Three Mennonite worship spaces

On the interplay of culture, theology, and aesthetics in Mennonite worship

Beverly Lapp

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This is a story of three Mennonite worship spaces in North America built across the span of two centuries and of some of the ecclesiological values expressed through music in these spaces. The first and oldest is a meetinghouse called Plains—named not for its austere style of sanctuary or for the plain dress its members wore for many decades in the mid-twentieth century but rather because of the relatively flat expanse of land it resides on among the rolling hills of southeastern Pennsylvania. First built in 1765, Plains Church was founded by colonist Mennonites who were descendants of the radical Anabaptist movement in sixteenth-century Switzerland and southern Germany. It is the oldest congregation in Lansdale, the township that eventually formed around it. The Plains Meetinghouse sits on the ancestral land of the Lenape people.[1]

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The second space is named Alexanderwohl, and it is found on some of the real plains of North America, on the ancestral land of the Osage tribe. First formed in the Przechowka village of West Prussia by a group of Mennonites in 1820, the congregation chose its name after Czar Alexander I greeted the group and wished them well as they traveled to their new home in Molotschna Colony in southern Russia (now Ukraine). To avoid new military conscription requirements, they

1 Richard J. Lichty, *Meetinghouse on the Plain: Plains Mennonite Congregation, Remembering 250 Years* (Harleysville, PA: PMT, 2015), 6–7.

later journeyed together in 1874 to Goessel, Kansas, as nearly an entire village and congregation. After they spent several decades of worshiping in immigrant houses and one-room schoolhouses, in 1886 a large church in the Dutch Mennonite architectural style was built for the Alexanderwohl congregation, with several additions and renovations since then.[2] Alexanderwhol is one of the oldest continuing Mennonite congregations in the world.[3]

The third space, the Chapel of the Sermon on the Mount, was built in 1965 as the chapel for two Mennonite seminaries sharing a campus in Elkhart, Indiana. It sits on the ancestral land of the Miami and Potawatami. Mennonites with mostly Swiss-German roots opened the Goshen Biblical Seminary, while Mennonite Biblical Seminary was formed by descendants of the Russian Mennonite migration to North America. The two seminaries eventually merged into what is now Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS). The 1965 service of dedication program offers a brief explanation of the chosen name for the chapel, stating, "Jesus brings faith and life together in His sermon recorded in Matthew. This uniting of faith and life is the goal of the seminary community."[4]

The role of instrumentation in Mennonite worship

The Plains church, where I grew up, is now two hundred and fifty years old. During some of those years in the mid–twentieth century, pianos and other instruments were not allowed in the sanctuary. Some North American Mennonite traditions taught during this time that instruments were too ornamental and too soloistic to support the simplicity and community that should be the focus of worship. With an assist from the popular singing schools of the early twentieth century, the spiritual concern that led to a ban of instruments in church services helped a robust four-part a cappella singing tradition become normalized in many Old Mennonite congregations.

An organ was first added to the Alexanderwohl worship space in 1943. Once settled and prospering in their third home since leaving West

2 Judith Unruh, Kris Schmucker, and Brian Stucky, "Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church (Goessel, Kansas, USA)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, January 2021, https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Alexanderwohl_Mennonite_Church_(Goessel,_Kansas,_USA)&oldid=169740.

3 Brian D. Stucky, *Alexanderwohl Names: 1622–2020* (Goessel, KS: Emma Creek), 6.

4 Service of Dedication program for the Chapel of the Sermon on the Mount, June 3, 1965.

Prussia nearly a century earlier, the Alexanderwohl congregation seems to have had little question about bringing an organ into the sanctuary. In time, chorister-led congregational singing made way for organist-led hymns.

In 1974, over thirty years after Alexanderwohl added its organ, an upright piano was rolled into Plains sanctuary for a special program. The church member who played the piano that evening was overjoyed that the ban was ended. However, to the dismay of her and others, the piano was promptly removed after the program. A dance between the lingering ban and the push to relax such rules ensued for five years as the piano was allowed for some events but always removed before Sunday morning worship.[5] The dance finally ended in 1979 when I was ten years old, whether through exhaustion or deliberate decision, and the piano remained in the sanctuary.

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J. Lawrence Burkholder's essay "Words and Music" reveals spiritual concerns about the role of instruments in Christianity that pre-date particular Anabaptist-Mennonite debates like the struggle to keep a piano in the Plains sanctuary. Burkholder observes that Christianity has historically preferred words to music, and music without words is "considered by many to be either devoid of meaning or a threat to faith."[6] He goes on to challenge this idea: "Christianity's fear of the unspoken is exaggerated and needs to be transcended. Reality cannot be reduced to its totality in language. Words spoken specify, but at the same time, limit."[7]

Fear of the unspoken was not the only concern about instruments in church, however. The plain Mennonites of mid-century North America elevated simplicity and service as matters of discipleship, and spending time and resources on the instrumental arts, as with the visual arts, was antithetical to this aim. Discipleship required careful monitoring

5 Lichty, *Meetinghouse on the Plain*, 109

6 J. Lawrence Burkholder, *Sum and Substance: Essays by J. Lawrence Burkholder* (Goshen, IN: Pinchpenny, 1986), 15.

7 Burkholder, *Sum and Substance*, 17.

to guard against artistic pursuits and other worldly distractions that led one away from focus on devotion to God and service to others. Art in support of worship was more acceptable. One might expect, then, that once the Plains sanctuary had a piano permanently, it would be primarily used only in service to sacred hymn texts as accompaniment to congregational singing. Conversely, instrumental accompaniment can be seen as adding a layer of complexity to the aural atmosphere of hymn-singing, which may be too ornate. It is not clear that either of these considerations mattered as much as culture around hymn-singing at Plains. Four-part a cappella congregational singing led by a chorister was such a deeply rooted tradition at Plains that for several more decades the piano was primarily used for solo prelude and offertory music and rarely to accompany hymns. If fear of the unspoken—as represented by solo instrumental offerings within the music service—was at the heart of the instrument ban in churches like Plains, it was quickly transcended as the rules relaxed.

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After college I met my future husband, and when I visited his family for the first time in 1992, we went to the Christmas Eve service at Alexanderwohl, his home church. Although I knew some of the historic and cultural differences between North American Russian Mennonites and the Old Mennonites of Swiss descent, my assumptions about the arts and beauty in Mennonite ecclesiology were jolted as I entered the balcony-surrounded sanctuary. Not only was there a pipe organ and concert grand piano, there was an abundantly decorated Christmas tree on the generous and high worship platform. The organist played prelude and interlude music, at a level I had previously only heard in organ recitals in graduate school, and expertly accompanied robust congregational singing of hymns. These were hymns I knew well but was used to singing without instruments. More accomplished singers performed from a choral loft facing the congregation. As I experienced the strangeness of a different worship culture, I both loved and judged the full embrace of aesthetic richness it represented.

Culture, theology, and aesthetics in Mennonite worship

Now I work at AMBS and attend worship twice each week in the Chapel of the Sermon on the Mount. When I sit in this space, I see elements of the careful austerity of plain Mennonite meetinghouses typical of the seventeenth century and the unassuming exuberance of Russian Mennonite churches built in nineteenth-century North America. The chapel at AMBS is both plain and sophisticated.

The chapel was designed to represent Anabaptist theological convictions that run deeper than particular Mennonite stories. Built at an angle, the chapel faces neither east nor west, and there are no square corners to be found. These features communicate nonconformity and courage to be different. The dark interior suggests refuge, perhaps symbolizing the hidden spaces sixteenth-century Anabaptists needed to worship safely. Solemn brick rises from a low and modest platform to point worshipers upward to natural daylight or moonlight beaming through a small skylight above. The low platform represents that status is no higher for those leading worship, and the skylight invites our focus on God's presence above us. Moveable chairs allow worship in formations that make us aware of each other and God's presence around us.

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The inclusion of a pipe organ was in the building committee's plan from the beginning of the project, and the instrument was ready in 1968, three years after the chapel was built. Already paid for by donors, crafted by its builders in another location and disassembled for delivery, the organ was in boxes in those uneven corners of the chapel when a small group of students held a protest outside a board meeting. They wanted to see if they could persuade seminary leadership to not move forward with installation. The protest was unsuccessful, and the organ was in place and fully functional within a few months.

Some students continued to object and call for its removal for at least another year. Letters and documents reveal intense theological and ethical questions at the heart of their concern.[8] Student Denny Weaver was lead

8 Erland Waltner, interview by Gayle Gerber Koontz, January 21, 1997, Elkhart, Indiana.

signer of a March 1970 letter to the seminary board that decried an organ in the chapel as entirely misaligned with Anabaptism:

> *Organs are part and parcel of the broader, established middle and upper class American Christendom (which is identified with and part of the church-state image). It is from this style of church that the Anabaptists/Mennonites separated themselves over 400 years ago and from which we have sought to differentiate ourselves ever since. We feel that our Anabaptist/Mennonite emphases on simplicity, modesty, brotherhood, discipleship, and stewardship are not in accord with the mainstream of American Christendom nor with an expensive organ.*[9]

Students Don Klassen and Jim Klassen wrote their own letter to the board that same month, decrying church organs as materialistic and another example of Christianity's tendency to ignore suffering in the world:

> *We pull down the shade, turn up the thermostat, and turn the stereo up loud. On Sundays we can even sit in padded pews, look through stained glass windows, and have the organ drown out the sights and sounds of pain and despair. . . . Organs, etc., are as inconsistent with Christ's Way of Life as war is. Will the Board of Directors help direct the Seminary in leading our Churches by putting the needs and concerns of the crying and dying over our "aesthetics"? If not, we may as well close all discussion of Discipleship on this campus.*[10]

In response, Esko Loewen, pastor at Bethel College Mennonite in North Newton, Kansas, urged Don and Jim Klassen to consider that rejecting the organ was not the way to activate against a society weighed down by materialism and greed. He wrote that a skillfully crafted organ is nothing less than a profound statement of faith, and that in order to transform our broken society, the musical and worship needs of a community must be met first.[11] Loewen made the argument that beauty is not an add-on. It's not for later or for only *if* all the other needs are taken care of.

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9 Denny Weaver, letter to the Board of Trustees of Mennonite Biblical Seminary, March 1970.

10 Don Klassen and Jim Klassen, letter to the Board of Trustees of Mennonite Biblical Seminary, March 1970.

11 Esko Loewen, letter to Don Klassen and Jim Klassen, March 17, 1970.

If I had read the student letters when I was a college student wavering about whether a music major was practical or adequately of service, I may have needed Loewen's rejoinder that the arts were worthy pursuits. Joy in developing my craft as a musician continued to mingle with vocational doubt as my piano studies continued through graduate school. My worship preferences were never in question, though. The sound I most treasure in worship settings is still unadorned voices in harmony. I experience this way of worshiping as a uniquely powerful embodiment of Christian community.

Lutheran minister and public theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber offers her reason for the same preference in an April 2021 blog post:

> *Singing hymns, acapella and in 4-part harmony is the thing I miss most about church. One of the strongest opinions I have about worship is that the primary musical expression of the gathered should be congregational singing. Because while lofty organ music and praise bands might have their place, they can never replace sung hymns. Because when we are on our death beds surrounded by loved ones, when fast falls the eventide, we will have only our own human bodies with which to pray and sometimes the most potent prayers we have are the songs of those who have come before us.*[12]

With maturity, I better understand how culturally embedded our preferences are around music in worship, and that this is both a gift and a limitation. Singing our heart songs in community in the style we are most at home in is a sacred gift. Only worshiping in ways we are most comfortable limits us, however, from fully knowing God and God's people. Indeed, what Bolz-Weber and I may see as authentic and inclusive in a cappella hymn-singing can be experienced as strange and exclusive to others.

The intersection of culture, theology, and aesthetics that lead worshiping communities to consensus or toward conflict is complex, as is the interplay of factors that make any one individual feel comfortable, or alienated, by a worship style. The ecclesiological traditions of these three spaces were formed and transformed over time and by each generation of worshipers gathered within. As a worshiping Christian, my faith and my

12 Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Singing Hymns Alone," *The Corners*, April 17, 2021, https://thecorners.substack.com/p/singing-hymns-alone

musicianship has been formed and transformed by each space and the stories within. For this I am profoundly grateful.

About the author

Beverly Lapp is vice president and academic dean at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.