Widening the circle of church

Joanna Shenk

"Where do you see hope in the church?" he asked me. I could hear sadness and pain in his voice. I thought for a moment and then named people and communities that give me hope. My response wasn't enough to brighten his outlook, but he responded by saying, "Maybe your job is to look for corners of hope in the church and share them with others."

People in discipleship communities are saying prophetic and pastoral words to the church. They are looking for hope. And they are looking for co-workers committed to embodying the kindom of God on earth.

For a few years my friend had participated in an intentional community affiliated with Mennonite Church USA. He decided not to join the community and subsequently also stopped participating at church. He is a thoughtful person, expecting integrity of himself and others. He came to the Anabaptist tradition looking for embodied faith. He found some of that, but he also found disappointment. In his experience, the hospitality, peacemaking, and reconciliation to which church people said they were committed didn't extend to everyone, and many Mennonites seemed comfortable with the North American status quo. He told me, "I didn't find anyone I could really follow."

What can we learn from discipleship communities?

Since the fall of 2009 I have had the opportunity to get to know many nontraditional church communities—or discipleship communities. Some identify as Mennonite and others don't. In my role with Mennonite Church USA I've been learning and sharing about how the institutional Mennonite church can be shaped by these communities.

My travel has been in the United States, but I have gotten to know some communities in Canada as well. One outcome of this

work is the publication of *Widening the Circle: Experiments in Christian Discipleship* (Herald Press, 2011), which tells nineteen different stories about discipleship communities.[1]

If the term *discipleship community* is new to you, here is a definition offered by Ched Myers, a mentor, who (with his partner Elaine Enns) co-wrote the introduction to *Widening the Circle*. *Discipleship* is rooted in the biblical call to follow Jesus as expressed in solidarity with the poor, creative peacemaking, the inclusion of the excluded (because of race, class, and gender), and the formation of alternative communities. These *communities*, committed to the journey of transformation through discipleship, generally work for renewal from the margins and engage ecumenically with other likeminded groups.

The communities I have gotten to know have been largely but not exclusively made up of white people. Many of the people currently writing and speaking about alternative church expressions in North America are white and male. I wanted *Widening the Circle* not to perpetuate this reality but instead to wrestle with it, so I intentionally sought people of color and women to write. Some of the writers grew up within the Anabaptist tradition, but more than half did not.

In this article I will reflect on what people rooted in discipleship communities are saying to the Mennonite church. Their words are prophetic and pastoral. They are looking for hope. And they are looking for co-workers committed to embodying the kindom of God on earth.

Institution and movement, movement and institution

The Anabaptist tradition, on which we've built many institutions, began as a movement. It was the anti-institution of the Reformation, in the eyes of the established church a blight that needed to be wiped out.

It's interesting that persecution and the passage of time have worked together to that end. What would our Anabaptist foremothers and fathers say about our wealth (or burden?) of institutions and respectability in North American society? Because of my work, I will focus on Mennonites in North America, but there are many thriving Anabaptist-Mennonite groups around the world from which we can learn.

And even as I write this, I navigate the tension of being supported by an institution in my work with "movement" communities. I've recognized that it is unwise to pit movements against institutions. After all, movements birth institutions and institutions birth movements. We see this pattern over and over again throughout history, the Anabaptist movement being only one example of this continuing cycle.

Problems arise when we rigidly choose one manifestation over all others, when we are not open to the Spirit guiding new birth. Both movements and institutions can be guilty of this effort to constrain the Spirit. This is a concern that discipleship communities carry about the institutionalized Mennonite church today. So it is exciting to tell them about my work with Mennonite Church USA, and it's challenging to face the journey before us. Part of this journey is to widen our identity as Mennonites, to allow ourselves to be shaped by those who claim the Anabaptist tradition but don't fit within whatever Mennonite stereotypes we carry.

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Unfortunately, I am no longer surprised when people tell me their story of how they read *The Politics of Jesus* and then visited a Mennonite church for the first time. Where they thought they would find a radical counterculture, they instead found a group of middle-class white people who asked about their last name. Those who have told me these stories visited churches made up of white people, which is not representative of all the churches in Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada.

What kind of witness do we have when some of the brightest and most creative Anabaptist converts are let go from our institutions, misunderstood by church leaders, or told to "put a lid on it"? One example that comes to mind is the story of Vincent Harding, whom I interviewed for the first chapter of *Widening the Circle*.

March out of conformity!

Dr. Vincent Harding connected to the Mennonite church in the 1950s. He co-pastored Woodlawn Mennonite Church in Chicago

for a few years in the late 50s. He was one of the first African American pastors in the General Conference Mennonite Church. In the early 60s, he and his spouse, Rosemarie, moved to Atlanta to lead Mennonite House, an interracial Mennonite Voluntary Service unit. It was the first interracial voluntary service unit and the first interracial household in Atlanta.

At Mennonite House (see chapter 2 of *Widening the Circle*, taken from Rosemarie's memoir), they lived around the corner from Martin and Coretta King and became good friends with the Kings. Vincent and Rosemarie were deeply involved in the Civil Rights movement. According to Dr. Harding, the term "Civil Rights movement" is the product of lazy journalists. A more correct title is "the black-led movement for the deepening and broadening of democracy in the United States."

In this black-led movement, Vincent and Rosemarie Harding were specifically tapped by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to meet as a couple with white pastors in the South who wanted to get involved in the movement. At the time Rosemarie still wore a Mennonite prayer covering, and this made them a curiosity and perhaps less threatening to the white pastors with whom they met. Even so, Dr. Harding said that many of their meetings with these pastors happened at night.

They also spoke at Mennonite churches and conferences about issues of race and Christianity. Dr. Harding, now in his eighties and a renowned educator, reflected to me that Mennonites gave him his first public platform from which to talk about the church and social change.

At a Mennonite World Conference gathering in Amsterdam in 1967, Dr. Harding had this to say in a plenary address. At this point he had been connecting with Mennonites for more than ten years. And this was also the year when he penned Dr. King's famous "Beyond Vietnam" speech, which King delivered at Riverside Church in New York City.

> *Mennonite Christians, men [and women] who love humanity, where are we? If . . . Jesus is our guide to life, where are we? In conferences shaking hands and taking pictures? In seminars formulating tidy doctrines of the Spirit? In churches singing and preaching excellent*

theology to the same names for generations? In quiet communities proclaiming law and order and free enterprise? Huddled behind the barricades of the status quo, praying the storm will soon be over so that life can continue undisturbed? March out saints and be counted. March out of the buildings, march out of the denominations, march out of the churches if need be. March out of the conformity and terror of the roaring night. You have nothing to lose but your lives and a world to gain. The Master is already on the road and he says, I am the way, follow me.[2]

After the assassination of Dr. King in 1968, Dr. Harding was asked to be the first director of the King Center in Atlanta and also helped to found the Institute of the Black World, an organization committed to creating and defining the field of black studies.

If Jesus is our guide, where are we? Huddled behind barricades of the status quo, praying the storm will soon be over so that life can continue undisturbed? March out and be counted. March out of the churches, if need be.

He told me that at that point in his life he felt compelled to stand in the heart of the black community. This meant he wasn't able to engage with the Mennonite church as much as in the past, and some Mennonite church leaders were concerned. They sent him letters saying, essentially, are you still with us? Are you a part of us? Dr. Harding commented that he never felt that he stopped being Mennonite. What he did was fully embrace his identity as a black man. However, this identification felt like a rejection to many white Mennonites. To them, being Mennonite (as *they* understood it) was the most important identity; everything else was secondary. What they weren't able to grasp was that being Mennonite in the United States at the time was very much wrapped up in Eurocentric norms.

How is it that the Anabaptist movement of radical nonconformity to culture (meaning: conformity to Christ) has become a denomination known for its stifling practices producing conformity in community? How is it that our conformity more often mirrors the status quo of the dominant culture? During the "Civil Rights movement," this tendency manifested itself in ambivalence

about protesting racist laws and engaging in nonviolent direct action.

What would it have looked like for Mennonite leaders to affirm Dr. Harding on his journey, to say: We celebrate the fact that you're deeply exploring your identity as a black man. We also need to think about what it means for us to be white in a racist society. Instead the message seemed to be: You must be like us. You must make sense to us within our understanding of what it means to be Mennonite.

Do we let those who join us reshape us?

For close to a decade, Andrea Ferich lived and worked in Camden, New Jersey. Originally she was among the cofounders of the new monastic community there. In chapter fourteen of *Widening the Circle*, she writes about her decision to leave the new monastic movement and also about her formation at a Mennonite church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Do we recognize ourselves as a changed body when new people join us? Do we allow ourselves to be changed and shaped by those who join us?

Her father was drafted into the United States army and fought in the Vietnam War. While serving there, he had a life-changing experience when he encountered a group of Buddhist monks. Without weapons they walked for peace to a village that the soldiers were occupying. Andrea writes,

> *Dad committed himself to finding a group of Christians that carried out their faith commitments in the same way, following Christ in simplicity, peace, and community. It led him to the Mennonite church when he returned to Lancaster. This war brought my family to the Mennonite church, and shaped a great journey of justice for me. The Mennonite church taught me to pursue justice. In the purest sense, justice means changing the oppressive systems that are in place to new systems that allow us to fully love each other.*[3]

Andrea goes on to talk about how justice and nonviolence were themes for her in this Mennonite congregation. This in-

cluded caring for the earth and learning about service done by Mennonite Central Committee all over the world.

"Yet," she laments, "even with these embodied understandings of justice, the hierarchy of the church loved their accomplishments more than seeking equal partnership with those they 'helped.' "

> *After five years of church attendance we were still being introduced to visiting clergy and outsiders as 'the Ferich family from the city that came to know Christ through the urban outreach ministries of the church.' We realized we were never going to be full members. The church leadership chose to remember what they 'gave' us rather than recognizing our vital contributions to the community. . . . For these reasons my family left the Mennonite church.*[4]

The experience of Andrea's family raises important questions about the hospitality of Mennonites. On the one hand we see ourselves as welcoming to strangers. We eagerly share food and invite travelers to "Mennonite your way." But do we recognize ourselves as a changed body when new people join us? Do we think about the ways the Ferich family could have led the church in walking alongside other Vietnam vets who were disillusioned by war? Do we allow ourselves to be changed and shaped by those who join us?

Gelassenheit is not a pietistic relic but a necessity

Mark Van Steenwyk, co-founder of The Mennonite Worker (formerly Missio Dei) in Minneapolis, writes about *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness) in chapter thirteen of *Widening the Circle*. Mark grew up in a variety of conservative evangelical churches in Minnesota. After working with the emergent church movement for a few years, Mark and Misso Dei decided to affiliate with Mennonite Church USA through Central Plains Mennonite Conference in 2008.

In his chapter he connects *Gelassenheit* with the practice of baptism, calling baptism the initiation into the life of self-surrender. The word *Gelassenheit* was borrowed from the mystics, he notes, but was understood in practical terms by Anabaptists, through the relationships people have with each other.

"*Gelassenheit*," he goes on, "is about ridding one's life of all obstacles to love of God and neighbor."

> *As the early Anabaptist Hans Haffner wrote in his devotional tract* Concerning a True Soldier of Christ*: "When we truly realize the love of God we will be ready to give up for love's sake even what God has given us."*
>
> *This commitment to yieldedness was central to the early Anabaptist understanding of discipleship. Unfortunately, it has largely disappeared from modern Anabaptist awareness. I am convinced that a spirituality of* Gelassenheit *is central to discipleship today. Far from being a pietistic relic of the past, it is a timely necessity.*[5]

He explains this new spirituality of *Gelassenheit* as a means to remove "all the obstacles to our love." It does not allow us to separate our love of God from love of others.

> *The most powerful thing a community can do in our oppressive world is to come to terms with those things within themselves that prevent them from loving their neighbor and their God. If we are committed to this, we should at least start where Jesus did. Jesus' life and message directly confronted religious, economic, and socio-political inequities. Before we can really understand how to be a part of God's project to transform these inequities, we need to commit to lives of repentance.*[6]

Many people are looking to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition for hope. Our repentance can be a source of hope. We have a lot to learn. We also have a history and an embodied life together to offer.

Love trumps ideology

What are the ways that we as Mennonite bureaucrats, scholars, pastors, and church members have cut ourselves off from relationships of *Gelassenheit*? Where have we valued the stability or survival of our institutions over the prophetic words offered to us? This question is complex because there is a lot at stake.

But we're not alone. There are many people looking to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition for hope today. Our repentance can also be a source of hope. We're on a journey, and we have a lot to learn. We also have a history and an embodied life together to offer. We may never perfectly live out this calling, but I don't think that's the point. The point is living honestly, with repentance, and with a deep commitment to each other.

According to Vincent Harding, it is only when we are in familial relationships that we can wrestle together—that we can "get messy and connected and involved and angry and sorrowful and everything else that deeply engaged people are supposed to get." And, he goes on, "Love trumps ideology every time."

May we, no matter our context, embrace this complex and joy-filled journey of discipleship and church.

Notes

[1] Portions of this article are adapted from from *Widening the Circle: Experiments in Christian Discipleship*, edited by Joanna Shenk. Copyright © 2011 by Herald Press, Harrisonburg, VA 22802. Used by permission. For more information about the book, visit http://www.mennomedia.org/WideningtheCircle.
[2] Vincent Harding, "The Beggars Are Marching . . . Where Are the Saints? in *The Witness of the Holy Spirit: Proceedings of the Eighth Mennonite World Conference, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, July 23–30, 1967*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck and John Howard Yoder (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite World Conference, 1967), 128–29.
[3] *Widening the Circle*, 164.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid, 158.
[6] Ibid.

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