal, animal dung or other biofuels, and smoke from indoor cooking fires contributes to an estimated 3 million deaths annually. Meanwhile, 22 percent of the global population lacks basic sanitation.

Do I support degrowth? No. I want massive economic growth so we can solve some of these issues. We know how to do it. Increasing food production, providing cleaner and cheaper energy to those who cook on open fires, and providing sanitation will require huge economic growth in much of the world.

Once these goals have been reached, we will be able to make real progress on the environment. We can do it not by making everyone poorer, but by making the whole world much richer. This is the good story we need to tell our children.

– JIM PETERS, WINNIPEG

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✉ Imagine degrowth

I appreciated Zach Rempel's piece on degrowth ("A recipe to reverse the economy," August 2024).

I stumbled on the topic early this summer, and rediscovered hope for our future in *Less is More*, by economic anthropologist Jason Hickel.

At first glance, degrowth sounds scary, especially if we think it will be akin to the unplanned economic contractions we have experienced. But, with forethought and political will, our governments could thoughtfully examine which industries we want to grow because they promote the well-being of human beings and the ecosphere, and which ones should be scaled down because they are environmentally costly and do not contribute to human flourishing.

Imagine an alternative world. After governments divested from industries that foul our environment and create wasteful products that people don't need, workers from those sectors could be redeployed to the sectors we want to expand, particularly public services such as education, health, housing and transportation. Care for elders and other family members, traditionally undertaken by women, could become valued, paid work.

Once we disincentivized housing as an investment

commodity, and invested in more public housing, marginalized populations could be housed.

The normal work week could be reduced to 28 hours. With more leisure time, we could have more time to cook, play with children, visit friends.

Our minds have been colonized by economic growth dogma that says, I consume, therefore I am. Let the Holy Spirit blow through us and sweep out the cobwebs of old thinking so a new path forward can emerge. Let's be part of the movement to make more-with-less living visible and appealing to our society. Let's talk in our congregations about how we can reduce our consumption individually and collectively. And let's press our leaders to give up the fable that GDP is a proxy for human happiness.

– JULIE ARMES, KITCHENER, ONTARIO
(STIRLING AVENUE MENNONITE CHURCH)

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- **Funding Congregational Ministry after COVID-19**
Thursday, Oct. 10
7-8:30 p.m. | *Instructor: Phil Waite*
- **Pastoral Care for Survivors of Sexual Abuse**
Tuesdays, Oct. 15 – Nov. 19
7-8:30 p.m. | *Instructor: Deborah Byler*
- **Seeking Repair with Indigenous Communities**
Tuesdays, Nov. 5, 12, 19, 26
7-8:30 p.m. | *Instructor: Katerina Gea*



*All times are Eastern Time

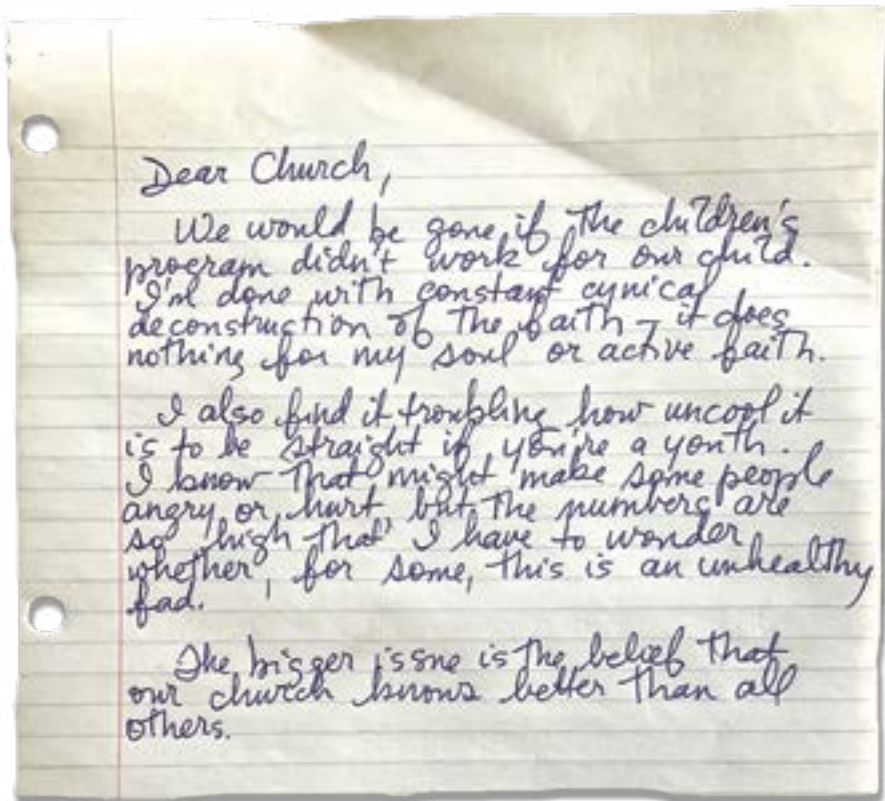
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 **Anabaptist Mennonite
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✉ **Dear Church**

We invited readers who have left a church or whose church left a conference to send a short letter to those who remain. Here is one such letter. More can be found at canadianmennonite.org/stories/dearchurch



CM **Milestones**

Births/Adoptions

Friesen Beatty—Samuel James (b. Jul 15, 2024), to Megan Friesen & Alec Beatty, Charleswood Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man.

Baptisms

Terry Penner—Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Abbotsford, BC, June 30, 2024.

Weddings

Morrow/Snyder—Shayne Morrow and Amanda Snyder, Breslau Mennonite Church, July 12, 2024, in Breslau, Ont.

Bretecher/Penner—Dakota Bretecher and Katherine Penner, Osler Mennonite Church, July 13, 2024, in Osler, Sask.

Deaths

Enns—Margaret (nee Bergen), 97 (b. June 15, 1927; d. July 19, 2024), Nutana Park Mennonite Church, Saskatoon, Sask.

Kroeker—John, 77 (b. Nov. 18, 1946; d. July 10, 2024), Niagara United Mennonite Church, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont.

Leis—Mervin, 92 (b. July 23, 1931; d. July 11, 2024), Crosshill Mennonite Church, Crosshill, Ont.

Postnikoff—Gertrude, 88 (b. 1936; d. July 20, 2024), Rosthern Mennonite Church, Rosthern, Sask.



Big tent, small centre

Shelby Boese

Here in British Columbia—the West of the West, where West and true East meet in North America—we sometimes tend to look more toward the traditionalist faith of the church in Asia than to the progressive, whiter, older Mennonite lands of eastern Canada.

We also continue to be influenced by the neo-reformed fundamentalism of our dear, and often directly related, Mennonite neighbours to the south.

In some ways, Mennonite Church B.C. is more like the new-Canadian congregations in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada than the Mennonite churches in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, although we do not have the deep white progressive history of the eastern and especially central Canadian churches.

This creates a complex, enmeshed web of needs, fears and opportunities for our churches and those who might come to give their allegiance to Christ through Mennonite Church Canada congregations.

But if Mennonite Church Canada seeks to become the major Anabaptist theological home for those looking to serve and live into following Jesus, we need to carefully consider paths that have been well worn by others.

One such path is that of the fundamentalist (largely neo-Reformed) resurgence. This route is tempting because it offers some quick “successes” by demonizing others and gobbling up older churches that have lost their sense of purpose. The problem is that it is generally toxic in its formational practices and blessing of patriarchy, among other things.

Another possible path is becoming “chaplain to the causes,” making our theology secondary to simplified cultural narratives. While the causes we work for may be worthy, this is a bland, generic, progressive,

neo-colonial, political repackaging, with hymns tacked on like a smear of Christ-flavoured peanut butter spread over the ideology. This approach also alienates most new-Canadian Christians who care more about theological matters.

Neither way is enough to fuel new life in our churches to become a growing movement. I think we have to choose otherwise.

Whatever way we choose, in our effort to become a vibrant network, I would implore our churches to consider prioritizing three elements.

Be Christ-centred

First, we need to put feet to unity, to be rooted in being Jesus-centred, and centre-set in how we handle disagreement. This requires that our activism—both left and right—be tempered by the self-sacrificial love displayed in Christ. We must ask better questions of the narratives we so easily let supplant the scandal of Jesus. We are too quick to claim the table-flipping narrative as the way to go about social (justice) and personal (formation) holiness.

If we’re seeking to make the tent bigger, we do so by making the centre smaller, in fact, centred on Jesus. We can move towards Jesus from opposite directions and find unity there. We can debate secondary doctrines and opinions if we have a defined centre. The old creeds are helpful for this work, too. We are not quirky Unitarians nor more-conservative-than-God fundamentalists; we are those who build on Jesus.

Form a people

Second, our task is to form new Anabaptist-movement Christians, *a people*, across Canada. We too easily forget that being an *ecclesia* is most fundamentally how we influence

persons and politics in a new way. Gathering around Jesus *is* a political act. This is an effective way to help others both be centred on Jesus and work for a life of reconciliation and peace.

When we close a church, do we prioritize starting new communities out of those ashes, or do we simply give away assets, as many churches across the country are doing? The people of the Anabaptist movement who carry forward our values into new generations will do far more for Jesus and justice than organizations committed to a smaller vision. Let us risk boldly to create new communities with our remaining resources, both churches for new Canadians and spaces for post-deconstruction, re-enchanted Christians who want to love Jesus.

Relearn practices

Third, building a growing movement might require our established communities, our churches, to consider outside assessments and coaching to relearn practices for forming and building a people. This requires radical humility and a teachable spirit. If we, the theological heirs of Anabaptism in Canada, do not relearn and re-contextualize deeply rooted discipleship/mentorship formational practices, who will? This is important because we have something to offer that secular justice organizations do not care about or understand.

Renewal is a work we enter into by cooperating with the Holy Spirit. Let us pray and work toward that renewal. ●



Shelby Boese lives in Langley, B.C., and serves as executive minister for Mennonite Church B.C. He can be reached at shelboese@mcbca.ca

Can't we all just get along?

Troy Watson

Are you losing hope in the possibility of everyone getting along?

Division in the church is nothing new for me. I grew up in a harsh, conservative fundamentalist church that judged everybody. Especially liberal Christians. In my early 20s, I became agnostic and relentlessly judgmental toward conservative Christians.

I returned to Christian faith and church in my late 20s after meeting some progressive liberal Christians. I found their focus on compassion, justice and peacemaking refreshing.

Over the past few years, however, I've observed the same judgmental and dogmatic spirit in the religious left. It's likely always been there, but I'm noticing it now.

The truth is that all human beings, whether we lean left or right, are hardwired for confirmation bias, ideological dogmatism, scapegoating and prejudicial attitudes toward people or groups we perceive to be threats to the well-being of those people and things we care about.

Recent research suggests that, just as we are born with certain physical and personality traits, we also come with an innate propensity to be liberal or conservative. Although we can learn to manage our predispositions, we can't change them. Liberals, for instance, tend to be more open-minded and creative, and to seek novelty and diversity. Conservatives tend toward lives, systems and structures that are more orderly, predictable, conventional and organized.

As the church, however, we're called to accept each other as we are. This means, in part, accepting our political and ideological differences. In theory,

this mutual acceptance and respect will empower us to work together for the greater good, allowing our differences to complement one another, rather than divide us.

This is easier said than done.

I've dedicated the past 20 years of my life to this vision. I believe it's what the Spirit has called me to do.

Yet I seem to be failing.

A few years ago, our church leadership discerned that we needed to be more explicit about being inclusive of all people. Since then, many of our more conservative members have left. They left for diverse and nuanced reasons, but the commonality is that those who left were more conservative.

Their departure was devastating for me, as these are people I respect and love. Some I've considered close friends.

It's been a very hard season for our church. This exodus has made me question my calling to create and nurture a church culture where all people—including conservative Christians—can experience belonging. I concluded the Spirit had given me an impossible task and I considered giving up.

Yet I haven't given up, for many reasons.

First, I know God has been known to do the impossible. I also realized I needed to surrender my expectations. The goal of ministry is not to produce a specific end result—it's to be faithful to God's calling. I've also been challenged and encouraged to learn and grow from my mistakes.

The gravest mistake we make as churches, pastors and Christians is allowing anything other than God to become our "god," our highest priority, ultimate concern and primary focus.

When we do this, we abandon the kingdom of God and instead take up residence in the realm of "isms"—dogmatism, tribalism, nationalism, progressivism, inclusivism, evangelicalism, conservatism, etc.

When anything other than the person and presence of our Creator becomes our highest priority, we need to recognize we have fallen into idolatry.

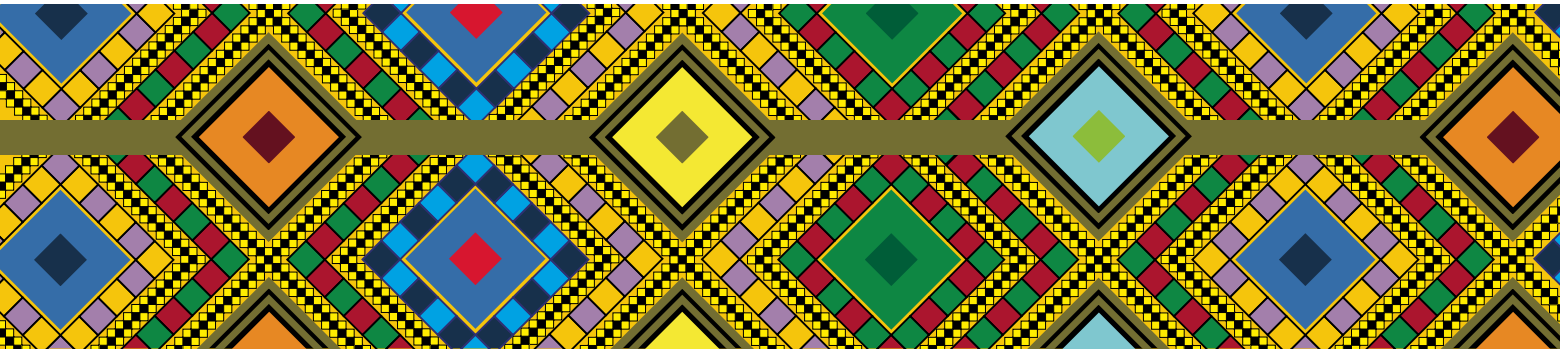
When good things like the truth, justice, peace, equality, morality or freedom become our god, that's when we find ourselves speaking and acting in the name of God in ways that are adversarial to God.

All human beings, including Christians, are "fallen," which means we're prone to worship and serve false gods. The only way to be liberated from our fallen programming is to allow the Spirit to continually renew our minds. Whether we're conservative or liberal, our minds need to be perpetually formed and reformed by the Spirit, because we're all constantly lured back into our default programming.

Our top priority must be tending to the presence and activity of the Spirit of Christ in our midst. For this, we need our mystics to disciple us more than ever, because nurturing our responsive awareness to God's presence is the only way we'll find hope for unity and reconciliation in the church. It's also how we'll embody this much needed hope for the rest of the world. ●



Troy Watson is a pastor at Avon Church in Stratford, Ontario. He can be reached at troy@avonchurch.ca.



Let's agree to disagree

Barbara Nkala

In my Zimbabwean African culture, elders are so revered that they are never seen as doing anything wrong. It is considered very rude to argue with one's elders, even when we are certain that they are incorrect. Young people must bow their heads and make peace by being acquiescent.

I vividly remember a time when my father and I had a serious disagreement. I was not prepared to concede what I believed was wrong or that it should be ignored. At first, my father was angry at what seemed to be insolence, but he tried to understand where I was coming from. Eventually, he put up his right hand and said, "Barba, let's agree to disagree!"

I liked that better than being shouted down. We remained a loving father and daughter. We were family. No disagreement would separate us nor make us enemies.

In life, we continually relate to those with whom we have differences. I have witnessed conflicts of values and interests in families, in communities and even in church. Other conflicts occur because of personality clashes.

I belong to a conservative evangelical church. Our congregation was established close to what was the one and only university in the country at the time. We met within the university campus chapel to cater to the students who came from the southwest and northwest of the country, where my church had roots.

A time came when the phenomenon of praying in tongues during mass prayer became prevalent in some congregations.

My congregation was not spared.

There are scriptures on praying in tongues, but this phenomenon arose out of a charismatic and Pentecostal influence, rather than our church doctrine.

A letter was quickly circulated from the bishop's office to curb this growing and unbecoming tendency. Praying in tongues and praying aloud in one accord had to stop until leadership in the church came up with a way forward concerning the phenomenon.

But the largest congregation in our country, whose pastor was well-respected, had been practicing praying in tongues, so many of us kept wondering how the leadership handled its concerns with that church.

This occurrence was a bother beyond our church denomination. At the time, I was working at a Bible translation organization where I engaged with many church leaders. I remember a day when I was in dialogue with different church leaders, all of whom had the same concern. One observed that young people had really "gone global" in the way they thought, spoke and dressed. There was some truth in that.

But then a second leader said, "I have ceased to worry about that. Remember the story in Acts 5:27–39 with a focus on

Gamaliel's wise counsel to the Sanhedrin who were plotting to kill the Apostles for preaching Christ: *'Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. . . . In the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.'*

I saw the wisdom in Gamaliel's words for our situation.

There always will be times in families and institutions when people don't see eye to eye. Still, people should be free and comfortable to express their opinions. Peace should be maintained by respecting other people's differences. We don't have to be heavy-handed or disdainful towards those we do not agree with. Christ hated the sin in us but loved us.

Like my father and me many years ago, in the church, we may have to agree to disagree and continue to keep good relations, as we are family. ●



Barbara Nkala is a writer, teacher, speaker and former Southern Africa regional representative for Mennonite World Conference (2016–2022). She is a member of the Brethren in Christ Church, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe.



ANIKA
REYNAR

DEEPER COMMUNION

Binding and loosing in an age of division

For the past three years, the United States has been my home, and in the U.S., division is impossible to ignore. Liberals on the left, conservatives on the right. Of course, Canada is not immune to these divisions, and neither is the church.

In this context, what hope does the church have of discerning the movement of God's Spirit? Apart from conservative and liberal, what options does the church have for recognizing the possibilities that emerge through our differences?

As I've looked for alternatives to line-in-the-sand divisions, I've found the biblical language of "binding" and "loosing" helpful.

In Jewish law, binding is the practice of moral discernment as communities negotiate their identity and define their boundaries. To loose is to free from obligation. A community practices loosing as it listens to new voices and allows its boundaries to shift.

Some Mennonite congregations are dedicated practitioners of binding, while others are experts at loosing. It's rare to find both practices in one place.

Both conservative and liberal individuals and congregations can be experts at binding. For example, conservative congregations have urged church leadership to maintain a definitive commitment to Scripture and *The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* on questions of sexuality. Liberal churches have urged change. In both cases, I've wondered if churches across the spectrum share the goal of creating or maintaining definitive boundaries for Mennonite

theological identity.

This temptation to bind is also a temptation to divide. Binding to a definitive understanding of Mennonite identity reinforces a view that unity is based on agreement. Those who disagree with the boundaries are pushed to leave and/or choose to leave the larger church.

The practice of loosing, in contrast, is more comfortable with ambiguous boundaries. Mennonite Church Canada has taken this approach in efforts to "create space" for congregations to "test alternative understandings" and follow the "nudging of the Spirit of God."

For me, the offering of this spaciousness brings some relief. At the same time, I recognize this loosing comes with its own danger. The temptation is to avoid conversations that engage difference. Instead, each congregation is encouraged to engage in ways that make sense for them, while allowing others to do the same.

This sort of tolerance comes with loss. By avoiding conversations that engage with difference, we lose the opportunities to learn from others who hold positions unlike our own.

When I imagine the sort of church I want to be part of, I imagine an ever-expanding community of people who are willing to practice binding *and* loosing.

What does this look like?

I think of my grandma, who, for the past 10 years, has faithfully emailed me every morning, except Sundays, with a verse of scripture. The emails always conclude with, "My love and prayers." I suspect she and I read many of these

scriptures differently, but interpretation is not what matters here. Rather, her emails invite me to bind myself to the faith tradition that reminds me that I am beloved and created by God.

When we are together, Grandma leans in, asking me questions about what I'm learning. As I speak, she creates space to receive my experience of faith, even when it differs from hers. My hope is that I also cultivate the ability to lean in to hear what is sacred in her experience.

When I think of the movement between binding and loosing, I see glimmers and moments that point to God's expansive goodness in community. When we believe that we have a definitive grasp on what is good, right and true, it's likely that the boundaries have become too rigid. Where the boundaries become rigid, we risk losing the creativity and energy at the edges of what we understand.

I like to think the church might be best characterized by a patient struggle to become attentive to the tensions, conflicts and glimmers that emerge in attempts to meet others at the edges of difference. In the political realm, unity is increasingly illusive. In the context of the church, however, we are instructed in our scriptures to strive for unity. In looking for glimmers of connection, I want to refuse the temptation to give up.

Where do you see glimmers of connection across difference? ●

Anika Reynar works in Boston as a facilitator and mediator in environmental disputes.



Tethered

I was so pleased to see Anika's reference to her grandmother's emails. My grandmother was also in the habit of emailing her entire family every day. She would include observations on the news, family updates, dates of significance (birthdays, anniversaries, etc.), Bible verses, even the occasional punchy exhortation.

Sometimes they were several paragraphs, sometimes only a sentence or two. Like Anika, I didn't see everything the same as my grandmother, but these little notes had the effect of binding me to a story that was broader and deeper and stronger than just my own.

My grandmother has been gone for several years. I miss her emails, not just for the reminders, updates and connections, but also because she kept us tethered to a particular way of inhabiting faith and of living in the world. Her faith wasn't perfect (none of ours is!), but it was strong, durable, resilient and joyful, often in the face of difficulties that I could barely imagine.

When I was younger, I sometimes found myself thinking, "Oh Grandma, you may not be as right as you think on that one." As the years went by, it increasingly became, "Oh Ryan, your grandmother might have more to teach you than you think." ●

– Ryan Dueck, pastor at Lethbridge (Alberta) Mennonite Church



Glimmer

At the height of the pandemic, one of my dear friends became convinced that vaccines were a means of government control and did enormous damage to our bodies. By contrast, I understood (and understand) vaccines, not as a panacea, but as a calculated risk we take for the common good. The public conversation in 2022 was profoundly polarized, but this friend and I managed to have several frank discussions rooted in our shared faith and mutual love. These conversations were a gift, showing me how unity could be interwoven with attention to conflict and difference. It was a glimmer of connection across difference.

In many ways, I have found that relationship more reassuring than friendships where we shy away from discussing the tensions we suspect exist between us.

Of course, not every moment or relationship requires us to excavate the depths of our differences, but to build true and fulsome unity—in friendship, in marriage, in community, and certainly in church—we need to tell each other the truth of where our hearts and minds both converge and diverge.

This way of loving and knowing each other is hard and countercultural, but, in my experience, it is also profoundly life-giving. ●

– Cindy Wallace, professor of English at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan



History

"What options does the church have for recognizing the possibilities that emerge through our differences?" This insightful question from Anika is one I believe all Christians must ask of ourselves and our communities.

It is also a question Christians can ask of history.

My mind goes to the US civil rights movement—(Christian) segregationists fighting against Black rights and personhood. Or the Stonewall riots—the culmination of decades of violence against gay people in New York, supported by Christians. There are the anti-war protests of the early 2000s—divisive in churches even among those who, like me, barely remember it.

In these moments, something was asked of people with differences, including many in churches. Who would they be in the face of racism, homophobia, or war? Who or what would they unite with, and how? What could come from deep division?

If the church is to be characterized by patient struggle with difference for the sake of the other, may it also learn to recognize the movement of God's Spirit to break the roots of division and idealized uniformity and instead to grow toward a real, expansive goodness for all. ●

– Justin Sun, youth pastor at Peace Mennonite Church, Richmond, B.C.



EXIT INTERVIEWS

IN SEARCH OF HEALING, WHOLENESS AND GOD

Sometimes, people leave churches and churches leave denominational bodies. Though these departures can be messy, surely God is present amid whatever differences, discord or hurt may exist.

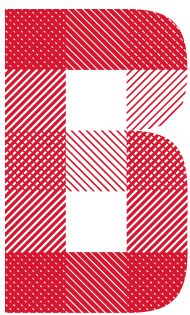
In this section, we invite you to listen to those who have left and to learn what God may be saying.

We also look at the wider phenomenon of what sociologist Joel Thiessen calls “exiters and switchers” (page 23), as well as how one conference minister works with congregations considering leaving.

Finding a home in the MB conference

An update from Maple View Mennonite

By Will Braun



rent Kipfer's Mennonite Church Canada pedigree is solid: he grew up at Poole Mennonite Church in Poole, Ontario, attended Rockway Mennonite Collegiate, graduated from Canadian Mennonite Bible College and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and became pastor of a Mennonite Church Eastern Canada congregation.

Now, he pastors a Mennonite Brethren church and sits on the board of the Ontario Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (ONMB).

I had spoken with Kipfer before he became MB, and was keen for an update on his journey.

When he started as pastor at Maple View Mennonite Church in Wellesley, Ontario, in 2012, the church was part of MCEC. While Kipfer says the church appreciated MCEC relationships, support and resources, particularly during pastoral transitions, there were “feelings of being out of sync” with the regional church.

Those feelings were largely in the background until the Becoming a Faithful Church process. This nationwide exploration regarding sexuality between 2009 and 2016 drew Maple View into a slow, careful discernment of their future in relation to the regional church.

Several other MCEC congregations were doing likewise.

In 2017, Maple View placed an insert in *Canadian Mennonite* that explained their traditional view on sexuality. The insert drew some negative response.

I called Kipfer then, in my role as senior writer for *Canadian Mennonite*. Our conversation left me feeling I would happily sit in the same pew as him even if our views did not align on all matters.

In April 2020, Maple View left MCEC, after joining ONMB. An overwhelming majority of the congregation favoured this

change, Kipfer says. “Overall, it felt natural and there was a sense of it needing to happen.” He is not aware of anyone who left the church as a result.

Similarly, Kingsfield-Zurich Mennonite Church left MCEC and joined ONMB. Ryan Jantzi, then-pastor at Kingsfield-Zurich, now serves as interim executive director for ONMB. (*Canadian Mennonite* contacted Jantzi for comment but he was on holiday.)

Around the same time, two MCEC congregations joined Catch the Fire—an international group of churches with roots in the Toronto Airport Vineyard church—while another joined a Pentecostal conference and one remained independent after leaving MCEC.

Kipfer says Maple View's decision of whether to leave, and how, was done with much consideration. They did not want it to be about cutting off relationship with people in MCEC or making judgments about others' faith, says Kipfer.

Some people, including Kipfer, experienced considerable grief at the loss of connection to MCEC.

How has the adjustment from MCEC to ONMB gone? Kipfer says, “[We are] still in the process of getting to know our MB family. . . . [It] feels like a good fit, feels energizing. Overall, it feels like a good theological alignment, good missional alignment.”

I ask if Kipfer feels there is still a need for healing from the break with MCEC. He pauses. “Good question,” he says. “I don't feel a sense of unfinished business.” He values ongoing connections with MCEC folks. For example, Kipfer has been available to fill in for the pastor at Poole Mennonite in case of an emergency, such as a death, when Poole's pastor is away.



“It always feels good for me when I’m able to connect with someone from MCEC who I have known for years,” he says.

As someone with increasing interest in connecting with MBs, I ask Kipfer how different we are. He should know.

He reframes the question: “What do we need to agree on theologically to partner in mission . . . [to] function as church together?”

While he notes “different impulses” in worship styles and the role of leaders—MB pastors tend to play a more prominent role in leadership—he says, “There is a lot of commonality.”

“Being Anabaptist is important for both,” he says, noting this might look different for different people and that views vary across the country.

But despite similarities, the divergence between the two conferences has been highlighted by the two MB churches that were released from ONMB membership within the past year. One joined MCEC.

“I carry a sense of pain about the brokenness in the body of Christ,” Kipfer says of division in the broader body of Christ. “I recognize the pain.”

He also says “it is important for denominational families to define theological commitments for the sake of discipleship and mission.”

Kipfer notes that the MC Canada logo—the dove and olive branch—is still visible in the Maple View sanctuary. The piece of metalwork was created by artist and former Maple View pastor Bruce Sawatzky. When the congregation left MCEC, they asked if they might keep the symbol in their sanctuary. MCEC agreed. “It represents part of our story,” says Kipfer.

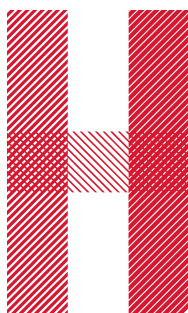
He says the congregation is doing well. There are a lot of young people and good leadership among young adults. There are “folks leaning into missional relationships.” A team of 18 went to a remote First Nation this past summer at the request of the chief.

I ask Kipfer what message he wants to share with *Canadian Mennonite* readers. He ponders, then says, “I love MC Canada and continue to value my relationship with MC Canada brothers and sisters.” ●



Leaving a church that left

By Will Braun



arv Wiebe—not his real name—did not agree with his congregation’s decision to leave the regional church, but still, he hoped things would work out for the congregation he had once pastored.

Questions about the conference had been discussed in the small-town congregation for many years, Wiebe says. (*Canadian Mennonite* is not identifying Wiebe due to the sensitivity of the situation.) “We’ve always had differing opinions on lots of things. For the most

says, “In their heart they believed this was the right thing for the congregation—what God wanted.”

Many in the congregation who did not agree with the decision slowly drifted away, but Wiebe stayed.

He had been baptized in the church and cared deeply about the people. “I know these people; I love these people,” he reminded himself. “I’ve sat in their homes and had long conversations.”

Eventually, though, he realized that after Sunday services he would be feeling “depressed” for the rest of the day.

“I could see what this church could be,” he says. But though he kept “looking for a sign that it would be okay,” he got to

‘A lot of people just don’t know what to do with conflict.’

part we were able to keep it together.”

But in recent years, those differences came to a head and a vote. Wiebe wished the process would have been more open and in-depth. There were strong opinions on both sides and people who could have gone either way. Some just wanted a decision so the church could move on. In the end, the church voted to leave the regional church.

Of those who led the process, Wiebe

the point where he had “no sense of that being possible anymore.”

More than a year after the vote, Wiebe announced his decision to withdraw his membership.

Of the people who remained, he is quick to say, “I don’t want to vilify them. I could have a long conversation with anyone there. They care. They are generous. . . . [They are] fundamentally good people.” They made their decision—which was

Dissonance

A young couple and a retired couple move along

By Amy Rinner Waddell



In the last two years, my church, Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford, B.C., has felt the loss of more than 20 long-time members.

Several families did not return after the pandemic, reducing the number of children in the church. Among them is my son Noel Dueckman. Noel and his wife, Stephanie, realized most other people their age were gone, and there was little left for their son. The P.A. system in the childcare room was broken and the nursery was the only option for an active child during worship. Prioritizing the spiritual nurture of their son, they began attending a Mennonite Brethren church with a thriving children's program.

Admittedly, they miss some things about Emmanuel, including the familiarity of knowing everyone and the hymns. Ties to the church were strong: Noel grew up at Emmanuel, and both he and Stephanie were youth sponsors.

Stephanie's advice to churches like Emmanuel is simple: "Be attractive to young families."

For retired couple Wally and Waltrude Gortzen, who had been attending Emmanuel since 2007, reasons for leaving two years ago were different. They cited "big changes going back to BFC [Being a Faithful Church] 7," the resolution approved by 85 percent of Mennonite Church Canada delegates in 2016.

The Gortzens believe that MC Canada's openness to same-sex relationships is at odds with the Confession of Faith. "For us it was wrong," says Wally.

The Gortzens and some of their friends held many discussions about changes in the church, but the decision to leave came after a congregational meeting in 2022. One item on the agenda was an Indigenous land acknowledgment. The Gortzens thought the decision was pushed through too quickly.



Noel (left), Zachary and Stephanie Dueckman, with Amy Rinner Waddell.

framed around questions of sexuality—because "they really believe it is God's will."

Speaking more generally, Wiebe says Mennonites can do better at dealing with differences. Earlier in his career, a church he pastored underwent a split. At the time, Wiebe thought that if everyone liked him, it would all work out. Now he sees that is not enough.

"As Mennonites, we tend to be passive aggressive," Wiebe says. "A lot of people just don't know what to do with conflict. . . . Our world has become more polarized, and we don't know what to do with people who hold a different position."

"If you have a conflict," Wiebe says, "you face it head on and have an open and caring conversation about it."

Humility and grace are also important. Of his former church, he says, "We needed to give each other far more grace."


Wiebe does highlight one bit of grace. A week after he announced his departure, a remaining member of the church approached him and they had a good conversation. "I give her a lot of credit for [reaching out]," he says.

The process has been difficult for Wiebe. The break from a conference or church is never a clean one. Tellingly, in talking about his former church, Wiebe still says "our congregation." ●

Opinions were strong on both sides, with some feeling this was important in acknowledging past wrongs to Indigenous people, and others, including the Gortzens, believing the decision could have political ramifications that didn't belong in the church. At the end of the meeting, the Gortzens, along with several others, decided that Emmanuel was no longer the place for them. "We felt our voice wasn't being heard," says Wally.

The Gortzens didn't attend anywhere for half a year and are now semi-regulars at a Mennonite Brethren church in town, though they say it doesn't really feel like home. Waltrude says she particularly misses the annual church retreats at Camp Squeah and the get-togethers for B.C. Mennonite Women, which she chaired for many years. She is unsure how to relate to her former MC B.C. peers now.

Years ago, I was among a group of people who left a church to come to Emmanuel, and I know that people left behind wondered why we left. Now I am experiencing this from the other side. When I run into those who have left, there are no bad feelings, but their loss is keenly felt in our church. ●



Responding to those who leave

By CM Staff

Sharon Peters—not her real name—left the church she had attended for almost 35 years after the congregation withdrew from an MC Canada regional church.

Peters, who did not want to use her name given the sensitivity of the situation, had been “very invested” in this congregation for many years. She led worship right to the end.

After she left, one friend from the church told Peters she saw a note about her in the bulletin, saying she was sorry Peters had left, but no one in church leadership contacted her or acknowledged her departure.

Peters found this hurtful.

The congregation, which is made up of people from various Mennonite backgrounds, had always been marked by an undercurrent of suspicion toward the regional church. Some people left the church in previous years because of the regional church affiliation.

With the pandemic, attendance dropped and tensions rose. Eventually, the congregation decided to leave the regional church.

Peters believes some people voted to

leave because they felt it was the only way to save the congregation.

Peters gives congregational leaders credit for putting effort into the decision-making process. They invited regional church leadership to be part of the conversation and kept them informed. Many discussions took place internally.

Still, she feels her voice was not heard. She wonders whether she was assumed to be in one camp, or perhaps was lumped in with a minority that would be outvoted anyway, and thus was not consulted.

Even after the vote, Peters would have preferred that the leaders had followed up with those people who voted to stay with the regional church, people who were disappointed by the outcome and felt they

no longer had a place in the congregation. She says she would have liked to hear someone say, “We know the vote didn’t go the way you wanted, but we still value your presence and input.”

“I think, in a way, that was the most hurtful part,” Peters says. No one said, “You are still welcome here. Let’s work at ways to accommodate the differences. Or let’s see if there are ways to continue to work together.”

Instead, she wonders whether people might be happier that she simply left.

“It felt so unfinished,” Peters says.

She had always felt at home in this church, that it was her congregation. They cared for her. They were good to her in hard times. Even though there were always differences in how people thought, they could always worship together, Peters says.

Despite the sense of loss and hurt, Peters still expresses affection for those at her former church. She would not hesitate to attend a funeral or baptism there, she says. “I still feel close to many of the people there.”

Her experience has made Peters “think differently about people who left before,

‘We can’t just let people disappear.’

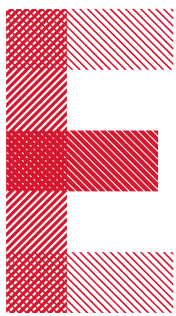
for whatever reason.” She says, “I would respond to them differently now.”

If someone were to leave the congregation she has since joined, she would not try to change their minds but she would acknowledge that she cares about them as a person and still values the contributions they made to the community.

“I think I’ve learned and become a little bit more sensitive,” she says. “[We can’t] just let people disappear.” ●

Couple peacefully changes conferences after decades at Glenlea

By Will Braun



Ernie and Charlotte Wiens switched from a Mennonite Church Manitoba congregation to a Mennonite Brethren one for rather ordinary reasons, but their experience stands as a witness to unity in a time of impatience and division.

Ernie had attended Glenlea Mennonite Church, a small rural church south of Winnipeg, all his life. Charlotte, who was born in Coaldale, Alberta, where the lines between the General Conference (GC, now Mennonite Church Canada) and the Mennonite Brethren (MB) were unmistakable, joined Glenlea shortly after she and Ernie married.

The small country church was a big

was located. They had become involved in the small town. Charlotte taught piano lessons and helped with the summer vacation Bible school program run jointly by Glenlea Mennonite and La Salle Community Church, an MB congregation.

When Ernie concluded his pastoral work, he wanted to leave ample space for a new pastor at Glenlea, so the couple started to attend La Salle Community Church off and on.

“It made a lot of sense to worship in the community where we were living,” says Ernie. It was not that they aligned more with one church or conference, but practical reasons became the deciding factor.

Ernie says some folks at Glenlea tried to convince him not to leave. The day they formally left was “very emotional,” he

people who worshipped together in a one-room school. In the '30s, an MB church opened in the nearby town of Niverville and the MB contingent at Glenlea left, creating some hurt and resentment among those who remained.

Having roots in Coaldale, Charlotte was aware of pronounced divisions between GCs and MBs. Her mom warned her that if she married someone from an MB background, he had better attend the GC church or her dad would be upset.

While the Wienses are obviously aware of past divergences as well as the hot-button differences between Mennonite Church Manitoba and the MB conference today, neither the past nor present divisions seem to inhibit their involvement. Their lives are an implicit witness to the possibility of crossing lines that divide. They experience the differences but seem almost immune to bias.

Ernie emphasizes the need for patience when there are differences. Whether now, or back in Ukraine, where the GC-MB split originated, he sees a need for us to be patient with each other.

The Wienses see commonality and potentially complementary gifts between the conferences. They value the emphasis on peace, justice and social concerns in MC Canada. Ernie, a long-time vocal peace advocate, is involved in the MC Manitoba Palestine-Israel Network. That sort of work does not resonate broadly in his church. “Other people have other passions,” he says.

The MB “zeal for church planting” is something they have to offer. “The Church needs many gifts from many different people.” ●

They experience the differences but seem almost immune to bias.

part of their life. Ernie served as part-time pastor for approximately 20 years, in addition to farming. Much of his extended family attended Glenlea as well.

Over time, however, a few pragmatic factors led them to another church, a 20-minute drive away. When the pastor Ernie worked alongside at Glenlea retired in 2008, Ernie decided it would be a good time for him to pull back as well. He was also nearing retirement age, and if they both left, it would make room for someone new.

By that point, the Wienses had lived for 12 years in the neighbouring community of La Salle, where some of their farmland

says. “We were sorry to make people sad.”

There are no bad feelings, they say, and they still go back to Glenlea occasionally. The change “felt right,” says Charlotte.

They do not regret it. “We feel very much a part of this church,” Charlotte says of their new faith home. Ernie even served as church moderator for a time.

Some years prior to their transition, Ernie had encouraged Glenlea Mennonite to consider joining La Salle Community Church, but neither church felt it would work.

Ernie noted that when Glenlea Mennonite started in the 1920s, the congregation was a mix of GC and MB



Switchers and exiters

Making sense of those leaving the church

Joel Thiessen

Why do people switch or exit a church or denomination? And why do some churches leave a denomination altogether?

Chances are you could offer possible reasons from your own experiences or those around you. Anecdotes are helpful to a point, but larger data sets based on extensive surveys or interviews across different populations can offer richer and typically more accurate explanations.

I offer my work as a sociologist of religion in an effort to shed light on prevailing research findings on “switchers” and “exiters.” Switchers are those who transition from one congregation or denomination to another—what Reginald Bibby famously called “the circulation of the saints”—while exiters include those who stop attending altogether.

When I say I hope to shed light, my aim is to provide a description of what is, rather than dictate what ought to be. At

the same time, I hope this description will be thought-provoking for those in the church considering what ought to be done about these phenomena.

There are several push-and-pull factors associated with switching or exiting congregations. Prior research—including two of my own books, *The Meaning of Sunday* and *None of the Above*—highlights several of these variables. In no particular order, these factors include: conflict

with a leader or congregant; preaching style and/or content; leadership change; financial or sexual scandal; hospitable and welcoming atmosphere; close social ties with others in the group; church size (too large or too small); programming (e.g., age, gender, or special interest-based); music style; theological beliefs regarding salvation, leadership or gender and sexuality; political views; life transition (e.g., relocation, divorce, death of



a loved one); busyness; or social position within a congregation.

Sometimes the *absence* of certain features in one congregation or denomination becomes a push factor, while simultaneously serving as a pull factor if present elsewhere.

Biographical context also matters. For example, switching typically occurs between similar denominations (e.g., a Mennonite may more easily become a Baptist than a Catholic). Stage of life—such as being single, having young children, or recently retiring—also shapes how people weigh different church options.

It is important to stress that no single variable uniformly captures congregational switching or exiting. Even for a particular switcher or exiter, the reasons are multilayered and varied.

In 2020, the pandemic introduced new challenges and amplified other ones for congregations. Many congregations reportedly felt two particular congregational dynamics increase at that time: polarization and church switching and/or exiting.

It is no secret that denominations, local church leaders and individual congregants held diverse theological and political perspectives on how the government and local churches should have mandated pandemic restrictions, or not. Additionally, public debates regarding race, gender and sexuality grew louder in recent years, again with varied views within denominations and churches.

Many sociologists maintain that such polarized views did not suddenly arise during the pandemic. Rather, they were amplified and rose to the surface. It is difficult to quantify how deep or wide these fissures span within or across different theological traditions. More research is needed into exactly how impactful polarization has been on church switching or exiting, but it is clearly a factor affecting some churches and denominations.

In response to what they see as irreconcilable differences, some individuals and entire congregations have taken their ball and left, so to speak, whether in search of more progressive pastures

or more conservative ones. Some of the churches regularly featured in the media for ignoring government restrictions during the pandemic have since grown exponentially. Other churches have left their denomination, either going independent or locating themselves within a more progressive or conservative stream within their larger denominational fold.

Polarization is not the only driving factor for switching or exiting. Studies in the United States show that declining church attendance during and after pandemic restrictions was largely driven by those who attended services irregularly prior to the pandemic and then diminished to no longer attending at all afterwards. For the most part, those who attended services weekly before 2020 continued to do so afterwards, whether in person and/or online, although very few pre-pandemic weekly attenders attend solely online now.

As for church switching, church services moving online provided a prime opportunity for people to respond to a range of the congregational push-and-pull factors noted above. Most importantly, they could switch or exit quietly without fellow congregants noticing. For these reasons, some research suggests that church shopping was at an all-time high at the mid-point of the pandemic.

Regardless of the reasons for switching

or exiting, these processes are typically shaped by an assessment of the possible social costs associated with a transition. Above all, sociological research reveals the powerful role that strong or weak social ties play for those who join, remain in or leave a social group such as a church. In their 2020 article, “Congregational Switching in an Age of Great Expectations,” David Sikkink and Michael Emerson note: “Those with many social ties in their congregation likely stay; conversely, the socially isolated congregant loses little by trying another congregation. We add that ties to leaders of congregations, especially clergy, would increase the cost of switching. . . . a related factor is social position within the congregation. The time and effort necessary to accumulate power and authority within a particular congregation may reduce switching.” There is good reason to believe the same logic holds for individuals exiting a church and for churches choosing to leave a denomination.

Changing societal values and norms also affect the thinking and actions of individuals and groups, including congregants and churches. One prevailing cultural value is individualism. In contrast to previous generations, it is ever more common to pursue one’s “authentic self” through what sociologists call achieved statuses. Rather than

REGIONAL CHURCH MEMBERSHIP CHANGES FROM 2019 TO PRESENT				
	Churches that closed	Churches that withdrew membership	New churches	Present membership
MC Eastern Canada	6	8	20	108**
MC Manitoba	3*	3	3	38**
MC Sask	3	1		21
MC Alberta	1			11
MCBC	3	2	1	24**
Total	16	14	24	202

SOURCE: REGIONAL CHURCH ANNUAL REPORTS.

*One of the closed churches merged with another MCM congregation.

**Includes church plants, provisional members and/or affiliate members.

individuals inheriting certain statuses or groups (e.g., a denomination or congregation) and remaining loyal to the traditions or social networks of one’s youth, individuals are now more prone to voluntarily seek social groups that best align with their preferences, desires and felt needs. Weaker church or denominational ties are an example of this, as is evident in the practice of church shopping.

Much research shows that individualist values are more widely embedded in conservative Protestant subcultures than in mainline Protestant or Catholic ones. Moreover, those who are more religiously devout—as measured in a myriad of ways—are more likely to switch congregations or denominations in search of the right place to meet their perceived religious and spiritual needs.

Switching and exiting can be hard on congregations and denominations, especially if these occurrences become trends. Some empirical research and countless anecdotes suggest that, psychologically, clergy find it difficult when members leave their church. Further, when people leave, those remaining may begin to doubt their own desire to remain.

Theologically and practically, there is an ongoing opportunity for individuals, congregations and denominations to consider what it means to live in Christian community amidst diverse experiences and perspectives. There is a place to ask ourselves challenging questions:

What theological essentials and boundaries ought to undergird community life?

What could unity in the absence of uniformity look like?

In what ways does our theology affirm or challenge dominant social values of individualism, and how does our answer intersect with our theology of the church?

Under what circumstances would we say it makes good sense for someone to switch to another congregation (or a congregation to change denominations), and to bless them in that transition?

My hope is that, rather than relying on anecdotes, churches and denominations might pay careful attention to the research on what does and does not contribute to switching and exiting. I



In what ways does our theology affirm or challenge dominant social values of individualism?

also pray that we will rigorously grapple with the challenging questions of unity, diversity, stability and integrity, toward ministering faithfully to where God is calling a given community for this time and place. May we do this work in a

posture of prayer, openness and humility to what the Spirit of God may be saying. ●

Joel Thiessen is a professor of sociology and the director of the Flourishing Congregations Institute at Ambrose University in Calgary.

CM For discussion

1. What makes you squirm or resist church unity in the face of deep disagreements?
2. How might you reach out this week for conversation with those who have left your church?
3. If you have left a church or denomination, how has the experience affected your view of church, faith or God?
4. Under what circumstances would it make good sense for someone to switch to another congregation (or a congregation to change denominations).

– CM Staff

Find resources on “The unity of the church” at commonword.ca/go/1468

CommonWord
Bookstore and Resource Centre

A shepherd in thorny pastures

An executive minister's perspective

By Susan Fish



When a congregation leaves a conference, its departure may be reduced to a line in the annual report or a prayer of lament at an annual meeting. Behind this are untold stories for those who leave and those who remain. Regional church staff are often involved in the process of a church leaving. We asked Michael Pahl, executive minister for Mennonite Church Manitoba, about this.

Canadian Mennonite: Why are churches leaving the Mennonite church?

Michael Pahl: In my three-and-a-half years, we've had three congregations withdraw from our regional church. The primary reason churches leave is that they don't feel comfortable affiliating with other churches that read the Bible differently. Right now, this often has to do with affirmation of LGBTQ people.

At an individual level, allegiance to a denomination is far less than ever, and people changing churches look less at what a church teaches and more at: *How do I feel on a Sunday morning? Do I like the music? Are people friendly and welcoming? Where are my friends going? Are there people my kids connect with?*

At the congregational level, theological questions are addressed more.

CM: Tell us about the process of a church leaving.

MP: The most common questions I get from people when they hear that a congregation has withdrawn are: *What process led to this? [and] Didn't you do anything?*

Our constitution has a recommended discernment process for when a church is considering withdrawal. It calls for a year of prayer and conversation with MC Manitoba leadership and within the congregation.

Congregations are self-determining, so we don't go in and say how things should happen. My concern is to ensure the necessary people are at the table and that the discernment conversations happen well. The process is flexible, depending on the needs of the congregation. I ask the leadership what conversations they think need to be had, depending on their congregational dynamics. Sometimes it's just me talking with church leaders, but it could involve special congregational meetings.

A goal in these conversations is to get past the reasons initially brought forward to the core issues, to determine: Is this something you value so strongly that you need to withdraw from MCM? If yes, then go with our blessing.

CM: If you are the shepherd of the regional church, do you have a sense of failure when you lose a sheep—when churches or people leave?

MP: I second-guessed myself more as pastor when people left. Talking with other pastors was helpful to realize that we would make mistakes . . . but there are lots of factors in why people leave, and I can't influence all of them.

CM: What is grief like for others left behind?

MP: Many people grieve when a congregation leaves: those in other congregations, those in that congregation who didn't want that to happen, and even among those who choose to leave.

At the conference level, we pay attention to how people are processing these losses. We try to answer questions and to encourage them in a pastoral way.

We try to carry relationships on with those who have left, but it has to look different because the thing that defined that relationship has dissolved.

CM: You recently wrote a pastoral letter addressing division and polarization, saying it is challenging for churches to find unity in diversity. What do people need to be able to do this hard work?

MP: We assume as good Christians that we will speak respectfully and practise active listening, but the reality is that these are skills that need to be learned in the life of a congregation. Many pastors are recognizing the need for this. I'm seeing congregations hold small groups and meetings that intentionally encourage skill development in seeking to understand each other, talking about difficult issues, reading the Bible, and coming to a decision when we disagree.

Especially since the pandemic, another aspect of building unity is leaning into people's desire to be together as a church by intentionally getting people together for meals and enjoying being together.

CM: What would you say to churches or individuals thinking of leaving? What would you say to those who have left?

MP: To those thinking of leaving, I say: If there are particular issues driving that, go talk to the pastor or the necessary people at the conference level. Every leader wants that conversation. They want it to be respectful, but they want to hear and understand. Please come and start that discussion.

For those who have left, I say: We don't think we have the only way of being the church. Look for a new denominational home for support and community. Whatever reason led you to make that decision, may you be blessed and know God's blessing. ●



Kirsten Hamm-Epp (centre) at an RJC High School retreat at Camp Kadish.

Amplifier of youth voices moves on

MC Sask's Kirsten Hamm-Epp wraps up 11 years of youth ministry

By Katie Doke Sawatzky

The end of summer 2024 also marks the end of over a decade of commitment to youth ministry for Kirsten Hamm-Epp, regional church minister for Mennonite Church Saskatchewan.

The Manitoba native, now 34, took over the reins of the Saskatchewan Youth Ministry Organization (SMYO) in the summer of 2013 after graduating with an English degree from Canadian Mennonite University in 2011 and working for two years as resident dean at RJC.

Only a few days after beginning her role, she led a bus trip of Saskatchewan youth to the 2013 Mennonite Church Canada national youth assembly at Camp Assiniboia in Manitoba. "It was probably the best start I could have had," Hamm-Epp said. "It was overwhelming to take over a trip, figure out all the

details...but just to hang out with this core Saskatchewan group of youth and leaders gave me a strong start. I went into the following school and youth year feeling like I really knew who my people were."

It's the relationships Hamm-Epp formed with youth and youth leaders that she treasures.

Madison Harms, 23, who was MC Sask's representative at the Global Youth Summit in Indonesia in 2022, said Hamm-Epp was one of few women role models in church who motivated her to get involved in the church when Harms was in high school. "There wasn't a huge presence of the younger generation," she said.

Zach Stefaniuk, 26, who now pastors at Zion Mennonite Church in Swift

Current, met Hamm-Epp in 2015 and joined SMYO soon after. Interested in pastoral ministry from a young age, Stefaniuk gave one of his earliest sermons at an SMYO-organized worship service. He credits Hamm-Epp's mentorship as a major influence.

"Kirsten gives youth a voice," he said. "She tells them, 'You are valuable, and I am here to listen to your opinion,' which is something young people do not hear as often as they need to."

Hamm-Epp herself heard that message growing up. Her parents, Marilyn Houser Hamm and Ray Hamm, pastored Altona Mennonite Church, where she helped with Sunday school and heard the message from her church community: "You have gifts; we appreciate them and we'd love for you to use them here."



Kirsten Hamm-Epp with RJC youth (left) and with her children and parents (right).

But it wasn't until she moved away from "the Mennonite bubble" in the family's traditional housebarn in the Manitoba village of Neuberghal, under "the tall, tall trees," and spent three summers working at Long Beach Lodge Resort in Tofino, B.C., that Hamm-Epp fully embraced her Mennonite roots. The difference between her life and values and those of her co-workers was evident, and Hamm-Epp found herself answering a lot of their questions about her Christian faith.

"It would have been easy to just leave that behind," Hamm-Epp said. "You finally have the opportunity... to decide for yourself if the answers you heard are your own. . . . That was huge for me."

Hamm-Epp decided she would share the same message she heard growing up, and she has kept the same spirit of openness in her conversations with the youth she's worked with over the past decade.

Youth today, she said, are open to hearing about Jesus but are also more open than ever to other expressions of spirituality. The current challenge of youth ministry is to figure out how to motivate youth to stay and lead in the church.

"[They have] this fear of missing out," she said. "If I commit to this, I'm saying

no to all of these other things.' We can help our youth understand that this isn't just a feel-good story—God made you, God knows you, God loves you—but that [it's] your cornerstone, the thing worth saying that, when all else fails, 'I know this.'"

Hamm-Epp also created opportunities for youth to develop their leadership skills by leading worship services at MC Sask

them," said Hamm-Epp.

Alex Tiessen, director of admissions at RJC, worked with Kirsten for five years as part of MC Sask's youth ministry group. "Kirsten firmly believed that youth should have a seat at the table," he said. "She was invitational, meeting youth where they were at in their journey with Jesus, and reminding the church as a whole that they are all part of the living body of Christ."

'You have gifts; we appreciate them and we'd love for you to use them here.'

churches and organizing Mega Menno youth events and retreats.

She stressed the importance of the church extending invitations to youth at the wider national and international levels. MC Canada youth gatherings like *Fat Calf* at Camp Assiniboia, *Shake* at Shekinah Retreat Centre in 2019—which Hamm-Epp helped organize—and *Amplify!* at Camp Valaqua in 2022 provide opportunities for youth to "dig in, dive deep" and be with others asking similar questions, she said.

"Those events can't be overrated for the potential that they have to help our youth know that the church is a great place for

Hamm-Epp and her young family live on her husband's family farm in the Petrofka area, 45 minutes northwest of Saskatoon. Rural commutes are trickier now that she has children, and she believes that stepping down from her job will offer her more opportunity to know people in her local community as her children begin school.

Hamm-Epp's last day as youth minister for MC Sask was August 31, but she will continue to mentor young people. Her family attends Eigenheim Mennonite Church, in Rosthern, where Hamm-Epp serves as the senior youth Sunday School teacher. ●



Lineing up after a jingle dress special at Kainai Days in Standoff, Alberta, July 2017.

POWWOW 101

Alberta webinar prepares church to meet its neighbours

By Katie Doke Sawatzky

“I didn’t know non-Indigenous people were welcome to most powwows,” said Natasha Wiebe, a member of Edmonton First Mennonite Church. “If I hadn’t attended that workshop, I wouldn’t have gone to my first powwow.”

Wiebe, a data scientist at the University of Alberta, was one of 20 people from Mennonite Church Alberta who participated in the June 13 workshop, “Powwow Prep 101: Things to Know, Places to Go.” This online webinar was hosted by MCA Bridge Building facilitator Suzanne Gross and MCA communications coordinator Ruth Bergen Braun.

The idea for the workshop began last year when Gross invited churches to join her at the Poundmaker’s Lodge Powwow. Members of Lendrum Mennonite Church were interested but asked for more information before attending.

“I appreciate Lendrum saying, ‘We want to go but we need a little context first,’” said Gross. “That gave everybody a starting place for when we showed up.”

Gross and Bergen Braun organized a workshop in response.

“The church, in the broadest sense, did much harm. It is only fitting that we lead the way toward healing,” said Bergen Braun. “Understanding Indigenous culture, particularly that of the first peoples of the land on which you reside, is

important work for both ordinary citizens and those of us in the church. Powwow is just one aspect of Indigenous culture but one that is relatively easy to access.”

The webinar addressed the signing of Treaties 6 and 7, the impacts of the 1876 Indian Act and the 1880 ban on powwows and other ceremonies. Bergen Braun also showed photos she has taken of a dozen different dances during her decade as a professional photographer at powwows.

Robbie Kaboni, an Ojibway woman who works as a manager with the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society of Edmonton, helped explain the significance of the dances.

In 2024, Gross and Bergen Braun thought they should offer the workshop again.

Following the June 2024 workshop, Wiebe joined Gross and four others from Edmonton churches at the July 13 powwow at Enoch Cree Nation, a large event with approximately 800 dancers.

Wiebe described how the group stood for the ceremonial grand entry and watched the dances. She was struck by the beautiful regalia and how community-oriented the powwow was, with people of any age and ability welcomed to dance.

Gross struck up conversation with a family sitting beside the Mennonite group, two parents and their two young

daughters, who are dancers. The father explained they travel from powwow to powwow all summer and that the gathering is about healing. Echoing his words, Gross said, “It’s about healing relationships, healing the earth. You do it for that. If you win, that’s great, but you don’t do it to win.”

The group enjoyed food-truck fare (taco-in-a-bag and bannock), and Gross shared homegrown Saskatoon berries with the group and the family beside them.

Gross said the group’s visit was a way to “be good guests” by showing up in “someone else’s space and being open to learning how to be in that space.” Bergen Braun said, “Attending a powwow gives non-Indigenous people a sense of the strength of Indigenous communities, a picture of Indigenous people that is counter to what many see as the norm.”

Wiebe, who plans to attend more powwows in the future, said it offered a way for her to get to know her neighbours. “It’s inspiring to see how much [the Indigenous community] is trying to connect with each other again and celebrate who they are,” Wiebe said. “Sometimes we think people are different when we don’t know them. Once you know them you can celebrate along with them.” ●

Malipayon Peace Hub campaign meets its goal

Mennonite Church Canada Release

Mennonite Church Canada is excited to announce the successful conclusion of a year-long fundraising campaign that raised \$235,000 for ministry in the Philippines.

The Malipayon Peace Hub is part of the vision of Dann and Joji Pantoja, long-term International Witness workers in the Mindanao region and founding partners of Peacebuilders Community Inc. (PBCI), their umbrella ministry in the Philippines.

The Peace Hub will provide training in peace and reconciliation for organizations, churches, community groups, Indigenous communities and even military leaders. It will also serve as a home for upgraded coffee bean processing and a farmer training centre for Coffee for Peace (CFP), as well as providing a new staff house and guest house, and a delivery vehicle.

CFP, an outgrowth of the Pantojas' long-term peacebuilding work, is a for-profit social enterprise that works to elevate incomes for impoverished farmers who were driven up onto the mountains by violence resulting from inter-tribal, religious and military conflicts.

Ongoing donations are welcome as the ministry continues to build communities of just peace in the Philippines.

Leadership at the Indigenous-run Malipayon Peace Hub will continue to be mentored by Dann and Joji Pantoja in their last two years of service as Mennonite Church Canada Witness workers.

A celebration and grand opening of the Malipayon Peace Hub is planned for November 2024. Contact Jeanette Hanson (International Witness) or Norm Dyck (Mennonite Church Eastern Canada) to attend. ●



Joji Pantoja shows the nearly complete Malipayon Peace Hub building to visitors.



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Agape Fellowship closes

Saying goodbye well

By Nicole Flemister

On July 14, Agape Fellowship of London, Ontario, closed after 48 years due to declining attendance, particularly after the pandemic.

Our church began in 1976 as an initiative of Alvin Roth, who had previously founded Mission Services of London. In that role, Roth had seen the need for safe, comfortable church settings for vulnerable persons living in London's inner city, many of whom were looking for supportive places to explore faith and find healing.

Agape Fellowship began with weekly Bible studies before developing into a house church model of weekly fellowship and worship. Because many of those who attended our church were supported by government social assistance, Agape's programs included a food pantry and weekly potluck dinners. In 1988, we added Sunday services. In 2004, the house church model ended, but Sunday services continued, with our congregation moving to Valleyview Mennonite Church in 2005.

During its early years, Agape received financial assistance from the Inter-Mennonite Mission and Service Board in Ontario. In 1989, it became a member of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. In 2022, we received an award from LUSO Community Services, a neighbourhood resource centre, for many years of engagement and advocacy around food security in our community.

Several guest speakers joined our final service. Al Rempel brought greetings from MCEC and opened our service with prayer. Gloria Janzen walked through the vision of the early years. Doris Kipfer spoke about all she and her husband, Enos, saw God do during their 15 years as co-pastors. Charles King, our Bible study leader, reminded us of our favourite times of Bible study. Marv Friesen, pastor



Agape Fellowship founder Alvin Roth (left) and his wife, Madeline, with Agape's second pastors, Doris and Enos Kipfer, at the time of their licensing as pastors, February 3, 1991.

of Valleyview, led us in communion one last time. Lynne Williams, a more recent pastor of Agape, spoke about initiatives started during her time as pastor.

Melody Steinman shared the impact of her experience at Agape. The following are some of the words she shared:

"I have had wonderful experiences of being in churches where I have felt accepted, and other times where I experienced pain and disappointment. That was some of the stuff I brought to Agape when I started seven or eight years ago.

"This group of believers and friends of Jesus brought me so much joy. They offered me a place of healing, welcome and belonging. They received my gifts and abilities and affirmed me. I was embraced freely when I shared my perspective and experience with having a bipolar condition

and being in a family with other individuals who have a bipolar condition.

"As we enter a new phase on the journey with Agape, we face an unknown and uncertain future. But although Agape ends formally, God's love does not. God will still love us, God will still meet us, God will still work through us as individuals. God will continue to help us in the next stage of our lives."

Agape thanks the individuals and churches who have supported us with their prayers, financial and other support, and friendship. ●

Nicole Flemister is the chairperson of Agape Fellowship.

Hearts in their hands

Mennonite Action march for ceasefire in Gaza

By Susan Fish

They carried their hearts in their backpacks when it rained, and on sunny days, they walked with their hearts in their hands.

The hearts were paper ones from Sam Ramer and Anna Miedema's church, Waterloo North Mennonite Church in Waterloo, Ontario.

On July 18, Ramer and Miedema joined three other Canadians and a group of more than 100 people on the 11-day, 217-kilometre "All God's Children March for a Ceasefire" organized by Mennonite Action for the purpose of drawing attention to the suffering and destruction in Gaza.

They carried the hearts as a way of honouring their pastor, Kendra Whitfield Ellis, who died suddenly on July 13. Whitfield Ellis was part of a binational pastoral team providing faith guidance for Mennonite Action, and had been preparing devotionals and commentaries for the march at the time of her death. Ramer and Miedema met Whitfield Ellis at a Mennonite Action event last fall, consequently joining Waterloo North and becoming close to their pastor.

They made connections between their loss and the personal losses of those in Gaza. Miedema says, "There are 37,000 confirmed deaths in Gaza, with [a report in the medical journal] *The Lancet* saying actual deaths could be four times higher. It's easy for such death tolls to become statistics. Experiencing the loss of a person who was special to me reminded me that each death in Gaza is a grief to someone."



Anna Miedema, Sam Ramer and Tessa Hendrick carry hearts from Waterloo North Mennonite Church as they march. Below, Mennonite Action marchers.

The marchers walked approximately 20 kilometres per day, encouraged by the interfaith groups, Muslim groups and churches of various denominations that hosted them, as well as by those who honked in support. The group, ranging in age from 11 to 80, also found themselves facing what Miedema described as "frightening, deep anger," with curses yelled at them, vehicles driven very close and black exhaust blown at them.

Ramer, who taught English and studied Arabic in Palestine, and who notes the long history of Mennonites and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in that country, says, "The Palestinian Christian community has asked us to do this—to highlight the injustice of the Israeli apartheid system and to stand up for any acts of injustice. As those from a

historical peace church, it was important to us to show alternatives to Christian Zionism and to push back against theologies of hate that are harming racialized communities in Canada, the U.S. and especially Israel-Palestine."

This work is the focus of Ramer's academic study and political advocacy, but he also felt it was important to join this march. "Christian history has always included pilgrimages and walks for many issues. This was a very symbolic walk—we went from the historical Mennonite community of Harrisonburg, Pennsylvania, to Washington, D.C."

As Ramer and Miedema left the march early for Whitfield Ellis's funeral, they felt a mixture of relief to be out of the intense heat and rain, disappointment at leaving before they reached D.C., and hope that coming together with people of all faiths and those who are not faith-based is resulting in meaningful progress with shifts such as the Canadian government's ceasefire resolution and arms embargo.

They came home carrying fragile paper hearts in their hands and fragile human lives in their hearts. ●





Avon Church youth in a Montreal urban garden and community centre.

Not your typical youth missions trip

Avon youth serve and learn in Montreal

By Stephen Kennedy

“**T**hat was a test. True servants are always listening.”

Jacques was our new friend. He was always barefoot and wouldn't say how he had ended up living in his van, but he spoke six languages, and he enjoyed chatting with us about faith and making the world a better place. For a few days, he was always popping up out of nowhere—to share another life lesson or a bowl of oatmeal with our group of 17 teenagers and seven adults from Stratford, Ontario, in Montreal for a week of learning.

That evening, Jacques asked our group whether someone would be willing to get him another glass of water. When one youth said yes, Jacques responded that he wasn't actually thirsty, that he was testing our servanthood.

We were in Montreal to learn. What might have once been called a “missions trip” we called a “learning experience.”

At our first planning meeting, we reminded the youth and their parents we wouldn't make a big difference in a week. Instead, we would be guests, meeting people and organizations making a difference, letting their passion rub off on us, gaining new perspectives, and listening



to the Spirit's guidance.

As Jacques would say, we would be servants who are always listening.

In Montreal, we stayed at Hochma, a Mennonite Church Eastern Canada church in the Hochelaga neighbourhood. Hochma once also hosted a shelter for people experiencing homelessness. No longer involved in that ministry, they still actively serve their community and rent space to a small francophone congregation.

We packed meals at the Mada Centre, a kosher Jewish soup kitchen, food delivery service and community centre. Their goal is to ensure that everyone has access to food, including Jewish and Muslim families requiring foods that meet their religious needs. Mada delivers more than

10,000 free kosher meals every week, food that also suits halal dietary needs.

We packed thousands of snacks at Welcome Hall Mission, a food bank supporting those with very low incomes. We volunteered alongside a group of investment bankers, an American Catholic group and people from a local service program.

One day, the teens navigated their way (without adult help) to a downtown neighbourhood to see the effects of gentrification and rising rental prices. There we toured an urban garden program run by Innovate Youth and visited their Solidarity Market offering fresh produce for those in need.

We weeded gardens and planted potatoes at the Sun Youth urban agriculture project we had visited two years before with another group. The clientele had completely changed.

Since most of our youth didn't speak French, they often felt awkward as we arrived at an organization. But they soon came to see we could connect over sports, music and working together toward something bigger than ourselves. One night we joined RDB, a Haitian church



new to MCEC, for an evening of basketball and popsicles.

We also didn't know how we would be received. Montreal was once called "the city of a hundred steeples." While the churches are still there, so is the reminder of the historic hurts the church caused in Quebec. I wondered whether 24 English-speaking Mennonite tourists would be met with hostility, bitterness and judgment on the Métro, and whether the organizations we partnered with would be critical of who we were.

But in every conversation, whether volunteering, travelling or eating late-night poutine, we were met with joy, curiosity and love. Our Mada host said, "Even though I am a Jew and you are a Christian, we have the same heart." Another host said, "I have no idea what Mennonite means, but you're here and that is beautiful."



One evening, our youth were exploring our neighbourhood when they heard a quiet voice ask, "Can you help me?"

The man was blind, carrying many bags of groceries. Rather than continuing to explore the city, they carried his bags and helped him navigate to his apartment, but they also learned where he had gone

to school, what his occupation was and how he had come to be in need.

One of the teens said, "Before Montreal, if I saw a blind man, I would be unsure what to do. I

learned that day that everyone has a story. That man had an amazing life uprooted by an accident. I learned not to judge a book by its cover."

They were listening servants. ●

Stephen Kennedy is the Youth and Family Pastor of Avon Church in Stratford, Ontario.

News briefs

UN reports zero hunger by 2030 is unlikely

New UN figures show that up to 757 million people globally experienced hunger in 2023. A July report titled "State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI)" shows one out of 11 people are impacted by hunger. The report highlighted a significant gap between global humanitarian needs and the necessary financing for robust, efficient programming. The countries most impacted by hunger are those with least access to financing. *Source: Canadian Foodgrains Bank*

CMU professor awarded Canada Research Chair

Heather Campbell-Enns, associate professor of psychology at Canadian Mennonite University (CMU), has been awarded a Canada Research Chair (CRC) Tier 2 in Families and Aging, which will contribute \$120,000 to the university annually over a period of five years. This is the first time CMU has received a CRC award. Campbell-Enns's research focus is family-provided care for older adults, particularly in the context of dementia. *Source: CMU*



Plastic Jesus

Creation Justice Ministries released a downloadable resource called "Plastic Jesus: Real faith in a synthetic world." The resource is designed for congregations seeking to think about how plastics impact creation and our lives. It is intended to equip people of faith to take practical action to address plastic use. See creationjustice.org/plasticjesus.html. *Source: Creation Justice Ministries*

LIFE IN THE 80S



Ron and Gudrun Mathies. Ron is wearing a shirt he bought that was hanging on a tree in Nairobi, Kenya, at the Mennonite Guest House.

‘We are age-appropriately well’

An interview with Ron and Gudrun Mathies

By Susan Fish

Ron and Gudrun Mathies attend Waterloo North Mennonite Church in Waterloo, Ontario. Ron, age 84, served as executive director of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and director of Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, among other roles. Almost 82, Gudrun taught in Malawi and Canada, worked as a volunteer hospital chaplain and as a church visitor with seniors. She hosted hundreds of MCC guests. Ron and Gudrun have been married for 60 years and have three children and four grandchildren.

What is your earliest memory of church?

Gudrun: I was born to German parents during World War II in Poland. In 1945, we fled and were separated from my father. We were on our way for four years

before we ended up in an MCC refugee camp. In the Gronau camp, there was a Sunday school for children, but my first real Sunday school memory was at Kitchener Mennonite Brethren Church (KMB), where I was the only girl among six boys.

Ron: In July, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of my family arriving as Russian refugees in Waterloo. I remember going to the “Russian Mennonite church” in New Hamburg, Ontario, which was both General Conference and Mennonite Brethren. Church was more than church—it was our social life, and everything happened there.

What is your best memory of church?

Ron: We can say good things about every congregation we’ve been part of, but church that came closest to Revelation 7:9 (“...from every nation, of all tribes,

peoples, and languages...”) happened at the Southern Africa Christian Leadership Assembly in Pretoria, South Africa, in 1979, where thousands were gathered from many countries and denominations. Every morning as I walk, I still sing choruses from that assembly.

Gudrun: My best memory of church was attending young people’s at KMB, where I met Ron and where we served together on a youth planning committee.

What is your most difficult memory of church?

Gudrun: It wasn’t hard to settle into new congregations, but it was hard leaving our church in Akron [Pennsylvania].

Ron: The church can be small and divisive. Churches can be hard on pastors. I remember an elderly saint forbidden from communion because he was baptized the wrong way.



Tell us about the people who have influenced you the most.

Ron: Robert Kreider, Bluffton history professor, did a 1961 MCC tour as Africa was coming to independence from colonialism and was requesting teachers. We saw going to Africa as teachers as thanks for what MCC had done for our families. Later Rod Sawatsky invited me to set up international development courses and an internship program at Conrad Grebel University College at just the right moment.

Desmond Tutu has been a huge influence. The first time I met him, he preached on Acts 4, and the question of whether to listen to people or God became *the* question for us over the next 40 years.

Gudrun: The person who influenced me most in my life was my mother. The group of women in Ontario with whom I worked on women's concerns also had a significant impact.

Can you share a favourite book, passage, poem or song?

Gudrun: My favourites are art books, such as Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*.

Ron: One of my favourites is *Feeding the Hungry* by Orié O. Miller, the executive secretary of Mennonite Central Committee [1935-1958]. I have his own copy, given to me by John Lapp when I succeeded him as executive director. He picked it up at a book sale.

What do young people not understand about old age?

Gudrun: They don't understand how difficult it is to accomplish something that at one time was easier. I used to host 300 to 400 guests a year. It's more difficult

now.

Ron: When I was younger, I didn't know the same things young people don't understand now. It helped that we were mentored by our grandmothers, our aunts and uncles and our siblings.

Gudrun: My mother lived for 50 years until she found out that my father had died in the end of the war in a POW camp. She always hoped he would return.

What is the hardest thing about getting old?

Gudrun: It's harder to do some things. We lose longtime friends who've been friends most of our lives.

Ron: The time we spend in medical offices. We've learned when someone asks how we are, we say, "We are age-appropriately well." I'm also sorry we can't travel as we used to.

What is best about getting older?

Ron: We miss the sense of mission we had in our jobs, but we don't miss the responsibility. Technology allows us to gather weekly with our children and grandchildren who live in Waterloo, Missouri and Mozambique.

Gudrun: I'm grateful for having fewer responsibilities, as it gives me time to do my art, to sketch and to paint.

If you had one chance at a sermon, what would it be about?

Gudrun: I've often told the German Mennonite refugee story to churches. I would tell my family's story.

Ron: I would call my sermon, "The Gift of Service in the Name of Christ." What we gained by being part of the body of Christ and serving has been far and above any compensation we could have received through other work. ●

CM News briefs

Mennonite history project receives grant

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Museum has received a grant of nearly \$25,000 from Library and Archives Canada. The grant will be used to gather, preserve and present a collection of oral histories about how the Mennonite community helped create Niagara's complex agricultural system and provided a safe haven for displaced people.

Six local families are the primary source for this research. However, museum managing director Sarah Kaufman said other families with ties to Niagara are welcome to contact the museum for the project. *Source: Niagara This Week*

Emission reduction grant applications due

Mennonite Church Canada's Emission Reduction Grant applications are due September 29. Eligible candidates are MC Canada congregations wanting to create and execute an ongoing plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions produced by the congregation's operations. See at mennonitechurch.ca/mc-canada-emissions-reduction-grant.

MCEC reconciliation resources

Mennonite Church Eastern Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Working Group has created a downloadable resource for congregational participation in Truth and Reconciliation Day, which falls on September 30. The resource includes books and suggestions for services, children's time and a litany. Find it at mcec.ca/programs/truth-and-reconciliation. *Source: MCEC*

Call for writing submissions

Organizers of the 10th Mennonite/s Writing conference invite proposals for critical and creative presentations on any aspect of Mennonite literature, including the 2025 conference theme, "Words at Work and Play." The conference will take place June 13-15, 2025, hosted by Canadian Mennonite University. See cmu.ca/programs/english/mennonites-writing. *Source: CMU*

Building strong connections

By Josh Hill

The last two years as vice-principal at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate have been rewarding and deeply fulfilling. I have loved getting to know this school community and working with faculty and staff as a team who are passionately dedicated to helping students find inclusive spaces where they can reach their fullest potential. Now, as principal, it is my honour to lead this incredible Rockway team alongside Rockway's new vice-principal, Stephanie Oliverio. Stephanie came to Rockway in August 2024, with over 25 years of experience at various levels of education within the public system. With her two children attending Rockway for several years, she brings with her a deep understanding and appreciation for the Rockway experience and has already demonstrated her passion and excitement for this place in the short time she's been here. Alongside faculty and staff, we are working to launch new programs that help us live out Rockway's values more broadly in the community.

Part of living out those values is ensuring we have strong connections with our local Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) churches. This spring, our director of Admissions & Recruitment, Sheri Wideman, and I engaged in a listening



Principal Josh Hill with vice principal Stephanie Oliverio

tour of the local MCEC churches. Our objective was to hear about each church community, learn of their strengths and challenges, and discern how Rockway can continue to be a strong partner. These conversations were inspiring and have helped me get to know our local Mennonite pastors on a deeper level. Additionally, these conversations created a positive energy around collaborative initiatives between Rockway and local MCEC churches, like hosting regional

youth events.

Whether I am having deep conversations with pastors or joking with a student in the hallway at school, as principal, I will do my utmost to ensure we continue building on the amazing legacy Rockway has established over the last nearly 80 years. Together, we will move and shape Rockway as we live out our school's mission in an ever-changing world. ●

Join us!

GRADES 7-12

DISCOVER ROCKWAY

Thursday, November 7, 2024 | 7 pm

"Rockway teachers go above and beyond to provide an excellent education while making you feel welcomed and included."

Matthew Martin, Rockway Class of 2024
University of Waterloo, Sustainability and Financial Management

RSVP at rockway.ca

#LifeatRockway

Calendar

Nationwide

Oct. 27: International Witness Sunday. Details and resources to come.

International

British Columbia

Sept. 21: Paddle-a-Thon Fundraiser at Camp Squeah. Details at squeah.com/paddle-a-thon/

Oct. 18-20: MCBC Ladies Retreat at Camp Squeah. Linda Todd guest speaker, register at www.mcbc.ca

Nov. 1-3: MCBC Pastor/Family Retreat at Camp Squeah. Details to come.

Alberta

Sept. 6: MCC Alberta fundraiser Golf Classic at Eagle Rock Golf Course, 8 a.m., Leduc County, Alberta. Register at mcc.org/abgolf24.

Oct 26: MCC Alberta's annual In Tune conference, A Soul's Cry for Home. Details to come.

Saskatchewan

Sept. 8: Celebrate Shekinah's 45th Anniversary, 2-6 p.m. More details to come.

Nov. 11-15: MC Sask and CMU present Healing Haunted Histories: Decolonizing discipleship,

available for credit or audit, register at mcsask.ca

Manitoba

Sept. 7: *The Secret Treaty* Book Launch at Westside Community Church, Morden. 1 p.m. Tour with Dave Scott of Swan Lake First Nation; 4:30 p.m. Faspa; 5 p.m. book presentation.

Sept. 9: Activ8 is a new 8-month program for young adults combining a learning community, a service experience and the freedom to stay at home, work and save for future study. Now accepting applicants. This pilot program is a partnership between MCM and Peace & Justice Initiatives. More at mennochurch.mb.ca/activ8

Sept. 28: *The Secret Treaty* Book Launch at Mennonite Heritage Village.

Oct. 3-4: 150th Anniversary of Mennonites in Manitoba Presentation by Jonathan Dyck, University of Winnipeg.

Nov. 7: Common Word Book Launch for *The Secret Treaty*, Marpeck Commons, Canadian Mennonite University.

Ontario

Sept. 1: Africa Inter-Mennonite

Mission Co-Executive Coordinator John Fumana at Listowel Mennonite Church, 10 a.m. and 11:15 a.m. with updates from ministries with African churches in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa.

Sept. 12: Book launch for Troy Osborne, *Radicals and Reformers: A Survey of Global Anabaptist History*. Short program and reception at Conrad Grebel University College, fourth floor gallery, 4-5:30 p.m.

Sept. 18: Walk with Grassy Narrows youth and community members in Toronto in solidarity on their path to achieve mercury justice and freedom. More at freegrassy.net

Sept. 21: Toronto (GTA) Mennonite Festival, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. at Willowgrove farm, Stouffville.

Sept. 20-22: Steinmann Mennonite Church Bicentennial weekend of celebration. For more details, see smchurch.ca/bicentennial-events.

Sept. 25: MCC Ontario Annual General Meeting, 7-8:30 p.m., virtual only. For the link, see

mcc.org/events/mcc-ontario-annual-general-meeting.

Sept. 26: Unveiling of commemorative plaque at Conrad Grebel University College at 4 p.m. for the site of the Montreal River Alternative Service Camp by The Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario with the Ontario Heritage Trust. More at MHSO.org.

Sept. 27-28: The Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario has arranged for two buses to go from Waterloo to Montreal River for the installation of the Montreal River Alternative Service Camp plaque on Sept. 28 with overnight accommodation. More at MHSO.org.

Oct. 21-25: MCC Learning Tour: Travelling Together Through Truth, engaging with First Nations communities and partners of MCC Ontario's Indigenous Neighbours program in Timmins.

Online

Sept. 20: Mennonite World Conference international hour of prayer, 14:00 UTC. Register at mwc-cmm.org/en

To ensure timely publication of upcoming events, please send Calendar announcements eight weeks in advance of the event date by email to calendar@canadianmennonite.org.

For more Calendar listings, visit canadianmennonite.org/churchcalendar.

Classifieds

Inspiring Devotionals

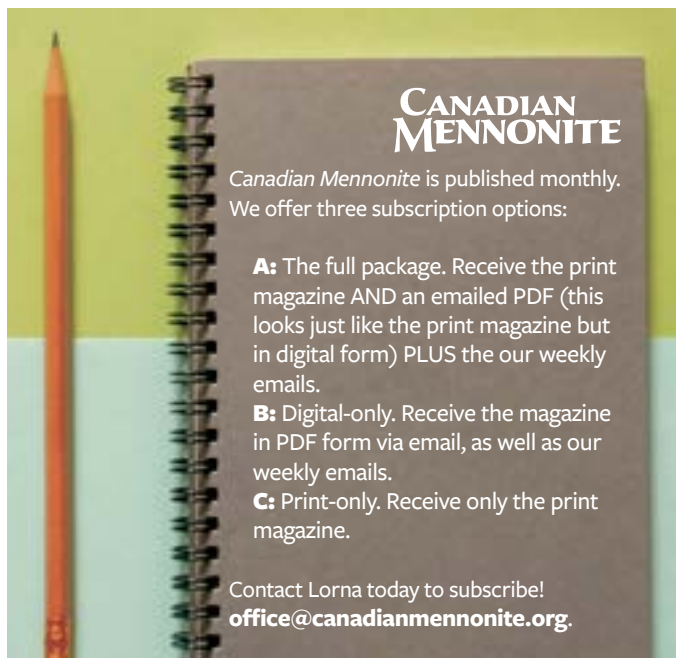
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An atypical testimony

By Zachary Shields

On this page you'll see a picture of me as a very young child being held by my mother on our raspberry farm.

This candid shot was taken by a photographer accompanying a national magazine writer visiting our farm just south of the border in Lyndon, Washington, to document the presence of the Minutemen on the day they started patrolling the U.S.-Canada border. Although I was unaware at the time, this was my first experience of advocating for peace, justice and the reconciling work of God.

My parents, and more specifically my mother, had drawn the attention of the media with her efforts to resist this militia-like initiative. My mother spent weeks planning, handing out signage, checking in on affected neighbours and organizing

protests with our church on the Canadian side of the border. The planned culmination of this work was a protest at the Peace Arch border crossing, but my



Zachary Shields held by his mother, Sara.

mother didn't make it. The protest ended up taking place shortly after her sudden and unexpected death from hantavirus.

I had just turned five.

To say that our community caught us as we were falling is an understatement. Members of our church opened their homes to give us a place to live for months as the Centers for Disease Control investigated how my mother had acquired this rare and deadly virus.

My father decided to raise my brother and me in Canada, near our home congregation, Langley Mennonite Fellowship.

The church would continue to play an instrumental role in my healing over the years. Thanks to mentors and friends, I learned the joy of service, pursuing peace and practicing compassion. Perhaps most importantly, I was not discouraged in my wrestling with God—I grew up in a community that listened to my

many doubts about faith, God and life in general.

One of my earliest memories of church is that of my friends and I engaging in what our then-Sunday school teacher, Russell Nelson, called “a preschool support group.” We insisted on having our own sharing time like the big people had during worship. Our problems were different and potentially silly to adults, but they were immensely serious for us. I am grateful for those precious times of listening and caring for one another.

But Sunday was only one day of the week. Elementary school was challenging, as I had regressed developmentally due to the trauma. I forgot how to dress myself, to ride a bike and to advocate for my basic needs. I had almost no confidence in myself or in God, with whom I was sad and angry.

Real healing would not begin until I attended a mini-week at Camp Squeah the following summer. There I had a safe place to feel like a regular kid again. I look back fondly on the extra time the staff spent with me, helping me work through my emotions and questions about God. I continued attending Camp Squeah every summer.

In my teens, I began helping with children’s ministry at church. My confidence in Christ had been rebuilt, and I began to explore how the teachings of Jesus about non-violence and radical love could be applied outside Sunday School.

In these early years of high school, those beliefs were again tested, this time by being bullied. I learned that, years before, my congregation had founded an organization called Community Justice Initiatives, which had developed a victim-offender reconciliation program for schools. Through a CJI mediator’s praxis of the love of Jesus, I began to heal from this difficult experience.

I spent a month at camp after Grade 11 as a senior leadership trainee, and three summers as a cabin counsellor. The time I spent with campers and fellow staff resulted in great memories and an even greater relationship with Jesus. I was content with my church involvement. Little did I know I would soon receive a personal call to faith-based action.

I was at college in early 2023 when

my pastor, Ian Funk, forwarded me an invitation to Living Hope, a young adult Mennonite climate action retreat in Manitoba. The conversations there were passionate and deeply moving. Toward the end of our weekend, through which the Holy Spirit was moving, I could not suppress the notion that another young adult retreat was needed, expanding the conversation. Participants and planners affirmed this idea.

I imagined the “Young Adult Anabaptist Conference for an Active Future,” aimed at young adults in the Mennonite church and other Anabaptist circles, and quickly assembled a ragtag band of other young adult Mennos. Together we developed a project proposal, became a Mennonite Church British Columbia young adult task group, and received funds to carry out our vision.

The conference this past June was a success. Young adults from across Canada and the United States took a deep dive into what it means to be an Anabaptist follower of Christ in the modern context—at the cusp of the tradition’s quincentenary—and discussed how to face the challenges of our time just as the first Anabaptists, most of whom were young adults, did centuries ago.

It was an unforgettable weekend, but the underlying consensus was that there is only so much we could do as individuals; in order to achieve what the Lord has set out for us to do, we must come together as a faith community as envisioned by Jesus, to pursue peace.

This is not a typical testimony, however I cannot tell my faith story apart from the story of my life in community, for it is through community that I have received and seen God’s radical love a hundred times over.

As my dad says, “Anabaptist faith is never simply an individual matter. We never come to Jesus alone, for to accept Jesus is to also accept the companionship of Jesus’ followers.” ●

Zachary Shields is the event coordinator for the Mennonite Church B.C. young adult task group. He studies at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana.

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Publisher: Tobi Thiessen
Editor: Will Braun
Associate Editor: Susan Fish
Editorial Assistant: A. S. Compton
Design: Anne Boese
Social Media: Madalene Arias
Advertising: Ben Thiessen
Circulation: Lorna Aberdein
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Regional correspondents

B.C.: Amy Rinner Waddell
Alberta/Saskatchewan: Katie Doke Sawatzky
Eastern Canada: Madalene Arias

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CONTACT US

C5 - 490 Dutton Drive
Waterloo ON N2L 6H7
Phone: 519-884-3810
Toll-free: 1-800-378-2524

General submissions: submit@canadianmennonite.org
Letters: letters@canadianmennonite.org
Calendar items: calendar@canadianmennonite.org
Milestones: milestones@canadianmennonite.org
Change of address or any other inquiries: office@canadianmennonite.org

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490 Dutton Drive, Unit C5
Waterloo ON N2L 6H7

Phone: 519-884-3810
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