

# WIDENING the CIRCLE

*Experiments in Christian Discipleship*

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## INTRODUCTION

by Elaine Enns and Ched Myers

*The true test of the Christian. . . is discipleship. The great word of the Anabaptists was not “faith” as it was for the reformers, but “following.”*

—Harold Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*

Harold Bender’s famous contention that discipleship stands at the center of distinctive Anabaptist identity has had influence well beyond the bounds of the Mennonite world. The “Anabaptist vision” has attracted increasing attention and conversation from churches across the ecumenical spectrum as post-Christendom realities cause them to rethink their faith and politics.

This anthology traces new and continuing expressions of this discipleship vision within, at the margins of, and wholly independent of the Mennonite church in North America over the last half century. This relational initiative to “widen the circle” arose from a conversation at an Interchurch Relations gathering of Mennonite Church USA in Akron, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 2008.<sup>1</sup> We were invited to reflect on the emergence of “new” peace and discipleship movements and their relationship with Mennonites, something we were delighted to do since this theme runs right through our marriage. Indeed, our experience is germane to the questions that shape this volume.

### I.

Elaine was raised in the bosom of an active ethnic Mennonite community on the Canadian prairies, attending Mennonite schools from grade ten through college. Mennonite Voluntary Service then took her to Fresno, California, to work with a vibrant Victim Offender

Reconciliation Project. She stayed on to complete a graduate degree in Theology, Conflict Management and Peacemaking at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, and then to teach at the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific University. Elaine traces her deep interest in restorative justice to her grandparents, all four of whom were refugees from Russia and Ukraine in the 1920s in the wake of the horrific dispossession and murder of Mennonites during and after the Russian Revolution. She is grateful for an upbringing that was rich with good teaching, mentorship, and community (if also flawed by patriarchy and provincialism). As a result, a commitment to peace and justice is “in her bones.”

In contrast, Californian Ched was not raised in any church, his father a lapsed Catholic, mother an ambivalent Episcopalian. He came to faith at eighteen as part of the “Jesus movement” of the late 1960s/early 70s, but shortly thereafter encountered the radical discipleship movement, whose motto was the “whole gospel for the whole person for the whole world.” Ched was mentored by Catholic Workers, radical Baptists, Quakers, and faith-rooted activists of all stripes; participated in several intentional communities; and has worked for thirty-five years as an ecumenical peace and justice organizer and theologian.

Ched was one of many young evangelicals in the 1970s who discovered the Anabaptist vision through the work of John Howard Yoder, Harold Bender, and others. There he found a theological home, if not an ecclesial hearth. Denominationalism wasn’t as important as discipleship to the community movement of that period (labeled in this volume as “Second Wave”). Renewal-oriented Lutherans, Methodists, Franciscans, or Congregationalists often had far more in common with each other than with their own less-engaged traditions. Still, Ched and others made attempts to find Mennonites with whom to be in conversation; too often, however, they experienced Mennonite institutions as insular and churches as less than hospitable to “mongrel outsiders” like him.

It wasn’t until meeting Elaine that Ched had the opportunity to build relationships with ethnic Mennonites. The welcome was warm, though it has taken a while to get to know, and be known by, her clan. Yet Ched encountered in this community a deep spirituality and strength forged by suffering, which led him to complete the circle begun thirty-five years ago by recently joining the

Mennonite denomination. Here indeed was a river of faith and practice deep and broad enough to swim in.

Meanwhile, Elaine’s immersion in Ched’s extended radical discipleship network enabled her to live out more intensely her Anabaptist faith. She points as examples to four non-Mennonite discipleship communities which have had a tremendous impact on her:

1. The Open Door Community in Atlanta, Georgia, was begun by two Presbyterian ministers; members live and work with the homeless and advocate for those on Georgia’s Death Row. This witness challenges Elaine to deepen and broaden her work in restorative justice.
2. Jonah House, in inner city Baltimore, Maryland, is a non-violent resistance community in the Catholic Worker tradition, which for four decades has been on the forefront of prophetic witness against militarism and the nuclear arms race. The women elders of this community have inspired Elaine to greater courage in transforming patriarchy, and to take more seriously Paul’s exhortation that the church preach the gospel to the Powers (Ephesians 3:10).
3. The Beloved Community Center is anchored in an African American Baptist congregation in Greensboro, North Carolina. BCC leaders have worked for racial and economic justice for decades, and helped launch the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on U.S. soil in response to the murder of five labor activists by white supremacists in 1979. Elaine’s involvement with the Greensboro TRC has animated her to look at historical, political, and structural issues facing peacemaking work.
4. The Word and World People’s School is an ecumenical and interracial collaborative founded in 2001 to provide alternative theological training for Christian disciples committed to the work of peace, social justice, and solidarity with the poor. Eight schools have been facilitated in different communities around the United States, as well as internships and a mentoring program. The “church as social movement” came alive for Elaine at these schools; she wishes more Mennonite youth could be exposed to this kind of discipleship education.

These and other discipleship communities embody convictions arrived at *not* through Anabaptist influences, but through Civil Rights organizing, solidarity with Latin America, nonviolent resistance to empire and war, and engagement with the poor and marginalized. Elaine felt welcomed by them, and learned the importance of celebration and mutual encouragement in the work of biblical justice and peacemaking in our violent world.

## II.

With our experience in mind, we appealed to the participants at the Interchurch Relations consultation in Akron to be more proactive in building relationships with “new peace churches” and discipleship movements. This is an urgent mission task because we find ourselves at another historical moment of great opportunity for renewing and “widening the circle” of the Anabaptist vision, a moment both similar to and different from the 1970s, when Ched first encountered Anabaptism and radical discipleship.

Three broad trajectories are shaping this moment of flux in North American churches, each of which are reflected in the contributions to this volume:

1. *Disillusionment*: Through the Reagan-Bush eras, the Christian Right became a formidable sociological and political force, and arguably the dominant religious stratum in the United States, its backbone formed by white suburban evangelical megachurches. But this edifice is now crumbling, due to a variety of factors including hyper-politicization, internal contradictions, and relatively shallow theological moorings. Thousands of young people from this world—who have come of age under the shadow of global warming, resource wars, and deadening consumerism—are experiencing deep alienation from both their dysfunctional churches and society. Many are seeking more authentic, holistic, and *traditioned* models of faith and practice, and significant numbers are engaging Anabaptism (reflected in Chapters 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, and 19).
2. *Dis-establishment*: Meanwhile, leaders from atrophying mainstream Protestant denominations (as well as some Roman Catholics) are increasingly drawn to theologies of

discipleship, to gospel nonviolence, and to learning how to become truly post-Christendom churches. Both at the level of formal ecumenical conversation, and even more widely at the grassroots, Mennonites have become the subject of genuine interest. At the same time, many Mennonites are learning about prayer and liturgy from these other Christian traditions (as evidenced in Chapters 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10).

3. *De-centering*: All North American denominations—including Mennonites—are experiencing the impact of changing demographics, which are steadily eroding “European” majorities. White male patterns of hegemony are being challenged by multicultural and post-colonial commitments, with issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation being raised persistently. In these matters Mennonites probably have more to learn from than to offer other traditions—but they are no less an opportunity for growth (see Chapters 1, 2, 4, 9, 11, 14, and 18).

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall has written incisively about how the phenomenon of societal disillusionment (so widespread at present) represents a necessary condition to ecclesial renewal. In such a context, “the disciple community has the vocation of exploring the failure of the illusion that is passing, and of articulating a new expression of the faith which can absorb this failure and point toward a new symbolic transcendence of it.”<sup>2</sup> These three trajectories thus represent “evangelical openings” for Mennonites, not only for promoting the gospel of discipleship among the religiously alienated, but also for partnerships with and mutual aid among kindred spirits and common public witness to God’s dream of justice and peace.

We were delighted that the Akron consultation affirmed the need for intentional Mennonite outreach to, and hospitality toward, the various expressions of discipleship that have arisen in response to the above trends. This includes networking with established alternative communities such as those noted by Elaine; with the much-publicized “emergent” and “new monastic” movements; and with old and new expressions of racial-ethnic Christianity. André Gingrich Stoner, director of Interchurch Relations, soon hired a new staff person to explore this terrain, and Joanna Shenk immediately

set about moving around the country, connecting with a wide variety of communities, and feeding back her findings to denominational colleagues.

An energetic young woman, Joanna has a keen eye and ear, strategic sensibility, and passionate commitment—just what is needed to facilitate this investigation of the intersection between “old” and “new” embodiments of the Anabaptist vision in a way that might animate both the U.S. Mennonite churches and other analogous discipleship movements. This collection represents the next step in this project, with the aim of advancing conversation among diverse voices and perspectives.

### III.

In order to ensure that this volume would not be unwieldy, spatial and temporal delimitations were set early. On one hand, the focus is restricted to the North American context, acknowledging that this is only a subset of the wider transformations going on in the global church. On the other, the scope is limited to the last half-century of Mennonite and “Anabaptist-like” renewal movements. In the wake of World War II, this book identifies three “waves.”

The first wave (Chapters 1–5) represents experiments forged during the difficult Cold War era of the 1950s and 60s. These pioneers are now our elders, and we owe them not only respect, but also our continuing, careful attention. Vincent and the late Rosemarie Harding’s reflections on their work in Atlanta in the early sixties provide a fascinating and inspirational window into the Civil Rights movement (Chapters 1 and 2). Reba Place and the Lee Heights Community Church represent two other early expressions of Mennonite renewal that arose in relation to the Concern movement of the mid-50s (Chapters 3 and 4). And Canadian Hedy Sawadsky pioneered new peacemaking paths in relation to broader antiwar movements of the 60s and beyond (Chapter 5).

The second wave encompasses community experiments of the 1970s and 80s, as Ched has noted. Represented herein are two influential Washington, D.C., based organizations, Sojourners (Chapter 6) and Church of the Saviour, perhaps the longest running “missional church” experiment in North America (Chapter 8). The Bijou Street Community (Chapter 7) and Christian Peacemaker

Teams (Chapter 9) are examples of two different modes of Mennonite peacemaking. And James Nelson Gingerich explores the dialectic between maintenance and mission in a community-based health care center (Chapter 10).

Third wave expressions over the last two decades receive the most attention in this book and range from the traditional (Mennonite Voluntary Service, Chapter 11) to the innovative (Little Flowers Community, Chapter 16). Included are the testimonies of Christians who are moving toward Anabaptism (Chapter 13 and 15) and those moving away (Chapter 14); of white (Chapter 12) and Latino (Chapter 17) evangelicals exploring Mennonite identity; and reflections that are sociological (Chapter 18) and more lyrical (Chapter 19).

This collection provides diverse snapshots of recent incarnations of the Anabaptist vision about which Bender wrote. While many other communities could have been profiled, we believe this volume is representative of the various currents that are seeking to embody discipleship in contemporary North America. It could not come at a more propitious time as we approach the five hundredth anniversary of the Radical Reformation, and as all Christians face the multiple threats of intractable social disparity, rampant militarism, and the specter of ecological collapse. May this book help to animate and to resource an ever-widening circle of Anabaptist visionaries in this crucial historic moment.