

“It’s like dating around”

Mennonite young adults, baptism, and the church

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Autumn Wiebe grew up attending a Mennonite church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and graduated with honours from a nearby Mennonite high school.¹ Soon she will graduate from Canadian Mennonite University (CMU), the school that I attend. As we have coffee together, she displays the same passion for her Christian faith that I’ve seen in her since we

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met five years ago. She cares about our topic, baptism, because she cares about the church.

Not all of Autumn’s experiences with the church have been positive, but she’s grateful for the ones that have been, and she looks forward to more. “There are a lot of really good Mennonite people and good Mennonite churches,” she tells me.

“Do you think you’ll ever want to be an active part of a Mennonite church?” I ask.

“Yeah—I think so,” she replies. In fact, a good portion of our conversation

strays to her thoughts about where she might go to church after she graduates. She lights up when talking about two leading candidates.

With a pedigree and a projected future like this, Autumn fits a modern Mennonite mold almost standard among Canadian Mennonites in my circles. At the same time, however, she displays an increasingly common postmodern departure from that mold: she’s never been baptized.

As we explore this subject together, Autumn ventures an analogy that comes up a lot with unbaptized young adult Mennonites. She tells me, “I’m hesitant to put myself out there into a church community. I feel like

1 All interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

there are plenty of churches that would welcome me and make me a member, and it would be a very good community. But it's almost like dating, like . . . is this . . . am I good here?"

"It sounds like you don't feel ready to commit, like you're still happy, preferring to test, to date around, as it were," I venture.

"Yeah. Date around. These are good analogies for church," she answers, laughing.

"Yeah, this is gonna be all over my thesis. It's gonna be called "Dating Around: Young Adults and Baptism,"" I joke.

"It should be called that," she proclaims. "It's so true. Yeah, it does feel like dating around."

My conversation with Autumn was one of ten in-depth interviews that Joseph Kiranto, a fellow CMU student, and I completed with sev-



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enteen- to twenty-nine-year-old university students of European descent in Winnipeg. Each student self-identified as a practicing Christian and as having experienced significant faith formation in at least one Mennonite church. None of them had been baptized.

Collectively, these students told Joseph and me that they view baptism much as they view dating and thinking about marriage. Baptism, like marriage, is important, so they want to get it right, and now is not a good time for that. The observations of these young adults led Joseph and me to conclude that the church has much to learn about itself

from them, not just about baptism, but about how it functions as the body of Christ.

"Baptism is important"

Independently, two of our interviewees, Brittany and Katrina, used the same exclamation—"It's bigger than marriage!"—to explain their hesitancy about getting baptized. Others seemed initially indifferent but eventually revealed attitudes similar to Brittany and Katrina's.

When first asked whether he had considered baptism, Sean Rempel Bergen casually responded: "Um, not very seriously. I've almost made a

choice not to for now. I have been asked if I wanna join the baptismal meetings, and sometimes it’s just inconvenient because it’s when I have volleyball. And there hasn’t been one that’s very applicable, and I also am just not sure in what I believe.”

But when Joseph asked Sean to “say a little bit more about that,” Sean confessed that he is doing significant soul searching. Baptism is something he is processing with others, as he tries to answer serious questions: “I like having conversations [with people] about why they are [baptized and are confident in their faith]. A lot of the time they say, ‘I’m Christian because my parents are Christian and I grew up in a Christian home.’ I’ve always needed not exactly evidence but more proof and a reason, in a sense. And I’m still not sure about it, and I wish that I could feel like there is a God. But I don’t feel like that a lot of the time. I believe in a creator. I think that something created this world, and how amazing it is. People see God in nature, but I feel like he’s not around nowadays. Or if he is, I don’t see him. And I would really like to. And it would be a lie if I said I could see God. I just have too many questions about faith to get baptized and make a commitment.”

Sean’s initial response to Joseph might lead us to conclude that unbaptized young adult Christians see baptism as unimportant. In our interviews, however, it became clear that interviewees take baptism quite seriously, even when they initially hint otherwise. These interviewees are hesitant about baptism because it is important to them. Baptism, like marriage, is “a big deal.”

“So I want to get it right”

Just as they emphasized baptism’s importance, participants described feeling significant internal pressure to “get it right.” Here, the marriage analogy was employed the most. Brittany explained to me that baptism takes a lot of thought. “It’s not something that you should just do on a whim. It’s something that you should be thinking about for a long time before you do it. It’s like any marriage. It’s a marriage between you and Christ, and it’s not like you just jump into a marriage, right? I’m hoping that soon I can set aside some time of reflection, and I can really reflect on what I believe and where I want to see myself and God in the however many years I have left. I think it’s just something that needs really, really thorough thought.”

Brittany was adamant that baptism should only be the concern of the baptizee and Christ, so it was not surprising that the preparation she felt

she needed to do was very personal: reflecting about herself, her beliefs, and where she wants to see herself and God.

Others, like Sean Rempel Bergen, felt that getting baptism right requires certainty about God's existence. Similarly, Thomas Enns felt he needed to be certain about the words of scripture. He doubted that any local pastors knew its original languages and context well enough to teach him what it truly said. He hoped, after finishing his accounting degree, to study Hebrew and Greek extensively, until he could know for himself what scripture really says.

A number of participants expressed concerns that their lifestyles are "not Christian enough" for them to be baptized. Marcus Buhler, for



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example, felt it would not be right for him and his friends to choose baptism, because they go to too many drinking parties, and he knew that they would continue to do so, because it is fun.

Although not everyone seemed so concerned about whether Christians should party, others expressed deep concern about another lifestyle choice: commitment to social justice. Katrina Zaun, a CMU student, explained that she was not ready for baptism because she did not yet know how to "fight oppression" and undo her privilege. "I think that

baptism is bigger than marriage, and it's gotta be a commitment to live in a way that's gonna dedicate your life to fighting systems of oppression, and it's gonna be a way of speaking out and acting every single day, trying to figure out what my privileges are and undoing those. It has to be a way of living a certain way economically, and in partnerships with people, but I don't know what those are."

Beneath these varied concerns, participants shared the worry that their baptisms might be insincere, and an insincere baptism would be worse than being unbaptized. They frequently contrasted themselves with peers in their home churches and home communities who had gotten baptized. Participants hoped to avoid the fate of those Brittany described as "stalemate Christians," who say, "Oh, yeah, yeah, I believe in God," but then they go and they don't do anything about it."

These kinds of Christians, Nathaniel Wiebe explained, just give in to pressures to please others, especially their parents. As a result, he continued, they end up leaving their church after their baptism, or living hypocritically as “Sunday morning Christians,” or participating in their church in an inauthentic way. Interviewees frequently demonstrated relief or even congratulated themselves for having avoided such a fate by not getting baptized too soon.

Thomas and Brittany also talked about what they perceive to be an inauthentic category on the other end of the spectrum. Brittany called these “radicalized Christians,” and Thomas explained that these were Christians who felt they needed to match the enthusiasm and narratives of persuasive pastors, as well as guest speakers and programs like Youth with a Mission (YWAM), which Brittany and Thomas found to be overly reliant on unbelievable stories of spiritual experiences. They explained that many of these “radicalized Christians” later “crashed” and left their churches. Even those who stayed in church were seen as inauthentic Christians, because their “spiritual highs” seemed to have been manufactured by others.

In summary, the young adults we interviewed expressed the conviction that because baptism is so important, they need to get it right. Getting baptism right means at least two things. First, it means being certain. One has to be certain one holds correct beliefs, certain that God exists, certain of the truth of scripture, certain one has a close enough relationship with God, certain one prays enough, certain one reads the Bible enough, certain that one will stop partying, and/or certain that one is consistently opposing systems of oppression. Second, getting it right also usually means being certain as an individual. Giving in to pressure from one’s peers, parents, or congregation was seen as an affront to the sanctity of baptism because it would be insincere and inauthentic.

“And now is not a good time for that”

According to our interviewees, baptism is important, and therefore one needs to get it right. Finally, interviewees explained that they were not at a good stage of life to get something as important as baptism right.

Autumn told us: “If I’m to speak on my generation, [I’d say] we just don’t know where we’re going. We don’t know where we are. We feel very unsettled. And I think baptism scares us because we see it as a commitment that we can’t go back on. And we don’t know where our lives will take us. Especially on the aspect of membership: we don’t know where we

want to be in ten years, if we wanna stick to our choices that we're making right now. [We don't know] if we'll feel the same way in ten years."

Autumn feels uncertain about where she will end up, and she is concerned about making a choice that will not fit the transitions coming in her life. How could she seriously consider baptism while she is in the midst of making so many other choices that could decide her future? Her peers consistently emphasized similar concerns.

For some interviewees, their high school years had, briefly, felt like a good time to get baptized. In explaining how that feeling had changed, these young adults often described losses or conflicts in their congregations. Many talked about the loss of a pastor, decline of a youth program, or tensions within the youth group. Others described conflicts between members of their family and other congregants.

For many, conflict and simmering congregational tensions had contributed substantially to the decision to delay baptism. Now, as university students, they feel that they have too many things to figure out about life to be able to commit to baptism. Rather than seeing this as problematic, however, they expressed relief that they had avoided the fate of their peers who had gotten baptized as teens. To our interviewees, those baptized as teens are now the "stalemate" and "radicalized" Christians who got baptized too soon.

Emerging adulthood

Our interviewees' articulation of these three themes—baptism is important, and they want to get it right, and now is not a good time for that—makes it evident that their way of thinking about baptism locates them in a stage of life known as emerging adulthood. The phrase *emerging adulthood*, coined in 2000 by psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, has been used to describe the way contemporary young adults in the West approach their late teens and their twenties.²

According to Arnett, today's young adults see their late teens and their twenties as a time to figure out who they are and to explore their options. They believe that in order to make the right decisions, one must use one's young adult years to test options. They see making commitments and taking on obligations during these years as prematurely foreclosing on their options, and as associated with future failure and with allowing

2 Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004).

others to define them. Yes, commitments are important, and therefore young adults want to get them right. In the interests of doing so, young adults feel the need to explore their identity and options now. That way, when the time is right, they will make the right commitments.

Thoughts for Mennonite churches

While these observations may initially seem to imply that Western young adult Christians simply require the church to be patient, there is ample reason to suggest that more comprehensive self-evaluation is in order. For Arnett, emerging adulthood was in part explained by “the shadow of divorce”:

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young adults’ perceptions that their parents’ generation experienced high divorce rates and unsatisfying marriages because they got married before they had dated long enough to find their true soulmates.³

Sociologist Andrew Cherlin, however, has observed that the root cause of high American divorce rates is not so much that too many people have gotten married too young, but, rather, a post-1960 rise in “expressive individualism”: the belief that one’s lifelong calling is to discover oneself and become the individual that one is truly supposed to be.⁴ In short, a fixation with exploring options by and for oneself is not unique to one’s twenties; it is lifelong. Cherlin also argues that American churches were and are complicit in this development. As

more and more post-1950 churches prioritized personal spiritual exploration and a personal relationship with Jesus, the church both accommodated and perpetuated the prioritization of private self-discovery.⁵

3 Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 112–15.

4 Andrew J. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).

5 Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 105–14.

In their history of North American Mennonites, Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt depict a similar trajectory for many Mennonites.⁶ First, they observe that as mid-twentieth-century Mennonites began to more comprehensively engage their North American contexts, many individuals and congregations found that “evangelicalism was an ally on [the] journey of Mennonite renewal.”⁷ It “emphasized personal commitment” and “provided theological tools for Mennonites beginning to grapple with



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how to communicate their faith in the modern world.”⁸ In our interviewees’ efforts to be surer of their personal relationships with God—as well as to pray and read their Bible more fervently and to repent from partying—their insecurity about baptism implied that a decidedly evangelical—and therefore individual—emphasis has characterized their formation as Mennonites.

Of course, many Mennonites and Mennonite congregations would be quick to argue that they chose and developed an ecclesial alternative to mainstream evangelicalism. Beginning with a rediscovery of the “Anabaptist Vision,” they embraced what Loewen and Nolt label as a “neo-Anabaptism [that] differed in perceptible ways from the spirituality of evangelicalism.”⁹ In its emphasis on Christian “community,” “discipleship,” and “peace,” it “expected that Mennonites would stand in some tension with a world of individualism” while offering “a model of radical political action.”¹⁰

Our interviews, however, suggest that even neo-Anabaptist-oriented young adults struggle with personal certainty. While some interviewees

6 Royden Loewen and Steven M. Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace: A Global Mennonite History: North America* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2012).

7 Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, 147.

8 Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, 147.

9 Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, 154–55.

10 Loewen and Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace*, 154–56.

articulated strong convictions about the need to be agents of radical political action, they also often sounded disappointed with their individual ability to be "good enough" at it. Katrina Zaun lamented: "I think that baptism is the biggest decision someone makes in their life, and I'm not sure what exactly I'm committing to. If following Jesus is so radical that it leads somebody to the cross, then surely it's gotta be a commitment to living a certain way economically, and in partnerships with people, but I don't know what those are."

Furthermore, Katrina and her fellow interviewees, both neo-Anabaptist- and evangelical-leaning, lamented that they struggle to find community at church. Echoing the many stories that interviewees told me of feeling socially disconnected from their churches and of seeing social dysfunction in their churches, Katrina observed: "It doesn't happen very often, but every now and then something happens and I get a glimpse of the church being the church. And those are the moments when I think, I'm getting baptized 'cause I wanna live my life like that. And often those times look very different from what I see [in my congregation]. Very different. So the

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conversation is [about] more than [just social justice]; it's [about] why are we so quiet when we're singing our songs? And it's why aren't we sharing? I know that half of you are on depression drugs, but you're not talking about it during sharing time."

Whether they and their home congregations' orientation is evangelical, neo-Anabaptist, or a combination of the two, our interviewees revealed two aspects of their Mennonite experience that warrant further reflection. First, they revealed that they believe that baptismal commitment requires certainty of belief (in God, scripture, and more) and certainty about aspects of one's behavior

(whether praying, reading the Bible enough, not partying, being a radical agent of social change, and more). Second, most also revealed that they believe that this certainty of belief and action is something they need to arrive at individually, and they often described feeling or witnessing social isolation in their churches. In short, our interviewees revealed that

regardless of whether they have absorbed an evangelical or neo-Anabaptist theology, they have absorbed an emphasis on Christian belief and action, and they have experienced a partial or nearly complete lack of Christian community.

In the Western context, where young adult—and lifelong—individualism reigns supreme, these interviewees should spur Mennonites to deeper reflection about how we are church. It is all too easy for evangelical-leaning Mennonites to suggest that neo-Anabaptist Mennonites have overemphasized a theology of works, just as it is all too easy for neo-Anabaptist-leaning Mennonites to suggest that evangelical Mennonites have overemphasized personal faith. Both appear to have contributed to these Mennonite young adults' sense that baptism is an individual achievement, either of works or of personal faith.

Furthermore, neither orientation seems to have consistently provided these young adults with a robust experience of community. So, we all must ask—and we must ask *together*: what does it mean to *be* the church? Beyond our Western fixations on individual certainty, might Christ present us with a community-oriented relationality that supersedes our beliefs and actions? Certainly, beyond the void of limitless options and the trap of personal perfectionism, Christ beckons us home to liberating commitments, commitments that transcend the empty freedom of dating around.

About the author

Peter Epp recently completed his MA in theological studies at Canadian Mennonite University, where he now resources pastors and congregations, connects students with the church, and teaches. He attends Charleswood Mennonite Church and lives in Winnipeg, where he and his partner, Shanda Hochstetler, spend most of their time trying to entice their three-year-old, Oliver, to sit on the potty for more than three seconds, and their one-year-old, Ruthie, to sleep for more than three hours.