Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

The church and young adults

Spring 2018, Vol. 19, No. 1

Editorial

Irma Fast Dueck and Peter J. H. Epp

When I (Peter) advertised the defense of my thesis, "It's Like Dating Around: Mennonite Young Adults, Baptism, and the Church," some of my thirty-something friends groaned. "Are we still talking about young adults and the church?" The best encouragement a pastor friend could muster was: "Maybe you'll at least say something new about it."

To be sure, in church circles the question, Where are all of our young adults? has almost become cliché. In many ways, I share my friends' fatigue. It's been more than a decade since I started talking and writing for older Mennonites about all my friends who weren't in church. I talked for so long about young adults that eventually I wasn't one anymore.

Our young adults reflect back to us the theologies we embodied and articulated for them. Not the theologies we think we offered them but the theologies we actually offered them.

Along the way, I've watched us keep circling back to the same kinds of solutions. Maybe they'll come if we have a worship band. Maybe they'll come if we use more liturgy. Maybe they'll come if we have more young adult programming. Maybe they'll come if we stop infantilizing them. Maybe they'll come if we stop pressuring them. Maybe they'll come if we give them more responsibility. Maybe they'll come if we make sure that each young person is spoken to by at least five older adults every Sunday morning.

Sometimes our approaches have been based on hunches. Sometimes they've been based on anecdotal evidence. And sometimes they've been based on sociological research. Usually, they've been clunky answers to the question, What's the thing we need to do to keep our young adults?

As we've tired of mostly empty solutions, some have suggested that it's time to just let go of the question. Maybe we shouldn't be so worried about our numbers. Maybe they'll come back when they have their own kids. Maybe there's nothing we can do.

This issue has been driven by our belief that when it comes to young adults, there is much we can do. But it has also been driven by our belief

that we're called to do far more than simply get them to come to church. Primarily, this issue has been driven by our belief that our young adults are our theological mirrors and the canaries in our ecclesial coal mines. Our young adults reflect back to us the theologies we embodied and articulated for them. Not the theologies we think we offered them but the theologies we actually offered them. They also warn us about the theological and ecclesial places that are toxic, and they sing to us about the places that sustain life. To be sure, our young adults do not have all our answers—in fact, my most reflective research subjects longed for a church that stopped trying to blindly accommodate their desires—but our young adults can ask and tell us much about what it means to be the church.

Our young adults are the canaries in our ecclesial coal mines. They warn us about theological and ecclesial places that are poisonous, and they sing to us about the places that sustain life.

First, however, we need to look and listen, and we invite you to do both in these pages.

This issue includes some articles by young adults and other articles about young adults. Gil Dueck, Peter Epp, and Anika Reynar explore issues connected to understanding young adulthood in our current cultural context and examining their relationships with the church. David Balzer, Jonathan Gingerich, Jessica Smucker, and Irma Fast Dueck open up issues of technology, anxiety, divorce, and cohabitation which are often connected to, but not limited to, young adulthood. Jessica Reesor Rempel, Isaiah Friesen, Andy Brubacher Kaethler, and Liz Weber write on themes connected to ministry and young adulthood. Meghan Larissa Good closes the issue with a sermon based on Acts 2, unleashing a rich incarnational understanding of the church. You will find this issue seasoned with single-page essays written by young adults in answer to the question, Why am I part of the church? or conversely, Why I am not part of the church? While we realize that these articles raise issues connected to young adulthood, we also recognize that many of the concerns raised by young adults are not limited to young adults.

We are grateful to all those who contributed to these pages, many of whom have never written for *Vision* before, or even heard of this journal. Thank you for letting your voices be heard here. Thank you for letting us look and listen.

Why I choose to be part of the church

Andrea Moya Urueña

I grew up in Colombia, Ecuador, and the United States, and I have spent about a third of my life so far in each of these countries. I have enjoyed the richness of Spanish, Kichwa, and English languages. I have been grateful for bodies brown, white, and black. I have delighted in snow-capped volcanoes, valleys, and plains. Throughout this diversity of experiences, the church has remained as a constant in my life. Why? For three reasons.

First, identity. The values of building community, serving, and making peace and justice have nurtured my development. These values I have learned through seeing how the church body moved and spoke.

Second, relevance. Sometimes, especially when I have been living in the United States, I have struggled to continue to be part of the church. I have sought out Mennonite churches that have welcoming and inclusive stances, but when I look around me I see almost no one else who is not white. This is hard. I know, race shouldn't matter, but it does. I sometimes hear a church member grieve the death of yet another Black person at the hands of the police, or invite our congregation to support a neighbor who is facing deportation, or call us to stand with the mostly immigrant and refugee poultry factory workers as they demand fair compensation and safe working conditions. When this happens, what I hear is people for the most part recognizing realities of our relationships outside the church. I hope this awareness of people around us begins to translate into meaningful relationships across diversity that are integrated into the body of the church.

Third, accountability. This aspect of faith I am learning to put in practice, and it is difficult, because it involves responsibility. My commitment is to remain with the body wherever I go and to keep it accountable in upholding God's invitation to all to have life—not just to survive. This invitation means acknowledging and including our races, ethnicities, cultures, sexual orientations, genders, and abilities.

About the author

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Emerging adulthood as cultural diagnostic

Gil Dueck

In his notable 2009 article, "The Millennial Muddle," Eric Hoover notes the recent emergence of a cottage industry around stoking awareness of and anxiety around generational uniqueness and generational transfer.[1] On the one hand, Hoover suggests, generational change is inevitable and worth paying attention to. On the other hand, we should be at least partially skeptical of grand-scale claims that emphasize not what different generations share but what sets them apart from each other. We should be circumspect around our tendency to fret about the next generation and suppose that unprecedented changes are afoot. "For as long as human hair has turned gray," Hoover suggests, "elders have looked at their successors and frowned."

Contemporary questions about the next generation are construed within a narrative of "delayed adulthood." Various strands make up one theory about delayed adulthood, *emerging adulthood*. In light of it, what does the church need to consider at this cultural moment?

Yet it seems that contemporary questions about the next generation, whether related to marriage and family life, entrance into the job market, or religious faith, are construed within a particular narrative—that of the "delayed adulthood thesis." Broadly speaking, this thesis suggests that something important is changing in the pattern of normal human development. These changes have stretched out the journey to adulthood while asking big questions about what's actually waiting for us at the destination. In what follows, I will unravel some of the various strands that make up one particular theory about delayed adulthood, that of *emerging adulthood,* and ask some questions that the church needs to consider at this particular cultural moment.

1 Eric Hoover, "The Millennial Muddle," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* October 11, 2009, https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Millennial-Muddle-How/48772.

What is emerging adulthood?

The theory of emerging adulthood was introduced in 1998 by US developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, who described what he saw as the advent of a new developmental stage, between adolescence and adulthood, in many Western contexts.[2] According to Arnett, this phase of life has emerged as the social role transitions normally associated with adult status—marriage and parenthood—have been delayed as the demand for specialized higher education has increased. The result has been an additional decade of relatively unstructured freedom for exploration as young people gradually make their way toward lasting commitments in love, work, and personal identity. Of central importance to Arnett is the self-consciously *developmental* posture that young people adopt as they move toward adulthood. To put it differently: for many, adulthood is clearly perceived on the horizon, even as it is deliberately kept at arm's length in the interest of pursuing other, more pressing goals.

The theory of emerging adulthood has met with criticism during its relatively short lifespan. At the popular level, some have lamented the refusal of contemporary young people to grow up, and have berated scholars who falsely dignify this behaviour by dressing it up in the finery of academic theory. At the scholarly level, critics have wondered whether Arnett is merely describing the distinct cohort of privileged Western college students (who are, after all, easy for academics to study) and neglecting those whose pathway to adulthood is fraught with economic instability. So does the idea of emerging adulthood offer a meaningful contribution to our understanding of coming of age? I will argue that this theory explains aspects of our particular cultural moment and forces a particular set of questions into our consciousness as we contemplate what it means to "tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord" (Ps. 78:4, NIV).

An individualized approach to adulthood

At the heart of the theory of emerging adulthood is the idea that changes are afoot in the course human life takes in many Western contexts. Scholars point to a loose historical consensus that has existed around the idea that arriving at adulthood involved navigating certain key transitions and the acquisition of certain adult roles—things like leaving home, beginning

2 Jeffrey J. Arnett, "Learning to Stand Alone: The Contemporary American Transition to Adulthood in Cultural and Historical Context," *Human Development* 41, no. 5–6 (1998): 295–315.

a career, marrying, and becoming a parent. What is noteworthy is that the percentage of youth in their twenties and thirties who would qualify as adult based on these criteria has decreased significantly in recent decades. Replacing a transition-based understanding of adulthood has been a psychologized understanding that judges adulthood to have been achieved once a certain subjective sense of independence is adequately felt.

Why has such a highly individualized approach to adulthood become the norm? Canadian philosopher and historian Charles Taylor points to the loss of moral horizons as one of the defining features of modern individualism.[3] Without any shared transcendent backdrop against which to measure our lives, Taylor suggests, the self must now bear the burden of *creating* a kind of meaning that can have no reference point beyond the self. Contemporary notions of adulthood are underwritten by precisely the kind of individualism that Taylor describes, an individualism that cannot conceive of human development as anything other than a self-chosen and self-directed project. Yet, as Taylor aptly observes, it is not only possibilities that have been introduced. For many, the proliferation of options has led to heightened anxiety and rendered every subsequent choice tenuous and unstable. Whatever our assessment of this kind of modern individualism, it seems impossible to undo its effect on the way we conceive of the transition to adulthood.

During their twenties, emerging adults try on different selves and even different worldviews through educational pursuits, jobs, relationships, travel. The goal in all this exploration is an answer to the omnipresent question: Who am I?

The priority of identity formation

According to Arnett, the first, defining feature of emerging adulthood is the profound emphasis on self-construction and identity formation. The twenties, it seems, is an extended period of self-reflection and experimentation as emerging adults try on different selves and even different worldviews through educational pursuits, jobs, relationships, travel. The goal in all this exploration is an answer to the omnipresent question: Who am I?

3 Charles Taylor, "Three Malaises," in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), 16.

As a developmental psychologist, Arnett predictably locates his discussion of identity formation within that wider field. In his explanation of identity formation as a task of emerging adulthood, he notes that he is departing from earlier theories that saw this psychological revolution primarily as a function of adolescence. But Arnett contrasts the tentative and transient identity explorations of adolescents with the more serious and identity-focused explorations of emerging adulthood. Each change of college major, each new job or relationship, each unpaid internship is part of a search for that elusive fit that will move an individual toward a more stable understanding of personal identity and vocation. Hovering over all this exploration is the sovereign emerging adult self that is picking and choosing which elements will constitute the completed identity project.

The orientation toward the self

Arnett states quite baldly that there is no time of life that is more self-focused than emerging adulthood. Adolescents, while experiencing a growing level of independence, are still dependent on their parents or community of origin for a fair degree of structure in their lives. And by the age of thirty, most people have established a home of their own, with a new set of commitments and obligations. But between the ages of eighteen and thirty, a remarkable period of freedom has opened, in which emerging adults learn to make independent decisions, both large and small, even as they continue to experience some of the material benefits of adolescence (mainly financial support from parents). And in Arnett's view, the self-focus of emerging adulthood is a good thing, a stage of development that is good, necessary, and temporary. For Arnett, emerging adulthood is not necessarily a time of narcissistic self-absorption but rather a temporary and calculated look inward, prior to taking on the expected responsibilities of adulthood. Moreover, this self-focus contains a clear goal of learning to stand on one's own two feet.

Not all share Arnett's positive assessment of this aspect of emerging adulthood. US psychologist Jean Twenge describes contemporary young adults as the first generation that was born into a world that took for granted the self-importance of the individual.[4] Contemporary young adults do not need to be told they are special; their uniqueness is a taken-for-granted element of their conceptual universe. For Twenge, Arnett's optimism

4 See, for example, Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled–and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

regarding the temporariness of this period of self-focus is unwarranted. Rather, she sees deep-seated habits of heart and mind that have come to be default settings in a culture that generally reflects and encourages this self-absorption in all its members. But whatever our assessment of the health of this orientation toward the self that dominates our time, its existence is difficult to deny.

The feeling of being in between

In the lives of emerging adults, the overwhelming psychological state is that of feeling "in between," experiencing some aspects of what they understand to be adulthood but feeling as if they've not yet arrived. In Arnett's research, more than 60 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-five gave some kind of "yes and no" response when asked whether they are adults. This number decreased significantly in polling of people in their late twenties and early thirties, but even here a full 30 percent still reported feeling in between.

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This feeling of being in between adolescence and adulthood also points toward growing instability around the definition of adulthood. In Arnett's work among college students, he describes a quiet revolution that has taken place in their understanding of what actually constitutes entry into adulthood, and specifically in the relative obsolescence of the role transitions that have so often been assumed to be its key indicators. Instead, Arnett discovered a consensus around the assumption that to become an adult has far more to do with *self-sufficiency*. He suggests three specific components of this new consensus on self-sufficiency: (1) accepting responsibility for oneself, (2) making independent decisions, and (3) achieving financial independence. What is noteworthy about this definition is the way it, for the most part at least, requires subjective evaluation rather than social recognition. After all, how does one evaluate when one has accepted responsibility for oneself? What constitutes an independent decision? In both cases, it is the individual who assesses when an appropriately adult level of self-sufficiency has been reached, and it is

precisely this subjectivity that seems to produce the uncertainty that many young adults feel when asked whether they have arrived.

Finally, for a significant number of young adults the explanation of this experience of feeling in between is rooted in their own negative assessments of adulthood. Indeed, there seems to be a kind of ambivalence around whether adulthood is a desirable destination. They clearly perceive it on the horizon—nearly all emerging adults anticipate a time when they will settle into more traditional roles as spouses, employees, and parents—yet there is a palpable sense that it should be put off as long as possible. They have seen the future, and they don't want it—at least not yet. So the feeling of being in between is not only a diagnosis of uncertainty in the midst of transition; it can also be seen as a judgment about the content of adulthood as it has been offered to them.

The experience of possibilities and anxiety

This description of emerging adulthood should not lead us to deny the real anxiety that many young people experience in the transition to adulthood. The young person coming of age in many Western contexts is, to use Kay Hymowitz's memorable phrase, "stunned with possibility."[5] Most young adults have been faced with the What are you going to do with your life? question for much of their adolescence, but the twenties are the time when this question moves from the horizon to the unavoidable foreground. The possibilities are almost endless for some, particularly those whose socioeconomic status offers a wide range of opportunities. But even those who do not have access to so many resources still face pressures in a cultural context saturated with the message that they have a sacred duty to be true to themselves and pursue their passions.

While the stereotype of young adulthood may portray it as an extended spring break, the combination of individualized and subjective assumptions around adulthood places increasing demands on the self, sometimes stressing it beyond what it can readily bear.

5 Kay S. Hymowitz, *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 35.

It is this context of limitless possibility and enforced choice that emerging adults confront. It can be seen as a root cause of the anxiety and mental health struggles that Arnett observes increasingly characterize this stage of life. While the stereotype of young adulthood may portray it as an extended spring break, the reality is much more ambiguous. The combination of individualized and subjective assumptions around adulthood places increasing demands on the self, sometimes stressing it beyond what it can readily bear.

What does emerging adulthood mean for young adults and the church?

The connection between the contemporary Western experience of coming of age and the life of the church is simultaneously obvious and unclear. We are, by this point, awash in data and analysis around the so-called exodus of young adults from the church. It has become somewhat common to note that something is happening in the transition to adulthood that is destabilizing for religious faith. And while there has been much good reflection around how the church can use this as a moment for self-reflection—for a sober assessment of how the contemporary church has become either inhospitable to or unpalatable for contemporary young adults—I want to suggest that there is also a crucial need to take stock of our relationship to a culture that offers much incentive to reflect on identity but few resources for anchoring those reflections in anything beyond our subjectivity. I conclude with two questions that I believe the church will need to address in order to engage meaningfully and faithfully with emerging adults.

The first question is: ***What pictures of maturity are we holding in front of our young people?*** In a context where adulthood has been collapsed into psychologized notions of self-sufficiency, and where youth is cherished and sought as a commodity over the entire lifespan, how can the church reflect a picture of maturity—in life and in faith—that offers an alternative? What would it look like for the church to prioritize maturity? What would it look like for us to tell stories and celebrate exemplars not just of those at the entry point of faith but of those who have achieved a stable, settled conviction? How would we describe this kind of maturity? Could we? What would it mean to point to these stories as indicators of the transforming power and activity of God?

The second question: ***What does it mean to suggest that we as members of the church are to find our truest and most durable sense***

***of who we are* in Christ?** "Identity in Christ" can easily become a Christian slogan or a euphemism for conversion. But in the context of this particular conversation, I would argue that we need a rehabilitated notion of how our faith in Christ—in his life, death, and resurrection—provides a reference point for our selves that relieves us of the anxiety-riddled burden of self-construction and the nervous pursuit of self-sufficiency. Paul writes, in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." There is much to ponder in this short sentence. It names the fact that there is an "I" that needs to be crucified. It names the self as the site of conflict and struggle, an awareness that is a crucial necessity in a time when we are trained only to trust—never to interrogate—what we find within ourselves. It locates salvation "in Christ" not as a religious transaction but as a recovery of a true "I," the I that is created by God, loved by God, and reconstituted by God in Christ. This progression—from "I" to "not I" to "I in Christ"—is the mark of the beautiful and enduring pattern of Christian discipleship.

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This pathway is not new, of course. But it needs to be learned afresh in every generation. Emerging adulthood is not the first term used to express our hopes and frustrations about the next generation. But it is often as we contemplate the progress of successive generations that we are forced to clarify the inheritance that we are wittingly or unwittingly passing on. This contemplation offers us a diagnostic for our souls and opportunities to examine what we are aiming toward. After all, we are the pictures of adulthood that our children will either aspire to or judge as inadequate.

In this sense, our ultimate task as churches is to create a space where this essential intergenerational conversation can happen. Crucially, it means that we need a better vocabulary for describing the goal that we are aiming toward. *Adulthood* is not a very inspiring term to name that goal. It can imply nothing more than the passage of time. But consideration of such terms can offer us a way into a larger, deeper, more profound

conversation around what it means, in the words of the apostle Peter, to "grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Pet. 2.2–3).

About the author

Gil Dueck serves as academic dean at Columbia Bible College (Abbotsford, BC). Prior to this he served as instructor in theology at Bethany College (Hepburn, SK) and program director at Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan. This article is a reworking of material from his doctoral dissertation, "A Transformative Moment: Emerging Adult Faith Development in Conversation with the Theology of James E. Loder," which was completed in May 2017. Gil lives with his wife, Shelley, and their three daughters in Abbotsford.

"It's like dating around"

Mennonite young adults, baptism, and the church

Peter J. H. Epp

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

> **"I'm hesitant to put myself out there into a church community. I feel like 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 . . . am I good here?"**

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 seventeen- 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.

"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."

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 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.

"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 day."

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": 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]

Today's young adults believe that to make the right decisions, one must use one's late teens and twenties 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 others to define them.

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 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.

In our interviewees' efforts to be surer of their personal relationships with God—and to pray and read their Bible more fervently and to repent from partying—their insecurity about baptism indicated 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 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."

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.

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.

Why I am not part of the church

Lukas Thiessen

I do not worship. I have nothing—or, if you prefer, no one—to exalt. I consider myself part of the church, though I do not hold its religious story as paramount. I am an atheist, and yet I am a stakeholder in the life of the church. I grew up in the church, and—like the DNA of my ancestors—my upbringing cannot be excised from me.

But the church is not my foundation. The church, Jesus, God, the Bible, religious belief, spirituality: none of these provides ultimate security for me. My foundation is manifold, not singular. I have boundaries, but those limits have various sources, only one of which is my church heritage.

I enjoy a lot about the media of worship: the hymns and choruses, the sermons, the gathering with a community, the sharing of a common story. But that story is not my cornerstone. I can sing a hymn of praise and appreciate the experience—but it rings false, because I do not believe in God. I rarely attend or participate in church activities, because I do not yearn for a fulfillment of a religious message.

For me, to live is a great adventure. At the same time, I believe that existence is meaningless. To make this statement is not to say that my life is meaningless. I have relationships, feelings, and desires that make life worth living, even when it is not pleasant, even when it is difficult, even when it is loathsome. I want to live well, even when to do so is difficult.

The church addresses the issue of how we should live our lives, and for this I am thankful. So many institutions deal with questions of their existence in pragmatic terms, rather than confronting whether they should exist at all, and if so, for what purposes. I do not say this as a criticism. At some point we all choose to act as though our existence has meaning.

If the church were a place or a space where wrestling with meaning were paramount, without holding fast to one foundation, I would participate far more. I cannot say what form such a change would take. The church is a place of change, and it takes many forms, but as long as it holds fast to a biblical foundation and a belief in God, I cannot fully participate.

About the author

Lukas Thiessen graduated from Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg, MB) and earned a BA (honours) and an MA in cultural studies from the University of Winnipeg.

Church after Eden

Finding possibility in banishment with Pastors in Exile

Jessica Reesor Rempel

In the centre of the room, on a low coffee table, is a tray of flickering tea lights, an assortment of half-empty mugs, a pair of sock-clad feet, an open Bible. Around this center one sees a circle of eager faces leaning toward the centre, and behind them a ring of overstuffed armchairs. The backdrop to this scene is an old brick wall, this room having been added on a century after the church was originally built. The people present crave connection to each other, to God, to an ancient text, and to the hidden purposes of being alive in this time and place. We crave dignity. We long for equality in our lives regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, race, class. This is Feminist Bible Study. We have gathered every Thursday evening in the months from September to April for three years now. This place is safe, and it is challenging.

Tonight we are discussing Eve and Adam and their expulsion from Eden. Despite the pain and messiness of life outside the garden, the consensus of the group is that life after the banishment is in fact the better alternative to staying in the garden forever.

Tonight we are discussing Eve and Adam and their expulsion from Eden. We talk about sources for the text and the ways it has been used throughout the centuries, and then we move on to exploring how we identify with the figures, based on our own experiences. "Eve," someone laments, "poor Eve! She's been blamed for centuries as the cause of all that is wrong with the world. People say it's because of her that humans were banished from Eden and the world got so messed up."

Then, in this feminist-oriented space, where every question is embraced and every voice is equally important, some people around the circle express doubts about the traditional narrative of the Fall. Would we really choose not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil

(Gen. 2:17)? Would we want to remain in blissful ignorance?[1] "If I could go back in time, I would eat the fruit too!" one of us announces.

Someone else notices that it is only after the exile from the garden that new life is possible, since only outside the garden do Eve and Adam have sex and bring a child into the world (Gen. 4:1). "If Eve hadn't eaten the fruit, we wouldn't even be here!" she proclaims, cheekily. It does not go unnoticed that after the banishment there is also pain. Ultimately the beloved children, the new lives brought into the world by Eve and Adam, become the cause of deep grief. Despite the pain and messiness of life outside the garden, the consensus of the group is that life after the banishment is in fact the better alternative to staying in the garden forever.

Pastors in Exile for a church in exile

As a pastor with Pastors in Exile, I often feel as though I am functioning in a post-banishment context. Ministry is gritty here, and everything is an experiment; everything must be learned.

Pastors in Exile is a charitable organization that began in 2014 as a response to the changing context for the Mennonite church in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. As young pastors living and working in the region, co-founder Chris Brnjas and I observed that many of our young adult peers identified with Mennonite/Christian faith but no longer participated in church communities, while others were actively involved in church but were looking for opportunities to deepen their faith in the presence of other young adults. At the same time, we noticed fear from within congregations and church agencies about the absence of young adults in the pews. Some characterized the Mennonite church of times past as a sort of Garden of Eden where Sunday school classes overflowed and young adults lined up to be baptized, whereas the current period of church life seemed akin to the banishment from the garden.

Supported by friends and mentors of all ages, Chris and I felt called to be pastors in that space of banishment and exile—thus the name "Pastors in Exile" (PiE). Rather than lament the lost garden, at PiE we are called to embrace this time of exile (there can be no going back to the way things were in the garden) and to join God at work in this new context. As Mennonite-rooted pastors working in the community, we see our role being to connect young adults in Kitchener-Waterloo with vibrant

1 All biblical references are from Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* (Plymouth UK: Sheed & Ward, 2007).

faith experiences outside and inside church walls. This connecting takes the form of retreats, Bible studies, spiritual care, and blogging. We also foster connection with local churches in order to bridge the gap between churches and young adults who find themselves on the margins. Over the past three years, as I have journeyed with the transient community of young adults who connect with PiE, my belief has strengthened that this season of metaphorical banishment from the garden is necessary and full of potential for the Mennonite church.

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New life after the banishment

We are told that after they were evicted from the Garden of Eden, "Adam and Eve knew each other, and Eve conceived and gave birth to Cain. 'With the help of YHWH,' she said, 'I have gotten a child.' She also gave birth to a second child, his brother Abel" (Gen. 4:1–2a). It seems that procreation was only possible for Eve and Adam after they had recognized their nakedness and were sent from the garden. Likewise, at PiE—where we are not a church, and as such are mostly free from the expectations about what churches are supposed to do (Sunday morning worship services, for example)—we are able to explore relationship with God in new ways. As current pastors with PiE, Tamara Shantz and I, along with our board of directors, listen to the spiritual longings of the young adults we engage with and then shape ways of gathering together that support these needs and are not available in quite this way elsewhere in our community.

One year ago, two young adults from the PiE community who identify as both LGBTQ+ and Christian approached us with a need: they wanted a space where they could explore in a group setting these dual identities, and they had gifts of hospitality they wanted to offer to others. With ongoing facilitation support from Tamara, these young adults began a group called Queerly Christian, which continues to meet bi-weekly, providing peer support as well as engaging deeply with biblical and theological texts dealing with sexuality. The Queerly Christian participants hope

to become a resource to local churches, as individuals who have lived experience and biblical and theological grounding in this area.

Recently, after someone defaced a local LGBTQ+-affirming church, members of Queerly Christian were able to process their hurt and fear together. I had the privilege of joining members of this group and others who came to assist local artist Kandace Boos (who is also a Mennonite and a young adult) in transforming the hateful graffiti into an image of love and celebration. After biking home that afternoon with paint on my clothes and hope in my soul, I jotted down my impressions of the experience:

> *THE CHURCH SHALL REMAIN HOLY is sprayed in black on the grey concrete walkway in front of the church with its rainbow flag and sign promoting an upcoming LGBTQ and Allies potluck. One week later the mood is somber as we gather around this unwanted addition to the church decor. We are an eclectic assortment of neighbours, faith leaders, and just plain passionate people. The somber mood does not last long. Soon the black words are outlined in white paint and then a torrent of colour is unleashed under the careful direction of a local artist/ally. "THE CHURCH SHALL REMAIN HOLY" it still reads on the walkway, but the message and the mood are now very different.*

At PiE, freed from Sunday morning obligations, these are the sorts of new life experiences that we often have the privilege to encounter.

Journeying in and out of the garden

Life after the garden does not mean forgetting what came before or devaluing the experience of those who are still in the garden. While there are valuable insights to be gained from the Garden of Eden metaphor for the Mennonite church, and for PiE's relationship to it, this metaphor has its limitations. For one thing, it implies that those in traditional Mennonite churches have not eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and as such are ignorant of the ways the world works and of how best to live out God's call in their context. This simply is not the case. In my work with PiE I have encountered many Mennonite congregations that are well aware of how the world around them is changing and are excited to maintain what is good and life giving in their structures while releasing

what is no longer relevant. God is at work in faithful people inside and outside church walls.

Moreover, the garden metaphor implies that the journey out of the garden is a one-time experience. In reality, there are no "winged sphinxes with fiery, ever-turning swords" (Gen. 3:24) at the entrance to this metaphorical garden. While we can never go back to how the church used to be, we can keep drawing on the rich resources of our history to enliven the way the church and other ministries are embodied today. Many of us are constantly moving in and out of the garden, harvesting what we need for the journey, and even taking time to water what grows there. For myself, and roughly half the young adults connected with PiE, this movement takes the form of being actively involved in a Mennonite church while also seeking out the new ways of connecting to each other and to our faith that PiE has to offer. Giving the lie to the belief that young adults are detached from their faith and unwilling to prioritize it in their weekly schedules, some of the young adults I engage with take time to attend one or more of PiE's weeknight groups, to worship with a congregation on Sunday mornings, and to serve on church committees.

While we can never go back to how the church used to be, we can keep drawing on the rich resources of our history to enliven the way the church and other ministries are embodied today. Many of us are constantly moving in and out of the garden, harvesting what we need for the journey, and even taking time to water what grows there.

Moving forward in hope

Last fall I had the opportunity to spend three back-to-back Sundays in a local Mennonite congregation, facilitating intergenerational dialogue for adult and youth faith formation classes around what it would mean to be a truly welcoming place for people on the fringes of their congregation—for young adults in particular. In the end the series produced no simple next steps drafted neatly on chart paper, but that was no longer the point. It became clear that the point was to take the time to sit together and listen to each other's hopes and worries for the future of their church. Their church, like so many churches, is in a time of transition, and it is far from clear what the next twenty years have in store in for

them, but they are committed to making space for all voices to be heard as they move forward together. Inside the church and out, young and old, and in all the liminal spaces in between, we are the family of God attempting to live out our faith in the best ways we know how to.

Back at Feminist Bible Study, by the end of the evening we have come to wonder whether perhaps the story of Eve and Adam is not a cautionary tale after all but simply the telling of family history. Outside the garden, life is difficult and complicated, the authors of Genesis seem to be telling us, but it is also full of newness and possibility. In the room with the comfortable chairs and the exposed brick wall, in this place that is both church and not church, we pray for each other and the world, we blow out the candles, and we gather up the Bibles. As we scatter into the night, I am filled with hope for the future of church.

About the author

Jessica Reesor Rempel is pastor and cofounder of Pastors in Exile. She is passionate about nurturing community, extending radical hospitality, and seeking out sacred moments in the midst of the mundane. Jessica's call to this ministry has been shaped by studies at Conrad Grebel University College (Waterloo, ON) and Toronto School of Theology, as well as by time spent serving with Mennonite Central Committee in Ontario and in Laos. Learn more about PiE at www.pastorsinexile.org.

Thoughts on forming leaders for a church that does not yet exist

Isaiah Friesen and Andy Brubacher Kaethler

The conversation was one part sobering and two parts inspiring as five young adults aged twenty to twenty-six discussed their experiences of leadership in the Mennonite church via Google Hangouts on an evening in early fall 2017. It was a timely conversation: Most denominations in Canada and the United States are declining in membership and involvement, with young adults being the largest demographic disengaging from church. Simultaneously, questions frequently reemerge about who will take on the mantle of leadership in the church in decades ahead.

Most denominations in Canada and the United States are declining in membership and involvement, with young adults being the largest demographic disengaging from church. Simultaneously, questions emerge about who will take on the mantle of leadership in the church in decades ahead.

Stereotypes of young adults as leaders

In September 2014, the private company that held a seventy-five-year lease on the Indiana toll road filed for bankruptcy. The company, which had held the lease for just eight years, reported lower highway usage and revenue than anticipated, citing among the top reasons for this reduction in toll-road traffic the fact that young adults are not using the interstate as projected: they wait longer to buy their first car and are more likely to carpool and use public transportation.[1] These trends make the personalized vehicle transport industry nervous.

1 Sean Slone, "Impact of the Indiana Toll Road Bankruptcy," http://knowledgecenter.csg.org/kc/content/impact-indiana-toll-road-bankruptcy-new-transportation-reports-asceeno-pew-nam-us-pirg; Melissa Etehad and Rob Nikolewski, "Millennials and Car Ownership? It's Complicated," www.latimes.com/business/autos/la-fi-hy-millennials-cars-20161223-story.html.

This report illustrates a common stereotype of young adults today: they are co-dependent, self-centered, and passive; they are simply not taking leadership and pulling their weight in a consumer culture.

But there is another view of young adults. In 2015, Canada's voters elected Justin Trudeau prime minister. Born in 1971, Trudeau is not exactly a young adult, but young adults in Canada broadly identify with his progressivism, his suave but informal style, and his personable and accessible way of communicating. They respect him for including in his cabinet a large number of women, representatives of minority groups, and young members of Parliament. In the United States in 2012, Pete Buttigieg at the age of thirty became the youngest mayor of a city of more than 100,000 residents. As mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Buttigieg displays a leadership style that is collaborative, inclusive, altruistic, and engaged.

These two caricatures of how young adults view leadership and take on responsibility also exist in the church. Because these stereotypes are in evidence in society and church, we thought it would be good to hear from young adults themselves about the qualities of leadership they value and about the kinds of communities in which they aspire to take leadership.

The young adults who took part in this conversation speak *as* young adults but not *for* all young adults. They provide glimpses of thoughts and feelings of young adults who, despite questions and frustrations, care about their faith, the church, and church leadership. Their perspectives are important and instructive.

Those who attend church are often involved in leadership

Most but not all of the five who participated in our conversation regularly attend a Mennonite church, and all who attend are involved in leadership in some way. Max Kennel (Hamilton, Ontario) preaches occasionally in a small congregation as he pursues a PhD in religious studies; Hillary Harder (Elkhart, Indiana) leads worship and music in her congregation; and Lynea Brubacher Kaethler (Waterloo, Ontario) and Isaiah Friesen (Goshen, Indiana) teach Sunday school. They all acknowledge that their leadership roles don't just keep them involved in their respective congregations; these responsibilities are a factor in whether they go to church at all. "Being actively involved is how I get to know people," Lynea observes. For Isaiah, "it feels right to be there when I can contribute to the life of the community."

Elizabeth Witmer (Harrisonburg, Virginia) reflects on the church involvement of her peers. "One group is very dedicated and invested," while

for the people in the other group the thought of attending is "never a question in their mind." Max's experience is similar. "Many of my friends right now are theology students and are highly committed. But I also have friends who are not Christians and do not go to church." Hillary helpfully complicates things (as she often does in the course of the conversation), by adding a third category: "friends who were involved and found church very meaningful but were hurt or burned out and now stay away for their own safety."

Neither guilt nor habit compels these young adults. Those who remain in or return to the church do so because they affirm and embrace the truth of God's nondiscriminatory love.

These observations highlight differences between what inspires young adults to attend church and what motivated previous generations to do so. Their grandparents may have been driven by guilt, and their parents may have attended out of habit. Neither guilt nor habit compels these young adults. Those who remain in or return to the church do so because they affirm and embrace the truth of God's nondiscriminatory love and vision of inclusion.

Balancing gifts and needs

Being invited to take a leadership role in congregational life is a dominant theme for these young adults, but not the only one. Dona Park (in Cambodia with Mennonite Central Committee's Serving and Learning Together program) contributed to our conversation by e-mail. She attends church because she needs it to be her "personal family." The church does for her as a young adult what her biological family did for her as a child and youth: it names and affirms her gifts. She and her conversation partners are not interested in being involved just to fill a demographic void in the church. In Max's words, "It's not only about what young adults can contribute; it's also about paying attention to the needs of young adults."

Conversely, some young adults who are no longer involved in a congregation report that their gifts and needs were ignored or rejected, or that they witnessed rejection of the gifts and needs of others. Young adults have little desire to be a part of a group that does not model acceptance, openness, inclusion.

This is Elizabeth's experience. After having a very positive experience in a ministry inquiry program at a socially active church, she is back at university and has not found a church that attends simultaneously to self-

care and care for others, so she is not going to church at all right now. She is forthright about it. Not going to church is a matter of self-care for her, and she finds other ways to "be part of a bigger community, practice selflessness, serve others, and fight for justice."

These young adults acknowledge the importance of balancing their gifts and needs as individuals and the needs of the larger church. Balancing one's own gifts and needs with others' gifts and needs requires us to acknowledge that as humans we are interdependent. The group readily agrees that being interdependent is a strength, not a weakness.

Big issues need cross-generational responses

When asked what the most important issues facing the church today are, these young adults put LGBTQAI inclusion at the top of the list. Other issues they mention include racism, xenophobia, mental health, sexism, gun violence, police violence, climate change, rape culture, and drugs. In their view, the church should be at the forefront in addressing important public and social issues. As Dona puts it, "The church should not be an institution of the privileged but rather a house of refuge."

We were surprised to hear that most of these young adults believe that fostering understanding between generations is among the most crucial issues facing the church today. And they connect this concern directly to the other issues that concern them. As Dona observes, the other crucial issues facing the church today are not narrowly young adult issues; these issues affect the whole church. Dona and Elizabeth mention that young adults frequently feel like the church does not listen to their perspectives.

Max observes that when there is conversation across generations, young adults and older adults tend to talk past each other, as if they were speaking different languages. They may use the same words—unity, peace, justice, for example—but these words mean different things to older and younger people and are sometimes invoked in ways that drive wedges between people of different generations rather than contributing to shared values and common identity. When the church does listen to young adults, Max notes, it is often in the name of "good process and unity," which ends up being code for "we like things the way they are."

Hillary reminds the group that we should take care not to assume that older people in the church have made no efforts for social justice. Hillary admits that "older generations have seen and done a lot." She recalls conversations with her grandfather, who has told her that "young adults are not the only ones concerned about justice." Hillary wonders whether

many church leaders are struggling with burnout, after dedicating decades to the mission of the church. Maybe the strategies used to protest the Vietnam War are not the ones needed to address racism and climate change. Perhaps older leaders are simply unsure about how to share leadership or hand it over to younger leaders.

Several participants name the importance of empathy, humility, and compromise. Young adults do a better job of being inclusive and trying to understand diverse perspectives, Lynea suggests, and the group agrees. Still, they agree that young adults need to respect older adults and meet them somewhere in the middle, even if it feels like the middle is elusive or is closer to the older generations' side.

Expectations of leaders

Respecting older adults does not translate into uncritical respect for leaders and those in power. Elizabeth pointedly asks whether we respect leaders and powers too much: "Often our mindset is that we should be quiet and not step out of our place. Instead, we need to be a little more countercultural, and challenge people in power."

Official roles and titles alone do not garner respect among these young people. "I don't respect pastors simply because they are leaders in the church," Dona admits. "I respect them because they earnestly seek to listen, to pursue relationships, and to challenge the church to act." Others agree that the leaders they respect most are those who openly commit themselves to leadership for the good of the local community, beyond the walls of their own congregation.

The characteristics of leadership these young adults value are integrity in living out one's faith, openness to the ideas of others, honesty and courage and vulnerability in raising tough issues, and vision and passion that foster social transformation.

If this sounds like a lot to ask of leaders, it is. But if these young adults expect pastors to be role models and mentors, they do not expect them to be perfect. They know that being vulnerable and taking risks to challenge injustice involves making mistakes. Further, these young adults do not expect anything less of themselves and their peers: these are the very characteristics they aspire to embody.

In light of the fact that these young adults look up to leaders because they live out these values and not just because they carry the external trappings—the offices and titles—of leadership, we observe with guarded optimism signs that the church seems to be in a process of slow transfor-

mation, sometimes because of and sometimes in spite of current leadership. None of these conversation participants thought it helpful to mindlessly abandon leadership models that have served past generations well. Church and faith have always been organic and fluid and cannot be contained in institutions alone. In Isaiah's words, the kinds of leaders we need are "able to deal with tension and complexity," forging a way forward not only in the congregation but also in the community and with people who may never enter the doors of the church.

The characteristics of leadership these young adults value are integrity in living out one's faith, openness to the ideas of others, honesty and courage and vulnerability in raising tough issues, and vision and passion that foster social transformation.

Church of the future

Will the church continue into the future? Will the future include a church that is relevant for young adults and for the unchurched and the formerly churched? None of these young adults want to be a part of a church that seeks their presence only so that the church can perpetuate itself. This "instrumental attitude" is a complete turn-off, according to Max. "Young people can sniff it out if they are just the token young adult on the committee."

But young adults also do not want to just take over and run things their own way. They want leadership midwifery, "guidance and encouragement for how to be actively involved," as Lynea puts it.

If the church is to survive, according to these young adults, it will be because it articulates a distinctly true and compelling vision for a meaningful life together in the world. These young adults do not expect or want older adults to articulate this vision for them; they are willing to invest in the process of discerning what a meaningful life together in the world looks like.

And this meaningful life does not appear to include certainty about a set of beliefs to the same degree for young adults as it did for their parents and grandparents. Isaiah reflects, "I hear from my peers that they don't feel like they belong in church because there's a minimum amount of orthodox belief you must buy into before you have a place. I am personally more likely to be part of a church that acknowledges my doubts and questions." "Critical and invested," is how Max identifies this posture:

we should spend less time arguing about rules, and more time exploring meaning and purpose.

Similarly, a relevant church is not primarily physical buildings and traditional institutions. "I hope that the church will be more a way of life and less a building, a budget, a membership list, or a hierarchy," Hillary offers. "We should be able to know someone is a Christian because of how they live."

The Mennonite World Conference gathering in Pennsylvania in 2015 was inspiring for Elizabeth. She longs for this kind of Christian community. She notes that outside the US, regardless of religious and political views, most people think climate change is a serious issue, because they are living it. At MWC 2015 people listened to each other with a shared faith and a shared cause.

Changing the question

Is the church preparing young adults to be leaders? This question is not irrelevant, but it may not be the most important question. Perhaps the more important question is, Are we preparing the church for young adult leaders? The question is not only about leadership; it is also about followership.

The kind of church young adults are poised to take leadership in does not yet exist. Are we ready to release our understandings of what it means to be church—understandings that may have served us well for the past fifty years but may not serve us well for the next fifty years—so that young adults may lead it with passion and integrity? Those who care about fostering young adult leaders need to allow them to mold the church rather than expecting them to be molded into the image of leaders of a church of a bygone era.

About the authors

Isaiah Friesen graduated from Goshen (IN) College with a double major in Spanish and peace, justice, and conflict studies. Now in Saint Paul, Minnesota, he continues to learn about contextualized Christian ministry and community at intersections with racial, environmental, and economic justice. Andy Brubacher Kaethler is associate professor of faith formation and culture at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. He has two young adult daughters whom he hopes will continue to find a home in a church that welcomes and fosters their leadership gifts. Andy and Isaiah co-wrote this article after convening and facilitating the group conversation.

Why I choose to be part of the church

Kristin Walker

I tried attending an established Mennonite church after college, but sitting in the pew on Sunday morning, I looked around at the most familiar scene of my life and felt lost. My job, teaching in the most challenging classroom of a severely disadvantaged urban school, took everything I had. The sea of serene white faces in the pews around me were a world away from the troubled faces of my black and Hispanic students. And the fact that I blended in with the people in the pews only heightened my discomfort. The chasm felt too wide, and I lacked the energy and vocabulary to start building a bridge between the real-life chaos and the Sunday calm.

So I stayed home. And there I found a kind of church, a place where I asked hard questions about the relevance of Jesus's teachings in this great big world I was discovering. Church became the community I already had. It was my roommates, close friends and fellow graduates of Goshen College, who were my most relevant faith community. We explored our new surroundings and new ideas, supported each other through difficult times, and lifted each other up. We were church.

Eleven years later, I now regularly attend the same church that I attended briefly as a recent college graduate. It is a source of strength and stability, a safe haven in what seem like perilous times. For the sake of my small children, I go to church. I go to show another way of being in this world: to seek peace, compassion, love, the social gospel of Jesus. I go to remain connected to my faith heritage, even as I live far from the family who instilled that faith. And I go to pass that heritage on.

The chasm that I couldn't bridge, the space I needed as a young adult striking out on a new path: these are no longer hurdles. I needed room in order to grow into the person of faith that I have become. That interval gave me time to appreciate the value of a diverse community of believers who gather with purpose: members from all walks of life who share a common vision of seeking wholeness in a broken world, exploring new ideas, supporting each other, lifting each other up.

About the author

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Tending the in-between spaces

Becoming itinerant storytellers

Anika Reynar

In the midst of significant structural change in Mennonite Church Canada, a group of Canadian Mennonite University students were drawn together in December 2015 around the question, Do young people care about the future of the church? This initial gathering generated surprising energy among the participants. Soon a group of fifteen of us began gathering over a shared meal several times a month to talk about our dreams, hopes, and fears for the church. The group, which came to be known as Emerging Voices Initiative (EVI), consisted of young adults, most of whom could be described as having an itinerant and fugitive relationship with the church. We were raised by various congregations across Canada but had no certainty that we would return to those places. We felt increasingly at home in Winnipeg but were not sure that we would stay there after we completed our degrees. We were passionate about the church but were disoriented by a sense that we were caught between homes, between vocational possibilities, and between congregations.

The itinerant wanderer and the fugitive do not create a crisis for a community; instead they are the catalysts for envisioning a dialogical community that is rooted in tradition yet permeable to new and unanticipated possibilities and flexible enough to adapt to them.

As I got more involved in EVI, I came to recognize that I was not alone in my lack of certainty about my home, my future, and my place in the church. I shared this experience with other young adults, and it often created a profound sense of disorientation for us. My disorientation, my sense of uprootedness, inspired my undergraduate thesis, which explored the role the university and church could play in forming young adults into storied people who are rooted in a particular place and tradition

while continuing to create physical and conceptual routes in a world that celebrates mobility.[1]

Unexpectedly, in the course of writing my thesis I found immense hope for the relationship between young adults and the church through the work of Sheldon Wolin and Romand Coles, both of them political theorists and the latter professing to be a member of no church. According to Coles and Wolin, the itinerant wanderer and the fugitive do not create a crisis for a community; instead they are the catalysts for envisioning a dialogical community that is rooted in tradition yet permeable to new and unanticipated possibilities and flexible enough to adapt to them.

In drawing on the work of Wolin and Coles, I want to suggest that it is precisely as they live amid the tension of the in-between spaces—between homes, between vocational paths, between churches—that young adults can help the church remember that dwelling in uncertainty and releasing control are critical parts of what it means to be the church. The ecclesial body that can recognize the gift of uncertainty has a profound capacity to meet young adults in these in-between spaces, thereby encouraging them to find a sense of home through remembering, embodying, and claiming God's story as their own.

As young adults set out to choose their own story, they face a great deal of pressure to get it right: to pick the right career and to make something of themselves. They can forget that they are already in the middle of a story given to them by the place they came from and the community that raised them.

Choosing our own story?

A dominant societal narrative suggests to young adults that education is the means by which they can choose to be who they want to be and go wherever they desire to go. In the words of ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, young adults are led to "believe they should have no story except the story they choose when they had no story."[2] As young adults set out to choose their own story, they face a great deal of pressure to get it right: to pick the right career and to make something of themselves. Often, the

1 Anika Reynar. "Movement and Memory: Storied Pedagogy in the Age of Empire" (undergraduate thesis, Canadian Mennonite University, 2017).

2 Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and The Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 37.

desire for freedom and the pursuit of the right story leads young adults away from the community and church that raised them. In setting out on their own, they can easily forget that they are already in the middle of a story, the story given to them by the place they came from and the community that raised them, the faith story that formed their framework for understanding the world.

While young adults can easily become fixated on choosing and controlling the direction of their lives, they are not the only ones who confront this challenge. The church also continually faces the temptation to try to control the future, to move in the "right" direction. We witnessed this pressure most recently in the process of restructuring Mennonite Church Canada, which proposed to shift resources and programmes from the national to the regional churches, and to reorient the church's focus around the congregation as the primary locus of worship and mission.

The church also continually faces the temptation to try to control the future, to move in the "right" direction. The church has also demonstrated a tendency to forget that this body is already part of the story of Jesus, a story premised on radical release of power and control.

The restructuring process expressed the church's desire to follow God's Spirit in a time when individualism, relativism, and disillusionment with professionalized institutions are culturally pervasive realities. These cultural shifts often seem beyond our control and have therefore created a sense of anxiety for the church as it recognizes that "young adults, and frequently their parents, grandparents, and others, are increasingly disassociating from what they consider to be a staid and possibly irrelevant institution."[3] In response to this anxiety, the church has focused on what it believes it can control: the structure of the church. In doing so, however, the church has also demonstrated a tendency to forget that this body is already part of the story of Jesus, a story premised on radical release of power and control.

3 Future Directions Task Force, "Interim Report," Interim Council, Mennonite Church Canada, October 11, 2013; see www.commonword.ca/go/1504.

Releasing control, tending a habitus

As young adults negotiate their own stories, they desperately need the church to be a social body that resists the temptation to seek control and instead models a countercultural commitment to remembering and embodying the particular relevance of Jesus's life and practices: love of enemy, nonviolent resistance, repentance, servanthood, dispossession of power, and so on.

In the life of the church, such a commitment requires a paradigm shift from a politics of *intending* to a politics of *tending*, to borrow Sheldon Wolin's terms. According to Wolin, a politics of intending is shaped by the language of contract: this system of power seeks to ensure a future by bringing all of life under a single rational structure and order. In contrast, a politics of tending requires "active care of things close at hand."[4] A politics of tending is centered on shared practices, habits, and memories that define a place and community in its particularity, and describe how that community will negotiate its future. In this sense, to tend habits is more broadly to tend a *habitus*, a collective expression of embodied dispositions and tendencies that orient the way we understand, interact with, and move through the world.

The Mennonite church, at its best, has an incredible capacity to tend habits of speech, worship, and hospitality that mirror the life of Jesus. But these habits can quickly become entrenched. When entrenched habits limit our ability to see more and say more, we begin to reach the edges of the habitus. Habitus, as sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu conceives it, represents a body of habits that give stability and coherence to a particular narrative.[5] However, as Romand Coles correctly recognizes, habitus—as a centripetal disposition—resists being reopened, reimagined, and retold. Coles advocates maintaining the stability of a habitus while simultaneously pushing the edges of the habitus, encouraging "corporeal and theoretical practices"[6] that "generate imaginative critical interrogation, flexibility, energetic quaking of and push-back against the limits of the self-evident, and radical transformation."[7] "These spaces of possibil-

4 Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), 89.

5 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977).

6 Romand Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2016), 7.

7 Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism*, 56.

ity," Coles goes on to suggest, "open only when and because gaps, blips, and mismatches—failures of articulation—occur."[8] It is within these gaps and moments of critical interrogation that truth, imagination, affection, and hope begin to be realized and clarified.

Fugitive edges

The task of pushing the edges of the habitus is complicated by the fact that there is no singular habitus. Rather, disparate places, traditions, and practices overlap in ways that make it difficult to know where the edges are. This is where Coles's metaphor of an ecotone becomes helpful. An ecotone is a meeting ground or an edge between two environments—the place where a forest and a meadow come together, for example. From the Greek *oikos* (habitation), and *tonos* (tension), the word *ecotone* points to a place full of fertile and generative possibilities yet also to an unpredictable and "ambiguous tension-laden dwelling."[9] Drawing on the work of Anglican bishop Rowan Williams, Stanley Hauerwas suggests that the metaphor of an ecotone evokes not only an edge between two different communities but also a transformation in our understanding of topography and territoriality.[10]

To live into the gospel story is to follow Jesus's example in not becoming competitors for space in this world but rather in competing against the desire to control and determine the right direction or the structure for the church, or the path of one's life.

As Williams observes, Jesus does not come to be "a competitor for space in this world."[11] Rather, Jesus's good news is that he "interrupts and reorganizes the landscape in ways that are not predictable."[12] To live into

8 Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism*, 94.

9 Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2008), 14.

10 Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 14.

11 Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 6; quoted in Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 14.

12 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 40; quoted in Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 14.

the gospel story, therefore, is to follow Jesus's example in not becoming competitors for space in this world but rather in competing against the desire to control and determine the right direction or the structure for the church, or the path of one's life. Here we are called to carefully and courageously tend the spaces and the edges that we inhabit. Within this call, however, "we cannot know precisely where the edges are, because they are part of what and how we are called into being, and they run throughout our lives and works in ways that precede us and are multidimensional."[13]

To find our way forward, we need to tell stories. Stories are how we share meaning, how we name where God is at work in our lives and invite others to do the same.

This sense of not knowing where the edges are begins to push toward an account of the church that is not self-contained but instead is defined by its fugitive character. Working with Sheldon Wolin's idea of "fugitive democracy," Mennonite theologian Peter Dula develops the notion of "fugitive ecclesia."[14] In developing the idea of fugitive ecclesia, Dula gestures toward a church body that is episodic and rare. While the life of the church has continuity with the body of Christ, it is predominantly characterized by a patient struggle to work through and become attentive to the tensions, struggles, and conflicts that emerge in the pursuit of living truthfully. In this sense, the church does not have a definitive claim on truth but is rather called to live on the edge, cultivating an openness to receive gifts from other spaces, traditions, ecologies, and stories.

Rooting, storytelling, and wandering

To the extent that they are living fugitive lives, young adults are in a position to help the church understand what it means to be fugitive. At its best, Emerging Voices Initiative did exactly this. In the winter of 2016, seven EVI members became itinerants, wanderers traveling across Canada to lead listening workshops, where constituent churches were invited to add to the "imaginative critical interrogation" of what it means to be the church. At the end of the tour, we observed that the tour "led to a rich

13 Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 15.

14 Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 95–113.

journey of sharing and collecting stories across the country. To find our way forward, we need to tell stories. Stories are how we share meaning, how we name where God is at work in our lives and invite others to do the same. We hope to keep storytelling central as we consider a re-structured church."[15]

In each church we visited, the stories we heard reflected the way each community was working to tend the history, memories, and unfolding particularities of that place. While these stories were diverse, they also contained common threads that transcended territorial designations. Increasingly, I began to understand that the role of EVI was to navigate the in-between spaces and to work to weave the particular stories of local congregations into the Anabaptist story and God's story more broadly.

In building bridges between localities, our task is not so much to ensure that the church gets the structure right as to ensure that congregations are not isolated from each other. As young adults wander, question, and struggle with the tension of being in between, they need the church to offer a broader story that gives coherence to their travels. This story, while rooted in the memory and wisdom of Jesus, must continue to be receptive to unexpected openings that invite new routes for exploration.

My hope is that in the dialogical interplay between storied traditions and fugitive moments, the church will be humble enough to receive the gift of uncertainty from voices speaking from the edges, whether those of young adults or those of thinkers such as Wolin or Coles. In turn, I hope young adults will find a sense of home in the story of the church, even and especially as the church struggles with the tensions of living truthfully in a world characterized by competing cultural narratives.

About the author

Anika Reynar works as an admissions counsellor at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. She recently graduated from CMU with an interdisciplinary degree (honours) in social ecology. Anika is a member of Hope Mennonite Church, Winnipeg.

15 Emerging Voices Initiative, "Tour Reflection: The Church's Future," January 26, 2017, https://emergingvoiceonline.wordpress.com/2017/01/26/tour-reflection/.

Living with anxiety

Jonathan Gingerich

I grew up in a middle-class Mennonite home in Goshen, Indiana. I had access to opportunities that many children don't get. My father is a physician and my mother stayed home with my younger brother and me until I was twelve. I was a bright and curious child, and while social skills have never been my strongest suit, I got along with others and had close friends. I breezed through my schoolwork, played violin and chess and soccer, and was, I think, a healthy and well-adjusted—if sometimes intense—child.

I spent my late teens and early twenties chronically unemployed and socially isolated. I lived in community housing for people with mental illnesses, was on food stamps and Medicaid, relied on walking and my parents and public transit to get everywhere, and generally struggled with basic tasks and activities of daily living. I lived with severe anxiety.

I am now employed full time as a software developer, having graduated from college summa cum laude with degrees in math and computer science. I am in a stable long-term relationship with a lovely woman, am close to my family, and enjoy the company of friends and a variety of pursuits. I still live with anxiety.

This is my story. I offer it—without any illusions that my experience is generalizable—in hopes that it nevertheless can be helpful to others who live with anxiety and to those who love us.

Onset

I'd always had performance anxiety, but it didn't reach debilitating levels until 2001, when I was a freshman in high school. During Thanksgiving break, with extended family in town, something inside me snapped. I remember sitting on a bed in the basement of my childhood home, crying—my parents sitting next to me, trying to understand what was going on. I felt confused and ashamed about my behavior and frustrated by my inability to explain myself or communicate how I felt.

When break was over, I just couldn't make myself go back to school, and it became clear to those around me that my difficulties went beyond normal teenage angst. I was diagnosed with depression and started taking antidepressants. The medicine helped my depressive symptoms, but my

irritability and anger got worse, and I was still suffering from debilitating anxiety. I didn't want to leave the house. I wanted to hide.

For the next three years, I would start school in late summer in a modestly hopeful frame of mind and crash in late November. In December of my sophomore year I saw a psychiatrist who diagnosed me with bipolar disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. I started taking mood stabilizers, and my irritability and anger improved some. But the struggle with anxiety and focus continued.

At church it felt like all those middle-class professional people had their st together, and being there was a reminder that I did not.**

I had a couple stints as an inpatient in the local community mental health center and an overnight stay in juvenile detention. I had weekly appointments with a succession of therapists and monthly appointments with a psychiatrist. We tried many different combinations of meds in a variety of dosages. I had side effects from the medications. Worst was the drowsiness.

My memory of high school is foggy and full of gaps. I slept a lot in school. When I got there, it was usually because my friend Benji, who lived down the street, would stop by and play Mario Kart with me for ten minutes and then walk to school with me. It wasn't something we talked about; he just did it, day after day. With his support and the help of an understanding special ed. teacher who ran a lot of interference for me with other teachers, I managed to graduate from high school, with a bare minimum of credits and mediocre grades.

At church it often felt like all those middle-class professional white people had their s**t together, and being with them was a reminder that I did not. Everyone was Mennonite polite, but it was hard for me to know whether that was sincere. I'd miss a few Sundays and then would be convinced that people had noticed and pitied or judged me. I felt like I was letting my family down, and I still didn't have the words to articulate what I was struggling with. And I was constantly at risk of falling asleep in the middle of worship or Sunday school, which led to more anxiety.

After high school

After high school, I knew I couldn't handle college, so I signed up for Service Adventure. The program entailed living with several other young adult volunteers for a year, participating in the life of the sponsoring congregation, and working for a local not-for-profit organization. I was

naïve to think that Service Adventure would be less stressful than college. After three months, the anxiety of a forty-hour work week and my new surroundings was too much for me to handle, and I dropped out of the program. Another fall, another crash.

Distressed, I moved home and got a part-time restaurant job washing dishes. Spring turned to summer and then fall, and I just couldn't get myself to work. In the meantime, an apartment in government-subsidized housing for people with persistent mental illnesses had opened up in nearby Elkhart, and it was a godsend for me. My relationship with my parents was full of frustrations and conflict. The new housing arrangement gave them much-needed space from me, and I got much-needed room to explore and fail without the stress that came with failing under their watchful eyes. They could give up their well-intentioned but unhelpful efforts to reason with and provide structure for me, focus on providing love and moral support, and continue to do the work of releasing their expectations of their under-achieving child. And I could begin to disentangle myself from those expectations and start working with my own hopes and fears.

How anxiety feels

Anxiety makes the simple things hard and the hard things agonizing. It makes you doubt yourself. It's difficult to get other people to understand what you're dealing with. And fighting to get them to understand brings its own anxiety. It's stressful to try to explain yourself. It's stressful to feel like you're a burden. It's stressful to constantly feel like people are judging you and to constantly judge yourself for the difference between where you are and where you "should" be. As the English essayist William Hazlitt famously said, "Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be."

People who haven't experienced debilitating anxiety seem to think the issue is irrational fear. Fear is concrete. Fear is immediate. Anxiety is generalized and pervasive. Fear is a response to a clear and present threat. Anxiety persists, and at least for me, tends to revolve around uncertainty and the unknown.

As I write these words, I'm anxious because I've had this assignment on my plate for six months and I feel like I'm letting people down. I'm keenly aware that I still have potentially debilitating anxiety, and I'm not sure where it might strike next. I wasn't expecting writing this article to

be so anxiety provoking. I'm anxious because this subject is important to me and deeply personal—because I want to make every word count and I'm not sure I will.

When my boss schedules a meeting with me for tomorrow afternoon and doesn't tell me what's on the agenda, I am anxious. I wrack my brain: Did I do something? What am I forgetting? I know I do good work and that he hasn't expressed any concerns about my work or conduct. I know that every other time this has happened, the meeting has been routine, no problems. And yet I'm anxious. What if? My anxiety isn't proportionate to the risk present in the situation. In fact, it exists despite my understanding of what's likely to happen.

Anxiety makes the simple things hard and the hard things agonizing. It makes you doubt yourself. It's difficult to get other people to understand what you're dealing with.

It's easy from the outside to think of anxiety as a result of not understanding what's likely to happen. But the problem, at least with chronic anxiety, is rarely one of education or information. What's more, when those around me treat my anxiety as an educational challenge to be tackled, it only makes my anxiety worse. In addition to what I was already struggling with, I now feel judged and misunderstood by those around me, and like I'm wasting their time and they're wasting my energy.

The same principle applies when those around me try to help me by addressing something other than the root cause of my anxiety. When I'm struggling so much that I'm not eating, showering, or sleeping regularly, the last thing I need is a someone trying to explain to me the importance of sleep, food, and hygiene. I know how to eat, sleep, and bathe, and I know how I should be eating, sleeping, and bathing.

So what has helped?

Remembering that we're doing the best we can. I think it was easy for those close to me when I was sickest to forget, in the heat and frustration of the worst moments, that I was my biggest critic and that I was trying hard. And it was easy for me, even on my better days, to forget that those around me were also trying and that they were human too.

My parents have told me that a couple events shifted their way of interacting with me during this time. One happened when a therapist speaking to their Sunday school class observed that it's usually a good idea

for people dealing with friends or family members with mental illness to assume that their loved one is doing the best he can. Mennonite theology and middle-class values tend to focus on will and decision and discipline and effort, and my parents' formation had made it hard for them to understand the extent to which my anxiety and mood instability impaired those functions. My problem was not, in the first instance, a failure of will. I can't overstate the significance that change in their posture made in our relationship.

Recognizing the gap between perception and reality. Accepting the fact that I had a mental illness involved recognizing that my perceptions aren't always aligned with reality. This shouldn't be any great revelation; to be human is to have that mismatch from time to time. But what do you do when that mismatch is no longer an occasional inconvenience but omnipresent and debilitating? What do you do when your mind and thought processes, the tools you've always used to solve problems and to distinguish right from wrong, truth from falsehood, reality from imagination, are themselves the problem? Recognizing this dynamic may mess with some of our usual ways of thinking about faith and ethics; for me it presented an existential problem.

What do you do when your thought processes, the tools you've always used to solve problems and to distinguish right from wrong, truth from falsehood, reality from imagination, are themselves the problem?

To look at this from another angle, let me ask you, Reader: How do you figure out what to do in a situation? What process do you use to make your decisions? I'm guessing you analyze your possible options. You weigh their pros and cons. You weigh their potential outcomes and the likelihood of each outcome. You consider your feelings. You consider the feelings of others. You consider the impact your decision would have on your life and the lives of others. And then you make a choice. I assume that's basically how you approach decisions, even when the steps are not always conscious and discrete. Now every one of those steps involves a complicated mental process. Would you trust your assessment of a situation if you knew you couldn't trust your perceptions? Would you trust your emotions on something if you knew they were often distorted? Would you trust your perceptions or emotions if you couldn't reliably differentiate between times when they were appropriate and times when they weren't?

Another event my parents point to as marking a shift in their way of interacting with me happened at a routine appointment with my psychiatrist. I was describing something, and Mom and Dad jumped in to set the record straight. Dr. K. looked at me and asked, "Do they often gang up on you like that?" They were totally taken aback, chagrined—and learned, with some coaching, to respond to me on such occasions with something like "Hmm. That's not the way I remember it. But we're unlikely to convince each other, so let's not argue about it." That response tended to reduce conflict between us around these perceptual differences, opening a way for more fruitful interaction. And my growing self-awareness about my perceptual gaps also helped de-escalate things between us.

Tackling manageable bits of uncertainty in safe places. When I'm feeling anxious, my first impulse is to try to control my environment: to suppress anything that will make things worse, to isolate myself in a bubble. When you're afraid of the unknown, what better way forward than to remove from your life as many unknowns as possible? But there will always be unknowns. I started to make real progress when I began to tackle manageable bits of uncertainty in safe places. It wasn't a smooth process; there was progress followed by setbacks. But it turns out that having setbacks and coming out the other end intact helped reduce anxiety. And success bred confidence, making it easier to tackle the next unknown.

Several years after I finished high school, a friend from church invited me to visit a Clubhouse in Fort Wayne, Indiana, to learn about this place where people with mental illness could rebuild their lives as they form meaningful relationships around meaningful work. The program was inspiring, and we began to lay the groundwork for the formation of a Clubhouse in Elkhart County. I spoke to church groups and service clubs, to anyone who would listen, and in time we formed a board and hired an executive director and bought a beautiful Victorian home, and a strong program developed.[1] Telling my story and making the case for a local Clubhouse was a profoundly healing experience for me. It gave me confidence that I could manage my anxiety and contribute to my community. And in time, that confidence led me to college and work and a full life—a resurrection.

Focusing on what's getting in the way. I know it's hard to be on the outside looking in, able to see what the person you love just doesn't

1 For more information, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clubhouse_Model_of_Psychosocial_Rehabilitation and https://www.ecclubhouse.org/.

seem to be able to see. It's just as frustrating to be on the inside, experiencing things that people you love just don't seem to feel. I know it's tempting from the outside to nudge—even push—the person with anxiety to have that breakthrough. In my experience, the desire for change needs to come from within if it's going to be lasting. Pushing often made my anxiety worse, because it left me feeling like I was letting those around me down and not living up to their expectations. Rather than thinking about how to incentivize the behavior you'd like to see in your loved one with debilitating anxiety, or how to disincentivize the behavior you think is counterproductive, focus on what obstacles are getting in the way of what she would like to do. Ask: What are her goals? What are her dreams? What's getting in her way? And how I can help remove those obstacles?

Looking for patterns. In the years after high school and before college, when I lived in government-subsidized housing for people with persistent mental illnesses, most of the forty or so people living there had a primary diagnosis of bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or schizoaffective disorder, with secondary diagnoses ranging from anxiety to addiction to obesity. Nearly every resident was chronically unemployed, and many were socially isolated, with no community to belong to.[2] The year my housemate turned forty-eight, he got one card for his birthday. Almost a year later, it was still on the mantle in our living room. It was the only thing in our whole house that he displayed with any kind of pride. In fact, it's the only thing I ever saw him display with pride. That birthday card—the only birthday card he got—was from the pharmacy that filled his prescriptions. I realized how fortunate I was to have good medical care and a supportive family and friends and congregation.

One of the first things I noticed in this new community was how stuck so many people seemed. Some did the same things over and over again in the hope that they'd get different results. Some had the hope beaten out of them by relapse after relapse, setback after setback. Some would believe they'd turned a corner, only to have the rug ripped out from under them by their disease. Some had given up hope and consigned themselves to living the same day over and over again for the rest of their lives.

I'm an analytical person, but it's generally my gut that tells me I need to analyze. When you've lived your whole life operating under the assumption that you can trust your feelings, it isn't easy to make the transition

2 Recent studies suggest that social isolation has dire effects on health. See https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/22/upshot/how-social-isolation-is-killing-us.html.

to figuring out how to live in a world where you can't. I had a choice: I could consign myself to a life with few risks and little hope, or I could take advantage of my situation—very little to lose and no-one counting on me—and try to figure out a way forward. One of the things I noticed about so many of the people I was living with was that they didn't see the setbacks and relapses coming. I also noticed in my own life that there were signs when I was heading into mania or depression. One of these signs was anxiety.

The first step in handling anxiety is recognizing anxiety. If you operate under the assumption that anxiety is a response to environmental stimuli, it's a short jump to trying to find patterns in the environment, identifying the things that provoke that anxiety. Why did I stay up all night? Why have I been eating all day? Why are my nails chewed to the quick? Why do I have the runs? Why didn't I take a shower today? Why am I irritable? None of these behaviors necessarily mean that I'm anxious, but for me they tend to be good indicators of anxiety, especially when they show up together. As I got better at identifying when I was anxious and when I wasn't, it became easier to figure out the impact that anxiety had on my functioning. Recognizing that I was anxious also gave me the opportunity to figure out what I was anxious about. As I got better at identifying when I was anxious and the environmental sources of that anxiety, I could start to pick those sources apart and avoid them or manage my responses to them.

I had a choice: I could consign myself to a life with few risks and little hope, or I could take advantage of my situation—very little to lose and no-one counting on me—and try to figure out a way forward.

Budgeting time and energy, harnessing motivation. Another strategy that I have found helpful in living with anxiety is to think about the resources at my disposal in terms of budgeting. Each day I have a certain amount of time; in a day there is a certain amount that I can do. Likewise, there is a certain amount of anxiety that I can handle at any one time; if I cross that threshold, I tend to shut down. And I have a certain amount of energy each day. Even if I have plenty of time and my anxiety is manageable, I can still run out of energy. And then there's motivation. In my resource model, motivation isn't its own resource; it functions as a multiplier on energy. If I'm motivated to do something, it takes less energy and often less time. If I'm not motivated, it takes more energy and more time.

If I can evaluate my upcoming schedule in terms of the time, anxiety, and energy cost, then I can stay within my budgets. I can often trade time for a reduction in anxiety (for example, by playing video games). Time spent this way is often labeled as escapism or avoidance and looks unproductive from the outside, but when I engage in it intentionally as a tool for reducing anxiety (rather than as a coping mechanism), I've found that it can be very useful. Tackling my day-to-day life using this framework has helped me keep my anxiety at manageable levels.

Finding companions. As I look back, I realize that even now, when I'm feeling anxious and like I don't have control over something that I really want to have control over (usually my feelings!), I tend to focus my frustration on unrelated things that I do have control over. This venting leaves me feeling bad, and it leaves whomever I took out my frustration on feeling some combination of hurt, anger, and confusion. When I was at my worst, this venting was frequent enough and extreme enough to effectively isolate me. That said, I have always had people who loved me even when they didn't understand me. There were friends who suspended judgment and accepted me, despite my erratic behavior. People from church cared, prayed, visited, brought cherry pie, and sent care packages. My family loved me unconditionally. And Grandpa took me out to Subway every week during the worst years, until heart disease limited his mobility. The day he died was one of my hardest—in addition to losing his gracious presence in my life, everything I valued most had just been stolen from my room. And it was November. But it was the first November in years that I didn't crash, and living through that loss gave me courage to begin rebuilding my life. During my college years a family friend treated me to dinner at every good restaurant in Bloomington and listened with interest to my musings about anything and everything. And now I am blessed with satisfying work, and a dear companion, and people in my immediate and extended family who stay in touch. And then there's my old lapdog, Buddy, whose affection I can always count on.

Life—even with anxiety—can be very good. And I would not trade what I have learned from living with mental illness for a life free of its complications. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

About the author

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Young adults, communication technologies, and the church

David Balzer

Three recent interactions I had with youth and young adults have gripped me and won't let me go. Three questions that came out of these moments frame my response to the topic of young adults, communication technologies, and the church: Can we speak positively about technology? Can the church be a refuge? And can adults take responsibility for the world we've made?

It hardly needs to be said that our experience of communication technologies and the formation of young adults provokes strong emotions, desires, and questions. My hope is to probe these questions for the sake of a healthy conversation.

Three questions came out of three recent interactions I had with young adults: Can we speak positively about technology? Can the church be a refuge? And can adults take responsibility for the world we've made?

Can we speak positively about technology?

At the end of a week during which I served as guest speaker at a local Christian high school, we designed the closing Friday session as a panel discussion with six students and two staff members. I had the privilege of facilitating this live-talk-radio-style experience, with a couple jazz musicians serving as the house band. The opening comment came from a grade 10 student who looked out at 430 of his peers and said, "When was the last time we heard anyone speak to us about technology in a positive way?" I was heartened that he felt I had offered something in a positive vein, but his comment raises a deeper question. How is it that critiques are abundant but tangible life-giving visions are few and far between in our naming of technology?

Granted, we have cause for concern. According to Nicholas Carr, who writes on technology and culture, the Internet, with its interactive, immersive, and repetitive stimuli, constitutes an unprecedented mind-altering medium that is creating a society of distractedness, a society where

the capacity for crucial deep thinking and creativity are quickly waning.[1] He argues that this reality has significant implications for public discourse and the development of civil society.

But rather than making pessimism our starting point, I suggest we begin by reclaiming our biblical creative calling rooted in the Genesis 2 account. Here we encounter a remarkable scene in the creation narrative. "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name" (Gen. 2:19, NRSV). Perhaps this was one of God's most audacious acts: to imbue God's creation with a capacity for symbolic action on such a fundamental level that humans ever since are invited to co-create culture with God. We co-create through language, hardware, and software. As one of many continuing expressions of this co-creative capacity, we have the remarkable privilege of naming our children. As Quentin Schultze (professor emeritus of communication at Calvin College) writes, "I believe that God created us to be stewards of symbolic reality.[2] Like symbolic gardeners, we have to figure out which symbols to plant, where to plant them in space and time, and how to nurture them so that they will bear the fruit of shalom."[3]

Rather than making pessimism our starting point, I suggest we begin by reclaiming our creative calling rooted in the Genesis 2 account. God imbued us with a capacity for symbolic action: we are invited to co-create culture with God. We co-create through language, hardware, and software.

Andy Crouch, who writes about culture, creativity, and Christian faith, posits that the biblical calling initiated in Genesis is to literally make something of the world. "If we seek to change culture, we will have to create something new, something that will persuade our neighbors to set

1 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton & Co., 2011), 116.

2 Quentin Schultze, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 23.

3 Schultze, *Communicating for Life*, 61.

aside some existing set of cultural goods for our new proposal."[4] God's call to us to participate in the creation of reality is a high calling. Understanding technology as an expression of this creative capacity anchors our deliberations in a positive biblical framework that is life-giving and worthy of our discerning stewardship.

One example of the stories we may want to tell is about the reCAPTCHA project of Luis von Ahn at Carnegie Mellon University.[5] Ahn and his team asked the marvelous question: What kind of good could we create if we had access to just a tiny slice of the untapped mental capacity of millions of people? This untapped capacity is what New York University writer in residence Clay Shirky calls the "cognitive surplus" available to us for the first time in world history as a result of living in the digital age.[6] Von Ahn has found a way to help digitize millions of books each year by getting users to decipher and type two words during the online authentication process often linked to sites such as Ticketmaster. Here, for a couple seconds, the genius of the human brain is harnessed to read a word that a computer can't, and the correct spelling is validated. This insight adds another word to the digitized database. I'm inspired by von Ahn's creativity. I believe young adults are ready to be invited into this kind of Genesis 2 vision.

Can the church be a refuge?

My second question emerged out of a conversation with a recent alumnus of Canadian Mennonite University. As we were making our way over to the picture windows in the Marpeck Commons with coffee cups in hand, I mentioned this article and asked about the church and technology. The response I got—"I think I'd like the church to be a refuge"—has stuck with me.

The notion of refuge reminded me of a growing theme in a media audit assignment I give my students every year. An open-ended invitation to reflect on twenty-four hours of their media use is generating more and more responses like this one: "The amount of time I spend with media is

4 Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 67.

5 Luis von Ahn, "Massive-Scale Online Collaboration," video filmed at TEDxCMU, April 11, 2011, 16:33, https://www.ted.com/talks/luis_von_ahn_massive_scale_online_collaboration.

6 Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (New York: Penguin, 2010).

concerning. I realized that almost every hour of my day had some interaction with the Internet and media. But the thing that scares me is that of most of my peers and friends, I am one who uses the Internet the least. And that makes me wonder, What causes us to become addicted to media, and how does that affect our relationships?"[7] Perhaps refuge is what is needed. And if the church is going to be exactly that in a technologized culture, we'll need to do at least three things: shift our model of communication from transmission to ritual, nurture an incarnational bias, and enact embodied worship practices.

Shifting fom a transmission to a ritual model of communication. Communication theorist James Carey held that our assumptions about the nature of communication have fundamental implications for the shape of our communicating. In his seminal essay, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," he writes, "In one mode communication models tell us what the process is; in their second mode they produce the behavior they have described."[8] He elaborates two views of communication, the transmission view and the ritual view. "If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality."[9] His interest is to mount a critique of the transmission view, which has dominated academic and cultural understandings of what it means to communicate. Our predisposition toward conquering geographic space with information rather than investing in social cohesion through time has significant consequences.

Notice how Carey differentiates between a horizontal communication that conquers geographic space with information and a vertical communication that invests in social cohesion through generational time.[10]

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7 This response came from a September 2016 media audit assignment in which students tracked their use of media by type and quantity in fifteen-minute increments for twenty-four hours, then wrote a reflection paper.

8 James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society,* rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 24.

9 Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 15.

10 James Carey is drawing significantly on the work of Canadian thinker Harold Innis. Innis was a contemporary of Marshall McLuhan and a thought partner in what came to be known as the Toronto School of Communication. In *The Bias of Communication* (1951), Innis argues that certain mediums of communication are biased toward spanning geographical space, while others are better at moving meanings through generational time. Thinking in terms of space-biased and time-biased mediums is helpful in making

We need to attend to how our media are biased toward one or the other of these dimensions. Taking a ritual view of communication as a priority creates a more dialogical and relational approach to making meaning and pushes back against more monologic, selfish, and abusive communication tendencies.

I raise the matter of transmission versus ritual communication here because I perceive a prevalent, largely uncritical adoption of presentational and other technologies in worship spaces. In that context we seem to be enamored of spanning space, but I'm not convinced that these technologies enhance relational connectedness. Carey and John Quirk argue compellingly that many in our society are caught up in the mythology of the electronic sublime, the "impression that electrical technology is the great benefactor of [hu]mankind. . . . They hail electrical techniques as the motive force of desired social change, the key to the re-creation of a humane community. . . . Their shared belief is that electricity will overcome historical forces and political obstacles that prevented previous utopias."[11]

I am concerned that we are shifting from faith *and* technology to faith *in* technology. A ritual view of communication pushes back against a cultural tidal wave of belief in technology that invites us to conquer geographical space but leaves us wanting in relational terms.

More often than not, when a technology upgrade or videocast is heralded in the church, I hear this kind of salvific rhetoric being offered as a rationale, and I am concerned that we are shifting from faith *and* technology to faith *in* technology. Quentin Schultze masterfully assesses this dynamic in his analysis of Christianity and the mass media in North America.[12] A ritual view of communication pushes back against

sense of emerging technologies and their inherent strengths and weaknesses. Innis was particularly interested in assessing sweeps of world history related to empire and how particular space- or time-biased mediums made certain political and social realities possible.

11 James W. Carey, with John J. Quirk, "The Mythos of the Electronic Revolution," in Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 88.

12 Quentin J. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 2003).

a cultural tidal wave of belief *in* technology that invites us to conquer geographical space but leaves us wanting in relational terms.

Nurturing an incarnational bias. A concrete means of moving toward a ritual view of communication and refuge is to nurture what I call an incarnational bias in our worshiping communities. In a recorded conversation about catechism with Pierre Babin, a member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and an expert in the field of religious communication, Marshall McLuhan says,

> *To teach catechism as a given or as content is to limit oneself to only half of Christianity. The formal cause—the ground that is perceived unconsciously—is not words, but that part of the faith which operates in our lives. The two should be united.*
>
> *In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same.*[13]

The fact that God chose to be revealed through Jesus in flesh and blood is significant to me from a communications perspective. Our worshiping communities would do well to learn from a person who "moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14, *The Message*). We can so easily be consumed by an interest in transmitting data—words—rather than pursuing embodied manifestations of God's presence.

Enacting embodied worship practices. Richard Gaillardetz, a specialist in Catholic ecclesiology, suggests that revitalizing our understanding and practice of the sacraments as multisensory immersive experiences is a unique opportunity for the Christian church.[14] And in using the word *immersive*, I'm not surreptitiously making a case for full-immersion baptism, although it is exactly the kind of embodied enactment Gaillardetz is valuing! Spiritual practices that engage movement, sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell are a beautiful means of creating refuge. These practices are countercultural in our technologized age, which so often truncates our sensory experience in unhealthy ways.

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13 Marshall McLuhan, "Religion and Youth: Second Conversation with Pierre Babin," in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, edited by Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek, and translated by Wayne Constantineau (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 103.

14 Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

This emphasis on embodied practices is affirmed by social psychologist Sherry Turkle, who contends that face-to-face interaction needs to be reclaimed, even though it is demanding.[15] "From the early days, I saw that computers offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship and then, as the programs got really good, the illusion of friendship without demands of intimacy. Because, face-to-face, people ask for things that computers never do. With people, things go best if you pay close attention and know how to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Real people demand responses to what they are feeling. And not just any response."[16]

The fact that God chose to be revealed through Jesus in flesh and blood is significant from a communications perspective. Our worshiping communities can so easily be consumed by an interest in transmitting data—words—rather than pursuing embodied manifestations of God's presence.

We often call text messaging "instant messaging." This is a misnomer. Consider how quickly you feel awkward in a face-to-face conversation when you're momentarily stuck for a response. Compare that reaction to receiving a text message and then responding. A student of mine in a reflection paper pointed to exactly this ability to pause between reception and response as the enormous difference between technologized and face-to-face communication. Face-to-face is instant; texting is not. This reality makes embodied relationships complex and increasingly unnerving, if not terrifying, for people who use texting as a primary mode of interaction. Turkle encourages us to embrace the awkward moments for the sake of regaining our capacity to be empathetic. The wonder of communion, baptism, and other embodied and immersive spiritual practices is that they achieve exactly what Turkle is commending.

Can adults take responsibility for the world we've made?

A recent informal survey of high school students generated my third question. I asked these teens, "If you could help your parents understand one

15 Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

16 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 7.

thing about social media, what would it be?" Among several amusing entries, such as "The difference between Instachat and Snapgram," this line caught my attention: "If they want us to put away devices, they need to do so too (hypocrisy)."[17] I am a parent of three young adults, and this answer caught me up short. It raises the question: Can adults take responsibility for the world we've made? As I reflected on this student's response, it struck me that all the communication technology infrastructure and access that exists today was invented, adopted, and promoted by adults, not teens and twenty-somethings. When I ask congregations who made personal video recorders, smart phones, and Internet access possible in their homes and churches, no one has said, "It's the children." So my plea is simply that we tread cautiously and graciously into conversation about this technology with young adults. To be blunt, if we are somewhat disconcerted by their usage patterns, we need to revisit our responsibility in facilitating the adoption of a very powerful and tantalizing medium.

My plea is simply that we tread cautiously and graciously into conversation about technology with young adults. If we are somewhat disconcerted by their usage patterns, we need to revisit our responsibility in facilitating the adoption of a very powerful and tantalizing medium.

New media scholar Danah Boyd argues that adults have often tended to falsely pathologize youth's technology practices. She contends that youth are trying to meet real and appropriate social needs through their use of technology.[18] In terms of content, their interactions are not significantly different from what earlier generations did in socializing at local hangouts, the difference being that now they meet online. The move toward adulthood includes learning about self-presentation and how to manage social relationships, and developing an understanding of the world.[19] She writes, "Adults must recognize what teens are trying to achieve and work

17 This survey was conducted in Student Life Groups at Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute in Winnipeg, Manitoba, while I was the guest speaker for the school's Spiritual Emphasis Week, September 25–29, 2017.

18 Danah Boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2014), 98.

19 Boyd, *It's Complicated*, 95.

with them to find balance and to help them think about what they are encountering."[20] What youth need are companions rather than combatants.

Concluding thoughts

We are all navigating a world in the making. We are one of very few generations in world history who have been asked to straddle a shift from one dominant medium of communication to another. We have the privilege of imagining and enacting a network society that fundamentally reshapes how we interact on a local and global scale.[21] The church has an immense opportunity to nurture and inspire a life-giving vision in this process. Our vision for engaging this opportunity is enlivened when we reclaim our God-given creative calling, when we boldly pursue incarnational practices of refuge, and when we humbly and graciously enter into conversation with our children and young adults.

About the author

David Balzer is assistant professor of communications and media at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg, MB) and is part of the North Kildonan Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg. One of his current passions is producing documentary content that explores when and why people say "Oh my God" (omgthedoc.com).

20 Boyd, *It's Complicated*, 99.

21 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, vol. 1 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

Let's do this church thing together

Liz Weber

I was raised in the Mennonite church. I attended the same church from birth until my mid-twenties. During that time I did all the things a good churchgoer does: I attended Sunday school, first as an infant with my parents and then on my own from preschool to youth. I went to church potlucks and ate the wonderful home-cooked food. After church I raced my friends over and under the pews as we waited for our parents to finish talking. I attended every youth event I could. And I was baptized in my teens. I was your typical church kid.

When I went off to university, I—unlike many others my age—stayed connected to my home church. It helped that I was only a thirty-minute drive away. During my time at university and for a few years after, I remained quite active in my congregation, coordinating and teaching children's Sunday school, being a youth sponsor, partaking in many intergenerational mission trips, and serving on the vacation Bible school planning committee. These were all activities that I enjoyed. I poured a lot of time, energy, and emotion into them. They are what kept me excited about church and wanting to be a part of it. But even these couldn't stop me from leaving.

The young adult thing?

A couple of years ago I left the congregation I grew up in. I didn't leave because I think the church is irrelevant, unimportant, anti-science, fails to adapt, or for any of the many other reasons people have come up with to explain why young adults are leaving the church. I left because I was being put in a box labelled "young adult" and I wanted to get out. I wanted out of the predefined idea people had of me that didn't allow me to be me.

After leaving the congregation I grew up in, I dreaded conversations in which people would ask which church I was attending. These probably cropped up more for me than for most people, because I worked in a church organization. I dreaded this question not because I didn't have an answer but because when I did answer with a general response about being between churches, people would look at me and say, "Ohhh, you're doing the young adult thing." Again, I was being put in the predefined box as one of those "young adults." My situation was being likened to that

of many others who were thought to have a similar experience but who in reality are all vastly different.

The adult thing.

Although I didn't like the phrase, it did get me to think more about why I left the church. As a result, I came up with a response that has helped generate some discussion on the topic. Now when people characterize me as doing the "young adult thing," I'll respond with, "Sure, but if you're going to recognize what I do as the young adult thing, then you have to recognize that it is because others have done the adult thing." This response usually catches people off-guard and makes them pause and then ask what I mean. The initial exchange opens up an interesting conversation around the role that adults can play in helping young adults feel part of the church.

I realize that by using the phrase "the adult thing," I am doing what I say I don't like and putting adults in a predefined box based on their age and on the experiences I've had with a select group of them. But I use this phrase to make a point and generate some discussion.

What exactly do I mean when I accuse them of doing "the adult thing"? I'm referring not just to one thing that is being done by adults but rather to a number of things that have created experiences that pushed me (and likely others) from the church. Adults often lament that young adults aren't in the church, yet the adults aren't creating a space for young adults to be who they are. (By "adult," I mean mainly people forty years old and older; these are the ones most of my experiences have been with.)

When a young adult hasn't said anything in an intergenerational conversation at church, the go-to question tends to be "Tell us, what do young adults think?" This question should never be asked. It is segregating, degrading, and impersonal.

Let me out of the box

Adults want young adults to participate in what is happening at church, but they are terrible at knowing how to engage with us. If there is a young adult in the room who hasn't said anything, the go-to question tends to be "Tell us, what do young adults think?" This is a question that should never be asked. I find it to be segregating, degrading, and impersonal. It segregates because it singles out a certain

age group and categorizes them as all the same, which we are not. It is degrading because it asks for an opinion based solely on age, a trait that one has no control over. And it is impersonal because it asks for a generalized opinion rather than an individual's opinion. No one asks people for their "middle-aged" or "senior" opinion on things; in fact, people of those age groups would likely be offended if that did happen. If you want to hear from me, ask me for *my* opinion. And when I give it to you, be sure to listen, truly listen, even if you don't agree.

When I would share my "young adult" opinion (or what others thought it to be), people would listen, hear what I had to say, and affirm it. When I'd share my personal opinion, I never felt truly heard, especially if I was questioning something or showing any sign of faith-related doubt. Often others would respond in a somewhat joking way, saying, "You were raised in the church, you should know."

When there are few young adults in a congregation, it can be easy to talk *about* them: why they've left, what they're up to, how to bring them back. But when young adults are actually in a congregation, older adults seem to struggle to know what to say *to* them.

Admit that you sometimes don't have an answer

Or sometimes my questions were labelled as unimportant or answered in a way that indicated that the responder didn't know the answer but was afraid to admit it. Why are we, adults young and old, so afraid of not knowing the answer and of being wrong? One of the reasons I love working with kids is because if I don't know the answer to something, I feel fine saying "I don't know" and they accept it. Mind you, I usually follow up my "I don't know" with a "But let's try to figure this out together."

Doing something together means that we have to find a way to talk with each other. When there are few young adults in a congregation, it can be easy to talk *about* them: why they've left, what they're up to, how to bring them back. But when young adults are actually in a congregation, older adults seem to struggle to know what to say *to* them, aside from the inevitable "What do young adults think?" question. We are not a foreign species who speak a different language. We are human beings, looking for relationships with other human beings.

Take the time to talk *to* me

If you want me to stick around and participate, then take the time to ask me about me—who I am, where I come from, what I do, etc. Stick with the basics to start with, and eventually we may find something we have in common that we can go deeper with. And don't wait for me to make the first move. If I am new to your congregation, then I likely feel that I did my part by coming in the doors and staying for the service. If you've never had to do that on your own, you don't realize how terrifying it can be. Come and say hi and introduce yourself. Engage me in a conversation, no matter how short or random it may be. This effort will make a world of difference.

When I talk with others about what I mean when I say "the adult thing," I find it amazing that so many admit to having asked for "the young adult" opinion. They tell me that they have assumed that those who grew up in the church know everything. They admit that they are afraid to say "I don't know." I am okay with their responses. Just having the conversation with them gives me greater hope for the church, hope that someday age won't be such a defining factor and that relationships will be more real and authentic.

So stop putting me in a box, listen to what I have to say, talk *to* me rather than *about* me, and don't be afraid to say "I don't know." Rather than doing the young adult thing or the adult thing, let's do this church thing together.

About the author

Liz Weber is hopeful for the church in the way that hockey fans in Ontario are hopeful for the Toronto Maple Leafs: they hope their team will do great, even though it continues to disappoint. Part of her hope comes from having worked at Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, where she got to hear many stories of amazing things churches are doing.

Without rings and without strings

Engaging cohabitation in the church

Irma Fast Dueck

When my husband and I courted thirty-five years ago, the pattern went like this: We met at a Mennonite college. We dated for a period of time. Then one day, after a long walk in the woods, we declared our love to each other and decided to get married and spend our lives together. I was twenty-one. After a week of getting used to the idea, we announced to our parents that we were engaged and began to make wedding plans. Relatives and friends hosted showers for us, to help us gather the things we needed to establish a household together. Our wedding took place in my home church in the presence of church people, friends, and family, and my father officiated. In a departure from the usual practice, our reception was held not in the church basement but at a nearby Mennonite camp. A short program followed the meal. It included a few sly references to having children and what we might be doing in our hotel later that evening.

The pattern for moving into marriage is changing. Living together has in many ways become culturally normative, and it may or may not eventually lead couples to marry. The church is left to discern how it will respond to this contemporary reality.

The unfolding of our courtship from dating to engagement and wedding and establishing a household together followed a familiar pattern in the Anabaptist-Mennonite community that formed us. Almost everyone we knew who entered into marriage did so by following this pattern, with only slight variations. It was pattern observable both in Christian communities and in the "secular" world. Thirty-some years ago, when I served as a pastor, on rare occasions when a couple was living together before marriage, I would present the situation to the congregation's board of deacons, and they would discern under what circumstances I could participate in the wedding ceremony. These might include asking the couple

to stop cohabiting in the interim. Clearly, cohabitating before marriage was the exception to the rule, and in such cases church leaders revisited the usual marriage protocols.

Today, the pattern for moving into marriage is changing. Living together has in many ways become culturally normative, and it may or may not eventually lead couples to marry. The social stigma around cohabitation has diminished, and many couples, both Christian and non-Christian, now regard is as a real option. And the church is left to discern how it will respond to this contemporary reality.

Cohabitation isn't just one thing

A cohabiting couple lives together in a sexual union, without having formalised that union in a legal marriage. But beneath that general definition is the reality that cohabitation is not a uniform phenomenon, a fact that becomes obvious as soon as one encounters real people who are cohabiting. Some couples are ***casual*** cohabiters. They drift into living together, for convenience or financial reasons, without giving much consideration to the future. Other couples are ***cautious*** about cohabiting. They are more serious about a future relationship together. They support the institution of marriage and may be tentatively moving toward it. They are not yet fully committed to each other and may consider cohabitation a trial marriage, hoping it will help them decide whether they are in fact right for each other. Still other couples are more ***committed***. They have made the decision to stay together, and they hope it will be for life. They expect to get married but have not done so yet for a variety of reasons. These might include lack of resources to foot the cost of the wedding they want, lack of a sense of urgency, complications related to employment or educational pursuits, the need to wait for a divorce from a previous partner to be finalized. Other couples see cohabitation as an ***alternative*** to marriage. For cultural or philosophical reasons, they see marriage as outmoded. These couples may be committed to each other but are not conventional in formalising that commitment in a marriage covenant.

Clearly, not all cohabitation is the same, and it may be helpful to distinguish the prenuptial cohabitation of those in the committed and cautious categories from the non-nuptial cohabitation of those in the casual and alternative categories. While researchers frequently cite a correlation between cohabitation and divorce rates, a simplistic cause-and-effect interpretation does not adequately capture the nuances of difference between prenuptial and non-nuptial cohabitation. Numerous studies indicate that

cohabiters with plans to marry report no significant difference in the quality of their relationship than do married people.

What is clear is that cohabitation is on the rise. Cohabitation has increased by nearly 900 percent in the past fifty years. In Canada and the United States, more couples are cohabitating than are married. The majority of young adults see cohabitation as a good idea; many would consider it odd not to live with a partner before marriage. Cohabitation is replacing marriage as the first living together union for today's young adults, and increasingly cohabitation is the most common route into marriage. But this does not mean that the majority of cohabiting relationships lead to marriage: some have claimed that cohabiters are just as likely to return to singleness as to enter marriage.[1]

Why couples cohabitate

Couples may choose to move in together for many reasons. In what follows, we will identify just a few.

An increase in nonmarital sexual activity. With the advent of effective contraceptive technologies and increasing sexual permissiveness, growing numbers of people are engaging in nonmarital sexual activity. In our current cultural milieu, sexual activity is a taken-for-granted freedom, a prerogative of the young and single. For many men and women, casual sex is expected as part of dating. Only a few take a moralistic stand against it. Simply put, the argument goes: if we're sexually active anyway, why not just move in together? For these, the only disadvantage (if it would be called that) of moving in together is that it constitutes more open acknowledgment of their sexual involvement.

An increasing gap between puberty and marrying age. In the United States and Canada, the gap between puberty and marriage has been steadily widening. Thirty or more years ago it was not uncommon for people to get married around the age of twenty-one. Now people are marrying at a much older age. One young adult asks, " 'True love waits' was fine when I was a teenager, but can it wait until I'm thirty or more?"

Changing attitudes to marriage. Many young adults have witnessed or experienced divorce in their families and among their friends, with the result that they are skeptical about or afraid of making their own marriage commitments.

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1 Adrian Thatcher, *Living Together and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 7.

Living together as a test run. The perceived fragility of marriage leads some to see living together as a cautious approach. Both women and men favor living together as a way of gathering vital information about a partner's character, capacity for fidelity, and compatibility. Cohabitation is seen as a way of testing the partners' long-term compatibility.

The reasons couples give for moving in together are not always grounded in reality. For example, the logic that cohabitation can function as a test of long-term compatibility might suggest that couples who have lived together before marriage will have better marriages. But no evidence supports this belief, and some studies indicate that the opposite may in fact be true, that cohabiting before marriage increases the likelihood of divorce, particularly for those who have cohabited multiple times.[2]

Engaging cohabitation in the church

Cohabitation is a new cultural norm which the church needs to contend with. We have observed that the practice of cohabitation is a complex reality. But marriage too is multidimensional: it is personal and communal, psychological and sociological, theological and sacramental, emotional and physical, philosophical and practical, to name just a few of its aspects. This multifaceted quality makes speaking about marriage challenging, but its very ordinariness also makes marriage difficult for us to reflect on. The risk is to oversimplify, to offer a causal analysis of cohabitation that makes it the enemy of Christian marriage and the family without engaging the complexity of the issue or examining the social context in which it is increasingly practiced. This context includes contemporary understandings of marriage which have been implicated in the practice of cohabitation.

What follows are some considerations for Christians to pay attention to as they engage the reality of cohabitation. I do not mean to be offering a justification for or a defence of the practice of cohabitation; it would be difficult to defend cohabitation from a biblical or theological perspective. But whenever there is a disconnect between the traditional teachings of the church and the convictions and practices of its members, we have good reason to think about what the church should do to bridge the gap. What questions should the church be asking? What should guide the church as it engages in discernment around issues connected to the practices of cohabitation?

2 Thatcher, *Living Together*, 12.

Remember that the Christian understanding of marriage is not static and has always been influenced by the social context and culture. Christians throughout history have had to engage in discernment about courtship and marriage practices. The particular cultural contexts in which Christians have found themselves have affected their marriage practices. Biblical teaching on marriage should be seen in the context of the ancient Near Eastern cultures with which the people of the Bible had intimate links, especially the Mesopotamian, Syrian, and Canaanite cultures of the Old Testament, and the Hebrew, Roman, and Greek cultures in the New Testament. We know that there were syncretistic tendencies among God's people, that their beliefs and practices were influenced by the cultural practices of societies they lived among. For example, practices of polygamy and concubinage evident in the narratives of the Pentateuch were influenced by the cultural world of the Old Testament patriarchs, but such practices would create significant dissonance in our cultural context, as would the notion that wives are the property of their fathers and husbands, an idea assumed in both testaments. At the same time, we must remember how frequently Judeo-Christian understandings of marriage and family have been radical amid—even subversive of—prevailing cultural understandings.

Whenever there is a disconnect between the traditional teachings of the church and the convictions and practices of its members, we have good reason to think about what the church should do to bridge the gap.

Increasingly, theologians are recognizing that Christian visions of the traditional family look remarkably like the bourgeois or middle-class family that rose to dominance in the nineteenth century alongside capitalism and with the industrial revolution. It is no accident that family and free enterprise came to be linked.[3] The capitalist narrative has shaped an understanding of marriage and family as separated and autonomous. This idea of the family is nuclear in the sense that it consists only of parents and their children and also in its inward orientation. David Matzko McCarthy writes, "Two people who join together in marriage carve out a distinct sphere of life, distinct not only from other families but also from social and economic structures. Husband and wife set up a home, and

3 This correlation is developed significantly by Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

home, as an ideal of intimacy and love, stands apart from economic judgements or concerns for profit and productivity. Family is, rather, sustained internally by emotional investment."[4] This closed conception of family has in many ways been co-opted by the church, a strange development in that the nuclear family does little to open a door to the sacred. The practices of the nuclear family are isolated from the social body of the church, and the church's role is reduced to sustaining the family unit.

The cultural context of the church has always influenced Christians' practice of marriage. In every generation and culture, the church has had to read the biblical story anew in light of the particular challenges associated with that context; the church cannot simply reproduce the patterns of its biblical or Christian predecessors. Now too, the church must discern how it will engage the current sexual milieu—including the pervasive practice of cohabitation—which will inevitably affect societal practices of courtship and marriage. At the same time Christians must recognize that the God of scriptures is a God who deigned to enter into human history and into relationship with humankind, who is the living and dynamic source and sustainer of all life and who will continue to sustain the church in days to come.

Contemporary practices of cohabitation present an opportunity for Christians to reflect honestly on their understandings of sexuality, marriage, family, and singleness. In a cursory reading of Christian literature on cohabitation, the most common concern I note is about the impact of cohabitation on Christian understandings of marriage. Specifically, this literature expresses the conviction that we have good reason to fear that cohabitation threatens the Christian ideal of marriage.

Yet cohabitation may provide a much-needed opportunity to re-examine this presumed ideal of Christian marriage. Several theologians have begun to ask whether current Christian understandings reflect a glorification of marriage and family that effectively makes an idol of them.[5] They suggest that this idolizing of family and kinship relationships is something Jesus knew the risk of; his own singleness could be interpreted as a form of resistance to it.[6] Further, as noted, our idealized view of the "traditional family" is not a model lifted out of Old Testament patriarchal society or

4 David Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 2.

5 See, for example, Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

6 Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*.

from the New Testament but is a model of family that comes out of industrialized Europe and North America of the nineteenth century.

This analysis raises questions for our consideration. What makes marriage Christian? What distinguishes the practice of marriage from cohabitation? How can Christian marriage theology and practice be strengthened, so that it doesn't simply become another version of cohabitation? Christians have long believed that there is in fact something Christian about marriage, something revelatory about who God is. For this reason, many Christians consider marriage a sacrament, an avenue for experience of and insight into the divine.

According to the Old Testament, Israel was not chosen by God and rescued from Egyptian slavery because of its merit or great numbers. Instead, "it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery" (Deut. 7:7–8). Through its history, Israel had come to know the Creator God, the sovereign Lord, and one of the most important characteristics they encountered in God was unyielding fidelity and unwavering grace. The Psalmist confesses, "Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds" (Ps. 36:5).

Eventually Israel came to see the relationship of husband and wife at its best as reflecting God's fidelity to Israel, and for this reason Israel came to practice monogamous marriage. Later, for Christians, the marriage relationship was to be a reflection of Jesus Christ's relationship with the church. Not surprisingly, Christian marriage is frequently described using the language of covenant, language that points to the relationship of God with God's people. Of course, it is not only marriage that is capable of reflecting God's fidelity to God's people, nor does the New Testament suggest that everyone should marry. In fact, it presents a positive view of singleness in the life and teachings of Jesus and the apostle Paul.

Perhaps the feature that most distinguishes marriage from cohabitation is community. At its best, marriage is a community-building act from the outset, while cohabitation is not.

Perhaps the feature that most distinguishes marriage from cohabitation is community. At its best, marriage is a community-building act from the outset, while cohabitation is not. To marry is to celebrate a couple's

love and commitment publically in the presence of family and friends and the church. Marriage begins in the context of a community and from the start acknowledges that we are part of a larger human family. It recognizes that one's life is more than one's own, that one's actions affect more than oneself and one other. It in essence proclaims that marriage is more than a private affair between two people; it finds its meaning in the context of a broader community, the church, the body of Christ.

Living together seems to imply that the central relationship of a couple's life is nobody's business but their own. To live together is a decision most often reached privately and put into effect without wider involvement. No community blesses or celebrates the decision. And sadly, what the community does not bless, it does not feel responsible for. But the same is true when marriage is understood as a private affair, an autonomous decision between two individuals, when the communal dimensions of this union are not recognized and practiced. Then marriage risks becoming just another version of cohabitation. The desire for privacy, for individual self-expression, for autonomy, looms large in North American culture, and the church is left to discern not only how the Christian community can find its way into the commitments of cohabiting couples in order to bring them into covenants of marriage but also how it might strengthen communal notions of marriage.

Current practices of cohabitation have many implications for ministry. A consistent complaint I hear from the university students I teach is that they have limited opportunity in the church to talk about sexuality, marriage, and ethical issues such as cohabitation. As the temporal gap between puberty and marriage increases, the need for ongoing dialogue and support becomes critical. And pastoral care is needed as people cope with negative experiences of marriage relationships, which lead them to suspect and fear marriage.

Perhaps most significant is the need for the church to remain in relationship with those who are cohabiting. Sadly, though understandably, when a Christian couple chooses to cohabit, they recognize their divergence from the church's traditional teachings, with the result that they often leave the church. Cohabitation, unlike sexual relationships that can be hidden, is public behaviour that still elicits the disapproval of many Christians.[7] The question remains: How can the church hold fast to the

7 Thatcher, *Living Together,* 33–34. Church people express religious approval for going directly from singleness to marriage, and it actually increases religious involvement, while church people still think of cohabitation as something less religious people do.

significance of marriage and at the same time accept the reality that cohabitation is, for many people, a step along the way toward marriage? How can the church remain in relationship with those who are currently living together without being married?

Christian theology is a human intellectual endeavour. It entails listening. Christians believe that God has spoken decisively in Christ, and that God's word comes to us in every generation, so it makes sense that listening is a significant practice for those engaged in doing theology. Listening is hard work. But part of doing Christian theology, part of our theological discernment around ethical issues, is listening to what social scientists, sociologists, cultural theorists, anthropologists, and psychologists are saying. These voices can help us as we make connections between our faith and ordinary life.

In addition, the church needs to listen to young adults as they reflect on their current cultural context and as they make choices. Many of the church's pastors and leaders and teachers have been formed into adulthood in communities and in a culture significantly different from our current cultural milieu: it's a different world out there. Our young adults experience cultural pressures that have an impact on their understanding and practices of sexuality, and they face significant cultural and social pressure to cohabit. The church needs to be attentive to this reality. From the point of view of many, living together seems to make sense: it respects their right to express themselves as sexual beings, often in monogamous relationships, before they are ready to take on the responsibilities and obligations of marriage. They may even see it as honouring the sanctity of marriage by not pushing them to enter into it lightly or prematurely. And they may see it pragmatically, as a fiscally advantageous choice, one that reduces their living expenses.

How will the church care for those who are living together, without letting their cohabitation diminish support for Christian marriage? How will the church faithfully tell the Christian story of sexuality, marriage, and family amid the competing narratives of the social context in which we find ourselves?

About the author

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How to be broken

Observations and reflections on divorce

Jessica Smucker

My brother and I walked from his house near the Providence River up the hill to the Duck and Bunny, a row house with pink siding and white trim that someone had converted into a trendy pub and cupcake joint. We entered the "living room" and grabbed two seats at the bar, which doubled as the cupcake case. Through the glass beneath our drinks, we could see rows and rows of decadent treats in assorted hipster flavors: Honey Lavender, Guinness Stout, Maple Bacon Bourbon. These cupcake makers were not messing around, but neither were my brother and I. It was a weekday afternoon and we were there to drink.

Navigating your parents' divorce should be easier when you are an adult. You have the emotional resources to better understand the boundaries between yourself and the people who raised you, to bypass all the clichés: feeling abandoned, feeling unloved, believing it's all your fault. Right? But no.

"What should we do?" My brother asked me. "I mean, we can't let him *do* this, right?"

I shrugged.

A few months earlier, on Easter Sunday, I had stood horrified on my aunt Carolyn's back porch and watched my dad get down on his knees and propose to the woman he'd been seeing since mid-January. I would call it one of the most uncomfortable moments of my life, but ever since my ex-husband impregnated and married my little cousin, my life is pocked with such uncomfortable moments. The more gracefully I handle them, the more points I feel I earn toward redemption for my own marital missteps.

This is when I confessed to my brother my belief that our parents' split was my fault. He dropped his head down on the bar/cupcake case for a moment, and when he came back up, he was laughing. "What are we, twelve?" he said. "I've been thinking it was *my* fault."

Navigating your parents' divorce should be easier when you are an adult. As an adult, you have the emotional resources to talk yourself through it, to better understand the boundaries between yourself and the people who raised you, to bypass all the clichés: feeling abandoned, feeling unloved, believing it's all your fault. Right? But no. There is no easy time to say goodbye to the first love story you ever knew. And none of the things you ever felt or believed about your parents go away as you grow old; every new piece of information, every feeling, every relic just piles on top of the last, layer upon layer, so that by the time you're fully grown, what you know of your parents is this mountain of sediment and snow you're trying to balance atop. One little shift—a melting drift, a rolling pebble—and you become your own avalanche.

My dad used to tell us kids about the moment he decided to marry my mom. What he described was never a story so much as a snapshot: him sitting alone on a black sand beach in Costa Rica, watching the waves collide with the sand in glorious monotony. My mom, ever mindful of details, would interject to inform us of what *actually* happened. When he got home from Costa Rica, my dad broke up with her and went on a weeklong bender with his buddy, Christy. *Then* he came back and asked for her hand in marriage. As with most real life stories, the romance is in the retelling.

I wonder how many years have to pass before I've fully accepted the alternate reality of my parents' divorce. Will it ever stop being the lens through which I see everything? Or will every happy memory of my family be forever obscured by a retroactive cloud of sadness?

Now that my parents have been divorced for more than a decade, I wonder what to do with stories like this. The picture in my mind of that black sand beach has changed over the years: what I imagined as a sunny afternoon has become an ominous twilight layered deep with clouds. I didn't grow up in a broken home. For the duration of my childhood, I had two parents who loved and got along with each other. I never once considered the possibility that they wouldn't be together forever. Now I wonder how many years have to pass before I've fully accepted the alternate reality of their divorce. Will it ever stop being the lens through which I see everything? Or will every happy memory of my family be forever obscured by a retroactive cloud of sadness?

The church's take on divorce: Brokenness or sin?

I feel compelled to write about divorce, but the truth is, I don't want to. I'm now a happily (if harriedly) married forty-year-old raising two toddlers. My day-to-day life is a mess of toys and diapers and unfolded laundry and half-written pages and barely cooked meals. On a good day, I get to have one meaningful conversation with another adult. On a *really* good day, that conversation is with my husband. So I don't want to talk about or think about or write about divorce.

And yet, it's a subject that haunts me, that keeps demanding my attention. For better or worse, I've gotten used to navigating around hidden pockets of shame, swallowing feelings in order to shield myself and others. I withhold information from my church community by de-emphasizing—if not outright hiding—my past. Why do I withhold my pain from the people with the greatest potential to lift it? Because I've never known the Mennonite church to take on divorce as matter of brokenness, only as a matter of sin.

My mother's experience: Perpetual punishment. My mother's childhood was fraught with every kind of abuse. Her parents withheld their love, resources, and the true story of where she came from, and they forced her to marry a man who tried to kill her more than once in their first few months of living together. By her eighteenth birthday, my mom was pregnant, divorced, and already finished with the business of being a battered wife. The little bit of self-esteem that had propelled her out of that violent first marriage took another hit when she encountered the Mennonites (through my dad) a few years later.

Her life was decidedly better after meeting my dad. For the first time, she had security; she had unconditional love. But she also had bouncers at her wedding to keep the church pastor away. The man who was supposed to guide and welcome her into a new faith instead refused to grant her church membership. For years, he made a point of visiting my parents in their home the week before communion Sunday for the sole purpose of reminding them that they would not be permitted to participate in communion because they lived in a perpetual state of adultery. Although my mom's relationship with the church improved over time (most notably with the retirement of that pastor), she was never allowed to feel like that first awful marriage was safely behind her. She continued to pay for her "sin" in large and small ways for the next thirty years.

My experience: Acceptance as avoidance. Just one generation later, I left my first husband—rather frivolously, to be honest—and have never

had to answer for it to anyone in the church. I was not a member of or actively involved in a Mennonite church at the time of my divorce, but I am now. And while I do not wish to be forced to dig into this issue with my current church community, I can't help but find peculiar, even jarring, the difference between my mother's experience and mine. Perhaps there are still pockets of the church that would continue punishing a woman indefinitely for the sins of her past, forcing her to relive ad infinitum her most tragic and vulnerable moments. For the most part, I think that is no longer typical of the Mennonite church of today. We have moved on. We are more progressive, more inclusive, more evolved. And that's a good thing, right? But what does it mean for the future of our institutions—for the institution of marriage (is divorce "okay" now?), and for the institution of the church itself? More importantly, does taking a more progressive/permissive stance mean we've actually done the work and dealt with the issue in all its nuances?

How does the church engage with broken relationships, with broken people? I suspect that when the church declared my mother's divorce an unforgivable sin, it did so because engaging with her brokenness was too awkward, too ambiguous, too hard.

Can the church find better ways to engage with our brokenness?

I suppose this is the point where, in a conventional essay, I would lay out my three-point hypothesis. I'd diagnose the problem, identify a winning solution, and propose a plan for getting us back on track. If that's the essay you were hoping for, I'm sorry to disappoint you. Like many others from my generation, I distrust answers, especially unearned answers that attach themselves to easy questions with neat dichotomies. (Is divorce a sin? Yes or no.) I want to ask a difficult question: How does the church engage with broken relationships, with broken people? I suspect that when the church declared my mother's divorce an unforgivable sin with a thirty-plus-year shelf life, it did so because engaging with her brokenness was too awkward, too ambiguous, too hard. And I suspect that when the church passively overlooked my divorce, asked me no questions, and made no demands, it did so for the very same reason. Not wanting to be that cruel church of the past, it became the fully accepting church of the future, offering a blanket of

forgiveness without really looking at the underlying bed of pain and loss. How's that for a messy dichotomy?

For me, the most alarming and alluring aspect of divorce is what it does to the human story. The act of divorce not only crosses lines; it also severs and redraws them. It annexes small or large sections of lives. It separates people not only from each other but from their own histories. It can separate a story from its teller.

The most alarming and alluring aspect of divorce is what it does to the human story. It separates people not only from each other but from their own histories. It can separate a story from its teller.

What happens to a story when its basic suppositions stop being true, when its narrative arc has to contort itself to line up with a new reality? The present, in its determination to pursue the future, outgrows the past. Old stories are sloughed off like the dead layer of skin that trips up the snake as he slides through time. My memory can no longer distinguish between the mom who loved my dad and the mom who left him, between the dad who loved his life and the dad who has to keep running hard and fast to forget he is broken. Every story from my childhood has been rewritten to reflect the current facts. Now, my lifetime of memories with my brother—all the playing, plotting, fighting, making each other laugh and cry—is weirdly organized around this one brief moment at the Duck and Bunny, when we couldn't come up with a single idea that would prevent our dad from breaking our hearts even further. It's as though we've spent our whole lives together drinking wine and eating cupcakes, trying and failing to save our family, screaming and silent at the same time.

About the author

Jessica Smucker is a writer and musician whose work has been published in *CMW Journal*, *The Mennonite*, *Mennonot*, *A Cappella: Mennonite Voices in Poetry*, and numerous literary journals. She lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, with her husband and two sons. She is a member of East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church.

Why I am not part of the church

Shane Miller

I grew up in a small Mennonite community in Iowa. I no longer identify myself as Mennonite or even as Christian.

I remember learning in Sunday school about heaven and hell, and that teaching never sat right with me. To me it always felt wrong that good people who are not Christian would be punished, condemned to hell for not knowing Christ. It always felt exclusive and elitist. I wondered, where is the compassion for these people? Why am I so special that I as a Mennonite would be saved while millions of people around the world would be condemned for believing in the teachings of another religion? What makes Christianity so special and right?

For some reason I was always concerned with what happened to people of such groups after their death, and that concern made me question my church's teaching. It turns out that I was so concerned because as a gay man I am one of those people who are part of an excluded group.

There are many things I appreciate about Mennonites: strong communities, pacifism, acts of service, programs that send people to help those in need in impoverished communities. But Mennonites, while so compassionate and caring, still ostracize people. They exclude people from the church, especially those with different gender and sexual orientations.

In the twelve years since I left the church, I have interacted with countless people of a variety of religions and backgrounds. I have come to understand that for the most part we are all striving for the same things: safety, love, and hope for a better future. These hopes and longings characterize people of all groups, religious and nonreligious.

I am all for believing whatever you as an individual want to believe. I have respect for Mennonites; their hearts are in the right place. But I would rather be part of a group of people who accept others instead of building walls.

About the author

Shane Miller is a registered nurse working in the emergency department of Meridian Park hospital in Portland, Oregon. He lives in Portland with his long-term boyfriend and two dogs.

The tongues of Galilee

A sermon on Acts 2

Meghan Larissa Good

On the day the church was born, every Christian spoke in tongues. For my Pentecostal friends, this is a fact of fundamental theological significance. They see the ability to speak in a new language as evidence that a person has received the baptism of the Spirit. Within Pentecostalism, this experience frequently involves the gift of a "prayer language" which is deployed for personal edification.

In Acts 2 the gift of tongues which spread through the first Christian gathering like wildfire was anything but a private spiritual experience; it was a public gift of comprehensible communication.

But in Acts 2 the gift of tongues which spread through the first Christian gathering like wildfire was anything but a private spiritual experience; it was a public gift of comprehensible communication. The very first gift the Pentecost Spirit saw fit to give believers in the nascent church was the capacity to declare the wonders of God in the mother tongues of their neighbors:

> *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*
>
> *Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? (Acts 2:1–8, NRSV)*

From set apart to sent out

This moment in Acts 2 represents a profound turning point in the history of Israel. As a community, Israel had long had a formal process for incorporating converts to their faith. But religious practice in ancient Israel was not especially evangelistic. The emphasis of the Law lay on holiness, on practices that set the people of God apart. There was a sense that the community of faith was continually under threat from hostile outside forces that sought to undermine its distinctive identity. Actions from Ezra's fiery indictment of intermarriage to Joshua's infamous conquest killings are explicitly tied to concerns about corruptive proximity. Circumcision itself, the fiercely defended marker of covenant community, anchored the identity of the people of faith in a symbol of apartness.

But on the day of Pentecost, something remarkable happens. The defining marker of the emergent people of faith shifts from apartness to sentness. In stories such as the Acts 10 account of the conversion of Cornelius's household, the newest members of the Jesus covenant community are known as such when they start to *speak*. The sign of their inclusion in the new covenant community is their capacity to do what the first Christians did and declare God's wonders in a new tongue, a new language (see Acts 10:44–48). Far from fearing outside contamination (a fear that lingers within Peter until a vision from God finally shakes it loose), the early church itself quickly becomes a kind of holy contagion. Its members are marked by their sentness, their embrace of a mission that moves them toward their neighbors instead of away from them. Their identifying marker is the distinctive speech of a people equipped to cross divides, to make disciples of Jesus from every tribe and nation.

The church of Acts is designed from the ground up for a missionary existence. It is the communion of those sent to declare the wonders of God in every tongue, to speak until the whole world is brought to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus the resurrected Christ.

From sent out to set apart

The early Anabaptists burned with the same evangelistic fire that characterized the early church. They were radical disciples who made radical disciples of their neighbors. Their voices were so bold and so persistent that in some cases it took tongue screws to shut them up.

But sustained persecution eventually had its desired effect. Tongues got quiet. And over time, a community that began its history in courageous embrace of sacrificial sentness began to settle into contentment

with simple apartness. Jewish markers of circumcision and dietary law found fresh equivalents in distinctive dress and practices.

The twentieth century saw renewed interest among Anabaptists in missional efforts globally, but with an undeniably mixed legacy. We are only beginning to recognize the damage done when the world-changing gospel is wedded to cultural colonization. In too many cases, the Jesus introduced to far corners of the globe was a fair-skinned Jesus dressed in plain clothes, a Jesus who could not dance, a Jesus who spoke not Aramaic or Spanish or Swahili but only English or Pennsylvania Dutch. In all corners of the Christian church, not simply among Anabaptists, export of culture has been confused with witness to Christ.

It's one thing to affirm that God values the mother tongue of a villager half a world away. But for many of us, it is the changing mother tongues of our own neighborhoods and communities that are hardest to accept.

Recent years have seen fresh conversations in the field of global missions. We have begun to understand that the burden is on those who carry the gospel to new places to learn the language and culture of those they dwell among. Anabaptists have rightly been quick to observe that the radical kingdom vision offers challenge to every culture's practices and values that lie outside the beauty of Christ. But nevertheless, the Christian gospel is fundamentally incarnational and as such must always be grounded in particular times and places. If Jesus shows us one thing, it is that God loves skin—in its many shapes and shades. The good news of a God who took on flesh and dwelled among us must be proclaimed in all the colors and melodies and flavors of those among whom that God has come to live.

In a curious twist, however, even as the church's awareness of the importance of cultural contextualization is growing with respect to global mission, the logic of incarnation often encounters its greatest resistance closest to home. It's one thing to affirm that God values the mother tongue of a villager half a world away. But for many of us, it is the changing mother tongues of our own neighborhoods and communities that are hardest to accept. This is true even—sometimes especially—of the changing mother tongues of our own children.

The challenge young adults present to the church in every generation is not unrelated to the challenge global diversity presents to the church:

Who gets to hear the wonders of God declared in their own mother tongue? Who gets to see the good news of Jesus incarnated in their own clothes? Who gets to hear the Spirit singing to their own melodies and rhythms?

The truth is, no presentation of the gospel is culturally neutral. The status quo of the church in every time and place was designed with someone in mind. This is not evil but a necessary aspect of an incarnational faith. The problem is not that every proclamation of the gospel is particular; the problem is how often we forget this fact. We entrench the song or the flavor profile of people of a single tongue and stop asking who it serves. We become more fearfully caught up in preserving our preferred gospel shade than passionately preoccupied with the mission we are sent out to accomplish.

The challenge young adults present to the church in every generation is not unrelated to the challenge global diversity presents to the church: Who gets to hear the wonders of God declared in their own mother tongue?

In 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, Paul declares: "I act like a Jew to the Jews, so I can recruit Jews. . . . I act like I'm outside the Law to those who are outside the Law, so I can recruit those outside the Law. . . . I act weak to the weak, so I can recruit the weak. I have become all things to all people, so I could save some by all possible means. All the things I do are for the sake of the gospel, so I can be a partner with it." This is the face of Pentecost faith. This is an incarnational mindset. This is what it looks like to form a church identity marked by sentness. It is a radical, sacrificial vision of a people willing to be continually pressed and reshaped into the many forms and colors of a God who dwells among people.

When the Spirit comes, everything changes

The church at the start of Acts 2 was not so different from most congregations I know. It is small, just 120 members on a day when everybody shows up. It is made up for the most part of people who share the same ethnic background and grew up in the same small towns, people with a common culture and a common history. They are gathered in a room, saying their prayers, no doubt expecting that tomorrow will look much like today.

This is where the story starts. But when the Spirit comes, everything changes. When the Spirit comes, the community of the faithful gathered is transformed into the community of the faithful sent. When the Spirit comes, an interrelated clan of Galileans erupt outward to sing the praises of God in the mother tongues of the peoples of every quarter of their city.

After Pentecost, there is no church except the missionary church. Nobody stays inside the room. Nobody gets to say, "The tongue of Galilee was good enough for my parents, and it's good enough for me." To be a Spirit-filled follower of Jesus is to be equipped, empowered, and sent to declare the wonders of God in the mother tongues of every corner of the earth—beginning with the tongues spoken on our street corners, beginning with tongues spoken in the corners of our homes.

The challenge young adults pose to the church today is not to become statically "millennial" (or whatever come next) but rather to become dynamically incarnational. It's a challenge to reclaim our core identity as a people who are both anchored in a story and continually in motion, constantly being sent, always taking on new tongues. It's a challenge to embrace our call to genuinely missionary existence, even close to home. It's a challenge to make the gospel-word flesh, to make it bone and sinew of our world, even as we resist conforming ourselves to the world's fallen patterns. This is a paradox, undeniably, but it is the paradox of Jesus, who walked our roads in first-century sandals, who declared God's truth in first-century words.

The mission field is all around us, streets crowded with nations and with generations who have never heard Christ's power proclaimed in the cadences of their language, never heard God's mercy sung to the rhythms their feet move to. The burden is on us, the church of every age, to ask the hard questions: Whose mother tongue is being spoken among us? Who is hearing the wonders of God proclaimed in the language of their hearts? Are we in the twenty-first-century church 120 Galileans enclosed in a room, speaking only to each other? Or does our life together give evidence that we remember who we are—a people with one great commission and the tongues of Pentecost?

About the author

Meghan Larissa Good is teaching pastor at Trinity Mennonite Church (Glendale, AZ) and a DMin candidate in preaching at George Fox University (Newberg, OR). She is the author of *The Bible Unwrapped: Making Sense of Scripture Today* (forthcoming in 2018).

Why I choose to be part of the church

Andrea De Avila

Why have I stayed in the church? Good question. Maybe it's because I am an extrovert. I need people around me. I need a community of people to grow, laugh, learn, and cry with. I need a community to be challenged by, and a community to challenge back.

I've always been drawn to church—even when I've hated church or tried to distance myself from church—because of shared passions. I didn't grow up Mennonite, but I grew up pacifist and with a strong sense of equality for all human beings. Dignity, humility, respect, simplicity, love, and mutual care were part of my home congregation's consistent teachings. That message stuck with me. Children and youth had a voice in church. The church taught equality across ages and backgrounds. As these things became part of my identity, so did the church.

My grandparents and parents always made church a priority. It had to be a once-a-year-only occasion for my family to miss any church event. No parties, sports, arts event, or language lessons were a higher priority than church. We lived close to church and would often walk to it. It was part of my neighborhood. In fact, I grew up on the street where my church was. I couldn't explain to you who I am without talking about the congregation that I grew up in. It will always be part of me. And I guess that is partly why I've always sought out a connection to church.

But none of this is to say that I've always been happy with the church. I've had and continue to have frustrations with the church. But it's in those times of frustration that I realize that my relationship with the church is not about me; it's about Jesus. I need the church to be a faithful follower of Christ. I need the church to do the work it's called to do. And I am angry for Jesus when the church falls short of fulfilling its mission.

At times the frustration is so great that I want to leave the church. Nevertheless, my passion for Jesus's teaching keeps me in the church, because I know I would not be able to do a better job by myself. So, I guess that is why I am still in the church: because I am angry for Jesus!

About the author

Andrea De Avila is an associate pastor at Sargent Avenue Mennonite Church (Winnipeg, MB). She is working on a masters degree at Canadian Mennonite University.

Resources on the church and young adults

compiled by Arlyn Friesen Epp

Like other age groups in the church, young adults offer unique gifts and a particular window into a given cultural time and context. The voices of that generation, like the voices of those older and younger, can give fresh insight for the whole church about what it means to live faithfully as the body of Christ here, now. Below are several resources, all available at CommonWord (www.commonword.ca), that speak to the concerns and issues that young adults are raising on behalf of the wider church community. Canadians may take advantage of the loan option. Anyone may purchase titles from CommonWord or their favourite bookseller. All can download the free materials.

Young adults offer a particular window into a given cultural time and context. Their voices, like the voices of those older and younger, can give fresh insight for the whole church about what it means to live faithfully here, now.

Books and DVDs

The Future of Our Faith: An Intergenerational Conversation on Critical Issues Facing the Church, by Ronald J. Sider and Ben Lowe (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016). Two evangelical leaders forty years apart in age discuss some of the biggest issues challenging Christianity today and into the future, including marriage, homosexuality, creation care, and politics. The authors model and cultivate an intentional, charitable, and much-needed intergenerational dialogue. Each chapter includes sidebar reflections from notable Christian leaders and study questions for individuals and small groups. See www.commonword.ca/go/1390.

A Living Alternative: Anabaptist Christianity in a Post-Christendom World, edited by Joanna Harader and A. O. Green (New York: Ettelloc Publishing, 2014). What does faith look like in a world where Christianity no longer dominates the economy, policy, and morality? Why do mainline Christian structures find this inevitability so intimidating? And how

can the church learn from radical reformers of the past, as we venture into this post-Christendom world? In *A Living Alternative*, these questions and more are put to the test by some of the brightest new voices in the emerging Anabaptist tradition. This book is an exceptional anthology that provides its readers a range of viewpoints using modern Anabaptist lenses. It includes chapter study guides to foster creative new insights for individuals and communities, as we prepare a faith for the future. See www.commonword.ca/go/1391.

Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation, by Carol Howard Merritt (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010). Much has been written about the changing landscape the church finds itself in, and even more about the church's waning influence in our culture. From her vantage point as an under-forty pastor, Carol Howard Merritt moves away from the hand-wringing toward a discovery of what ministry in, with, and by a new generation might look like. What does the substance of hope look like right now? What does hope look like when it is framed in a new generation? Motivated by these questions, Merritt writes *Reframing Hope* with the understanding that we are not creating from nothing the vital ministry of the next generation. Instead, we are working through what we have, sorting out the best parts, acknowledging and healing from the worst, and reframing it all. Merritt believes that if we can manage to navigate many of these important shifts, the years ahead are full of hope—but only if we recognize and welcome the changes that will come and open ourselves to what new adaptations will bring to us. See www.commonword.ca/go/1392.

Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church, by Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2016). This book profiles innovative churches that are engaging fifteen- to-twenty-nine-year-olds and as a result are growing—spiritually, emotionally, missionally, and numerically. Packed with research and practical ideas, *Growing Young* shows pastors and ministry leaders how to position their churches to engage younger generations in a way that breathes vitality, life, and energy into the whole church. See www.commonword.ca/go/1397.

Greenhouses of Hope: Congregations Growing Young Leaders Who Will Change the World, edited by Dori Grinenko Baker (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010). Do you know a church where young people regularly shape the liturgy with words that speak their truth in ways that also

inspire their elders? Do you hear about congregations that reach out in quirky new ways to their ailing neighbourhoods, instead of locking doors and shipping out to a suburb? Do you find churches creating hospitable space that invites the live wriggling questions and doubts of young people in unhurried, unworried ways? Do you see congregations where young people's gifts are not stored in the basement or bracketed into "contemporary" worship services but are brought forth and celebrated? The authors who collaborated on this book launched a quest for such vibrant, life-giving, greening congregations and observed the diverse practices that grow in these Greenhouses of Hope. In the pages of this book, Dori Baker and six contributors tell the stories of these remarkable congregations, helping others think about how they can create space for the dreams of young people to be grafted into God's dreams for the world. See www.commonword.ca/go/1393.

Embracing Spiritual Awakening: The Dynamics of Experiential Faith, by Diana Butler Bass and Tim Scorer (Denver: Morehouse Education Resources, 2013), DVD. Best-selling author, speaker, scholar, and cultural observer Diana Butler Bass explores what Christianity may look like "beyond religion and beyond the church" in this five-session DVD series on "believing, behaving, and belonging." In this engaging and provocative study, Diana leads a small group of diverse adults, young adults, and youth in a fascinating discussion of how, both culturally and spiritually, we are in the midst of another of history's "great awakenings." See www.commonword.ca/go/1400.

Claiming the Beatitudes: Nine Stories from a New Generation, by Anne Sutherland Howard (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009). Anne Sutherland Howard asks: What would the Beatitudes look like today? Is it possible to live a Beatitudes life in today's world? Nine remarkable stories of young pastors and seminarians introduce us to a world where the Beatitudes are not an unreachable moral standard but a simple set of guidelines by which we can try to live our lives. Howard reminds us that "these are not impossible hero stories; these are simply people of commitment and conviction and courage who invite us to join them in their daily practice." Each chapter includes discussion questions. See www.commonword.ca/go/1394.

Online resources

"***Young Adults and the Future of the Church***," Church Matters Podcast: Episode 110, with guest Jonas Cornelsen (Mennonite Church Canada, 2016), www.commonword.ca/go/1395. Church denominations across Canada are facing an uncertain future. Declining membership, volunteerism, general participation, and donations to support ministry all point to needed change. But what should that change look like, and what is the vision behind it? In this podcast we speak with Jonas Cornelsen, spokesperson for the Emerging Voices Initiative, a group of young adults from across Mennonite Church Canada who want to speak into the process of change at all levels of their church, from congregational to regional to national. Also see Church Matters Podcast: Episode 3, "Young Adults and the Global Church," with guest Sarah Thompson (2007), at www.commonword.ca/go/1398.

"***You Lost Me: The Church and Young Adults***," Face2Face online video, with Kirsten Hamm-Epp, Danielle Morton, Mike Wiebe, Lukas Thiessen, and Harrison Davey (Canadian Mennonite University, 2015). Many young Canadians have stepped away from institutionalized religion, a trend that has been growing for the past twenty-five years. Is the church not listening, or do young adults no longer care? Has the church lost touch with the issues about which young adults are most passionate? How significant is the church's worship to the participation and involvement of young adults? Do young adults feel any responsibility in keeping the legacy of the church going? What does it mean for the church to be faithful in this time and place? Watch the video to hear several young adult perspectives and convictions related to church and faith, at www.commonword.ca/go/1396.

"***Mennonite Youth and Young Adults in Church***," online video by Jessica Reesor Rempel (Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, 2014), www.commonword.ca/go/1483. Youth and young adults in the Mennonite church are regularly talked about but rarely heard from. Here is their wisdom around two questions: What is the best thing about church? What would make church more authentic? Also see Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's online video "Misplaced: Thoughts by Young Adults on Church," 2008, at www.commonword.ca/go/1399.

"***Moving Out: Engaging Young Adults Contextually***," online video of Deep Faith Conference (Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2016), www.commonword.ca/go/1484. In this seminar, Jessica Reesor Rempel and Chris Brnjas, leaders in the young adult initiative PiE (Pastors in Exile) from Kitchener/Waterloo, Ontario, offer guideposts on how to engage young adult faith formation in your local setting. Also see the Pastors in Exile (PiE) blog at https://pastorsinexile.org/blog/.

Young Anabaptist Radicals: Let's Activate Something blog at https://young.anabaptistradicals.org/. A loose affiliation of self-identified young Anabaptist radicals write, "We aim to be young in a non-exclusionary way. . . . As radical Anabaptists, we'd like to imagine together what it might mean to root our lived faith today (and tomorrow) in the spirit and soil of early Anabaptism. What does this mean politically? What does this mean socially? What does this mean theologically?"

About the compiler

Arlyn Friesen Epp is director of CommonWord: Bookstore and Resource Centre, a collaboration of Mennonite Church Canada and Canadian Mennonite University.

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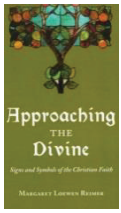

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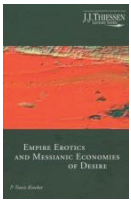

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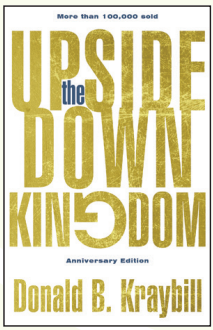

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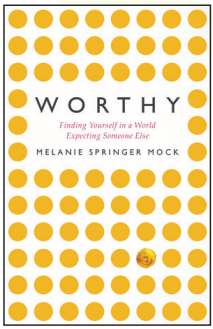

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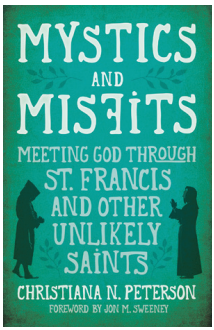

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