

# Matt's declassified seminary survival guide

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I arrived at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) in 2015 and learned that I was a conservative. This was news to me! I had entered the Mennonite world because of my interest in its beefy peace witness, by way of a Mennonite Voluntary Service placement focused on restorative justice. Not unlike Mennonites, Roman Catholics—the headwaters of my Christian experience—treated “peace and justice” as a churchly

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idiom for a particular species of religious progressivism. I was (and remain) firmly in support of peace as well as justice.


Yet my peace-and-justice self-concept did not (and does not) impress among my peers at AMBS. I can hold forth with some confidence on Christian objections to war, but when it comes to any number of other concerns—among them the centrality of evangelism, the morality of abortion and contraception, biblical authority, divorce and remarriage, the importance of the ecumenical creeds, participation in state politics, church discipline, the legitimacy of various forms of nonviolent direct action,

and my less-than-unquestioning embrace of women's ordination—not to mention the all-significant question of my attitude toward gender and sexual minorities, which (in my circles, at least) is treated as an ultimate index of progressivism or conservatism—I am utterly backward and troglodytic.

I unwittingly outed myself as a troglodyte early in my AMBS career, and the label stuck. Apart from a smattering of international students from the Global South and a motley bunch of American ex-evangelicals,

I often feel an island unto myself, a “clod . . . washed away by the sea,”<sup>1</sup> whose cloddishness is every day more apparent.

My hope is that these reflections will be edifying regardless of whether one is a so-called conservative at AMBS, or a Pink Menno<sup>2</sup> at a gathering of the Evana Network.<sup>3</sup> In other words, although these comments are born out of my personal situation, my intention is *not* to advance conservative opinions (whatever that means) over and against liberal opinions



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(whatever that means). Rather, I intend to share some general reflections on my experience of living, moving, and being in a setting where many of my own deeply held convictions are not shared and are sometimes even met with firm resistance. This is to say that my intention is to write for Christians who live in the world.

### **Honesty in the open forum**

One of the tricky dynamics that I first needed to address during my time at AMBS was the tendency to minimize the significance of disagreement. I encountered this tendency in myself as

well as in the people around me. I needed to come to grips with the reality that, at the very bottom, I hold some things to be true, to the exclusion of others. Disagreements about what is true, especially in the weighty areas named in our confession of faith, have correlatively weighty implications. Some disagreements might even compromise our Christian unity.

My intuition is that the temptation to trivialize the importance of disagreement is strongest in settings that purport to be nonexclusive, i.e., in

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1 John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1959), 108.

2 Pink Menno exists to “to make the Mennonite Church an open and welcoming place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people.” See more at <http://www.pinkmenno.org/history-vision/>.

3 The Evana Network is a fellowship of evangelical Anabaptist churches. A presenting issue for the formation of the Evana Network was increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships in Mennonite Church USA. See more at <https://evananetwork.org/about/vision>.

settings whose mission it is to be a kind of “open forum.” By minimizing the stakes of disagreement, the custodians of the open forum aim to encourage participation from a wide range of ideological camps, extending thereby the possibility of unity to the widest range of individuals.

The generous spirit of this approach notwithstanding, it yields questionable outcomes. Most obviously, the low-stakes framing of the conversation discourages full, honest participation from individuals who believe that the subject of the conversation is, actually, a matter of high stakes. The temptation to minimize the stakes of our disagreement is compounded, in my experience, by a general tendency among Mennonites toward conflict aversion. We want to get along, and we pride ourselves on the ability to get along with people who are different from us. The open acknowledgment that disagreement bears social consequences has the potential to shipwreck our ambition to be in loving relationship with a diverse cast of characters.

We owe it to ourselves and to our peers to be honest about the stakes of our disagreements. Squaring up to the possibility that our disagreements might really matter for our relationships demands of us a measure of courage. But openly articulating our level of investment in a particular truth claim also enables us to be considerate of one another. I believe that this kind of courage and honesty will be rewarded with the possibility of deep and authentic relationships, even friendships, if not with full Christian unity. Full-orbed honesty of this kind may not ultimately guarantee unity, but I suspect it to be a prerequisite.

## **Yielding the space**

When I am outnumbered, one of my first impulses is to insist on my own rights. After all, rights are supposed to protect the interests of minorities! Freedom of speech protects unpopular speech, and freedom of religion protects unpopular religion, even if these freedoms do not shield us from the consequences of our expression. In the pursuit of justice, it has been important for marginalized voices to strategically insist—at times, forcefully—that their rights be honored. The book of Acts tells us that the apostle Paul strategically invoked his rights as a Roman citizen.<sup>4</sup> But Paul also wrote that not everything that is lawful edifies.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Acts 22:25.

5 1 Cor. 10:23.

The operative word here is “strategic.” We do well not to be carried away by our first impulse to assert our rights, or to run with our own (often over-exaggerated) sense of personal victimization. We need to be discerning. When faced with the impulse to insist on my rights, I have made

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it a discipline to ask: Where is this coming from? Am I seeking validation? Am I simply being oppositional? Or does injecting my opinion where it is not particularly welcome genuinely serve the interests of Christ and his kingdom? Does this edify?

As I began to consistently ask these questions of myself, I noticed a shift in my posture at AMBS. Instead of struggling against the governing consensus, I yielded my claim on the space. Instead of jockeying for the power to host the conversation, feeling personal responsibility for outcomes, I assumed the posture of a guest. I accepted the fact that I was not in control. This yielded posture opened up new possibilities for relationship.

The late, great Mennonite missionary Alan Kreider preached that the heart of Christian mission is entering into places where we are not in control.<sup>6</sup> Yielding control, we open ourselves to the possibility of being surprised. Serendipity and spontaneity become possible again.

In his assessment of Reinhold Niebuhr’s ethics, John Howard Yoder criticized a controlling, violent concept of responsibility—a kind of “responsibility” that lends itself to engagement in warfare.<sup>7</sup> John Nugent argues in *Endangered Gospel* that the social ethic of the early church was not accompanied by an absolute sense of responsibility for broader out-

6 “Alan Kreider leading worship,” YouTube video, 7:53, from Mennonite Church Saskatchewan delegate session, February 26–27, 2010, posted by Dick Benner, March 1, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T7yb3WQ3G8>.

7 John H. Yoder, “The Theological Basis of the Christian Witness to the State,” John Howard Yoder Digital Library, 1955, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15705coll18/id/2294>.

comes in society.<sup>8</sup> I have come to believe that the yielded posture I have cultivated through my time at AMBS is an expression of characteristically Anabaptist insights into Christian faith and practice.

## Rounding home

Yielding up my claims at the seminary gave me a sense of spiritual relief. It was a breath of fresh air and freedom. Yet even with this burst of fresh air and freedom, my desire to be around like-minded Christians did not dissipate. I had grown to see that the seminary—by virtue of its

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mission to be a kind of open forum—was not an appropriate place for me to seek to meet this need. But I came to believe even more confidently that the desire for fellow travelers is healthy and holy. The New Testament does indeed countenance the value of unity of mind,<sup>9</sup> although not in the verses cited regularly by the custodians of open forums. All Christians need a home base, a sending community, solid ground from which to launch into the unknown, unmanaged, and uncontrolled.

I found that the church I was attending—a fantastic, loving group of people with an open forum mentality—was not able to provide me with the kind of sup-

port I needed as I navigated the open forum at AMBS. We parted on good terms, as I began attending a church whose convictions aligned more precisely with my own. While I believe that we are called to enter spaces of difference—spaces where we are not in control, where our vision is contested and challenged in the encounter with others, and where we contest and challenge in turn—it is also essential to have spaces where meaningful similarities are acknowledged and celebrated.

A word of caution: Trash-talking is an easy habit to develop, especially if our home base is populated with other people who are longing to have

8 John C. Nugent, *Endangered Gospel: How Fixing the World Is Killing the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), e-book locations 1657–59.

9 1 Pet. 3:8, 1 Cor. 1:10.

their perspectives validated after a difficult week spent engaging with difference. It is important to have places where we can let off steam, but it is also important to remember that it is unhealthy to live in a sauna. An outward-looking mission focus is an important quality to look for in any home base. Mission offsets our tendency to turn inward, nursing resentment and disapproval. A good home base prepares us to engage graciously with the rest of the world as ambassadors of Christ.

With a home base to provide validation and a sense of shared identity, I no longer felt the need to seek these things in the open forum. I experienced greater freedom from compulsion in my time at AMBS. It suddenly seemed less dire to me that I convince others of the merits of my views. I was better able to resist the goading of some of my more pugnacious peers, and I felt greater liberty to decline invitations from well-meaning professors when they asked me to contribute a token conservative opinion.

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Far from being a bunker to which I could retreat and hide from competing ideas, I found that Sunday mornings at my new church left me more willing to engage the wide spectrum of opinions at AMBS in healthy, fruitful ways.

### **Take it as a gift**

Assigning these purposes to my congregation and to the seminary not only freed me from a compulsiveness and anxiety; it also helped me to see past the quiet resentment that had clouded my vision. I believe that I now see AMBS for what it most fundamentally is: a revolving door of quirky, well-intentioned people in various degrees of error, who

are, for the most part, trying their best to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God. In this, I fit right in, and I consider it a remarkable privilege to associate myself with the AMBS community. Are our differences often substantive? Of course. In fact, I have grave concerns about the fact that some of my peers will be pastors one day. But I am left with little doubt that the feeling is mutual!

Having candidly acknowledged these differences, I cannot help but believe that we are all benefitting from the discomfort of bumping up

against one another in these awkward ways. In fact, I suspect that I am a greater beneficiary of this discomfort than most. As I sit in class at AMBS, I imagine myself as a Mennonite equivalent to the Shinto monk meditating under a waterfall. I am being polished in the buffeting stream. Even in cases when I am not actively engaged in discussion with a contrary viewpoint, I am showered with opinions that push me, internally, to critically reassess and reformulate my own beliefs. My cup runs over with opportunities to develop faculties of self-criticism, resilience, and generosity. I have grown familiar with strong formulations of arguments—arguments that are persuasive, and so too enjoy great popular currency—with which I still ultimately disagree. I have honed my responses in turn.

My time at AMBS has prepared me well to function as a minister of the gospel in the actual world—a world where the proclamation of the gospel meets with actual resistance. In these ways and more, my time at AMBS has been a tremendous gift. I pray that these reflections will help others who feel themselves mired in similar situations understand their situation as gift and opportunity.

### **About the author**

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