

ABSTRACT

A RETURN TO OUR ROOTS:

TOWARDS A WAY FORWARD FOR MENNONITE CHURCH PLANTING

by

Christopher M.E. Scott

Virginia Mennonite Conference is part of Mennonite Church USA and inhabits the Anabaptist tradition. Mennonites have distinctive ways of being the church and following after God in community. These practices can be signposts for a way of church planting that is consistent with Mennonite history. Church planting done in a way that is connected to the history, theology, and praxis of a movement is a witness.

The purpose of this study was to explore Anabaptism as expressed in Mennonite theology and history and consider how that might inform future efforts at church planting. Included in this is looking at the larger church planting conversation and gleaning best practices from outside the tradition that might help Mennonites plant. The outcome then is to use these insights to begin a dialogue toward the work of crafting a new path forward for Virginia Conference as it looks to build bridges of connection with new people. While this project was not designed to bring a fully-fledged plan for the future of Mennonite Church planting, it can be a piece of the process going forward.

The findings show that Mennonites have a deep history on which to draw and which has much to say to current church praxis. With post-Christendom forcing the Church to reconsider the way in which it has approached church, Mennonite efforts of church planting are important. Mennonites have lived and worshiped on the margins of society and have a contribution to the wider church conversation.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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I am amazed at the twists and turns of our lives and the ways in which the Spirit moves. This dissertation represents a lifelong goal and I am grateful to God for the opportunity to complete it. May it be used for connecting and growing Shalom communities in our world.

CHAPTER 1

NATURE OF THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter begins the process of crafting a way forward in church planting for Virginia Mennonite Conference. In this chapter the basics of Anabaptism are laid out, including a survey of relevant literature and other materials, methodology, etc. The purpose statement and three research questions are included in this first chapter as well.

Chapter 1 identifies the development of a new approach for church planting as important in the life of Virginia Mennonite Conference. The chapter also begins to address the current situation that gives rise to a need for a new way forward.

Personal Introduction

I have planted four churches. Entrepreneurially wired, I have served in a variety of ministry settings, both inside and outside the church. As one of my first ministry roles, I served as a director of two different “Under 21” Teen Centers. My first paid position was as a youth pastor at a mid-sized rural church in Shenandoah County, Virginia and I began several new outreach activities there. I moved from that setting to another town where I worked with two churches, both of which I planted. Even now, I am involved in a church plant. This current church plant is denominationally linked to Virginia Mennonite Conference and Virginia Mennonite Missions and connects me with my ministry context for this dissertation project.

I have lived within the contexts of several denominations. I have explored church planting independently in non-denominational settings and within two different

denominations as an official effort. While in seminary working on my Master of Divinity that I truly found my theological and ecclesiological home within the Anabaptist movement in general and the Mennonite Church USA specifically. Locally, I have developed connections in Virginia Mennonite Conference. I have some Mennonite roots, as my mother was raised in the conservative Mennonite movement. I attended several Mennonite churches, but had served more recently with a Presbyterian Church (USA) as a Director of Christian Education and for 5 years as an Associate Pastor in a local United Methodist Church congregation; all after serving in the Brethren Church (Ashland).

The idea of starting something new or experimenting with possibilities enlivens me. With an entrepreneurial spirit, my default position is to want to start something new. With teen centers and church plants in my history, I have a track record of planting efforts and congregational development.

I am excited about the idea of the worshiping community as a contrasting society. Rather than attack the prevailing culture as a sign of spiritual faithfulness, we are called to live out an alternative city, a different way of interacting both with each other and the world. Perhaps, Christianity is the ultimate alternative lifestyle. Mennonite church planting can model this posture, while being faithful to the shared Anabaptist heritage.

I have been through three church planting intensive assessments and many training sessions. I have participated in weeklong boot camps and read books and visited large conventions dedicated to church planting. I spent a month in California at DCPI (“Dynamic Church Planting International”) in the early 1990s for their concentrated program. Sent there by the denomination I was serving in at the time, it had a profoundly

Evangelical approach and advocated for a bigger-is-better philosophy. Even though I did not feel that these were a good fit for me, I do believe that there is much I could learn from their experience and certainly many principles that could enrich Virginia Mennonite Conference in best practice research.

The church planting model I was trained in during the early part of my journey is one where numbers were prioritized and drawing a large crowd was emphasized. As a people steeped in the idea that explosive growth is the goal and this growth being the natural byproduct of the right choices, American church planters so often carry that over into the church setting. Under the Christendom system, it was widely assumed that a denomination simply needed to find a street corner, hang a denominationally specific shingle, and residents would flock to the new church. For much of our American history, this is the system that church planters operated under. The reality is that for a long time this method worked but is working less well in many locations and is not working at all in most settings. In too many places and far too often, though, our church values have been transacted out for corporate American values. We focus in the church on values of success and values of excellence. My planting training has been one of how to do big groups and obtain critical mass. Rather than replicate corporate America the job of the church is declaring grace. The job of the church is to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God. This is not an outcome that can be modeled on a chart.

The Anabaptist tradition, and Mennonites specifically, on their best days, have a tradition outside the Christendom model. The Anabaptist wing of the reformation stood in many ways as a vocal and committed opposition to the wider church. Early

Anabaptists were quite vocal in their promotion of the radical reformation they were engaged in after beginning to practice adult believer's baptism in 1525. They were a force to be reckoned with when they began witnessing and expanding all over Europe. Met with serious and lethal persecution from both the Lutheran and Catholic churches, Anabaptists withdrew. In later years, Mennonites were referred to as the quiet in the land, after withdrawing from the force of the persecution, or a peculiar people (Suderman).

In my experience, our Mennonite approach to church has been neglected even in our Mennonite circles in favor of a more Evangelical or Seeker-targeted method, one that does not truly fit in the Anabaptist ethos. It may well have been effective at beginning new churches, but it is in many ways not a natural outgrowth of Mennonite theology. I heard one leader state outright that his Anabaptist heritage embarrassed him; he expressed a desire to be more mainstream in his faith expression. I have attended training seminars where I simply felt the teaching was not at all a fitting approach for me. Too often the method of planting, growth, and discipleship advocated was at odds with the Anabaptist tradition and theology. I am seeking a Mennonite ecclesiology that celebrates the communal character and encourages service to the wider community and multi-voiced leadership while opting out of the intertwining of Church and State.

I want to be a part of helping the Mennonite church, which I love, find new ways forward to church plant and grow this expression of faith in Christ. I do not always make the best fit in Virginia Mennonite Conference, as I do not share the names or history and can feel disconnected, but this is my home and my tribe. I want us in VMC to plant in a way that fits in with the Mennonite distinctive approach to theology and ecclesiology and

shares the Anabaptist way of following Christ. Virginia Mennonite Conference values following God in the way of Jesus as understood through the Anabaptist perspective, working itself out through missional engagement, peacemaking, relationally oriented community, and redemptive discipleship. I believe that there is a way to plant Virginia Conference churches and care for the church planter that honors this path.

While not entirely accurate, the stereotypical assumption for the way the Virginia Mennonite Conference has begun new church works in the past has been for a group of Mennonite members to move to an area and establish a new church where they find themselves. These moves were sometimes a result of economically inspired decision making, though groups did indeed move for a missionary effort. There are some definite exceptions to this practice. I am working and serving in a church plant now that does not draw a traditionally Mennonite crowd. A very small percentage of the attenders of our church have any Mennonite history. This is a way forward for the Mennonite Church to grow into nontraditional backgrounds.

To be clear, I do not believe that the Mennonite Church is the only true church or more holy in any way, but having found a home here and being grateful for this home, I want to invite others in and help them to experience this shalom community. I truly believe that Mennonite history and theology hold an important conversation piece for our world. The Christ-centered approaches to peacemaking and community are truly important. I want to make some suggestions for the forming of a church planting effort that can honor those missional impulses of the Anabaptists and offer an alternative way

of church planting that avoids any stereotypically Christendom model or perhaps the effort to “pack ‘em in and get ‘em saved.”

As a convinced Mennonite, I want to expand the Mennonite tent. I am not saying that what has come before is corrupt or even has been ineffective. I stand on the shoulders of many giants of the faith and the beneficiary of the hard work of others. I come to this project out of my deep respect for these brothers and sisters and I hope that it can be useful for the planting of Mennonite Churches in the future.

I was recently introduced to the image of the Sankofa bird. This is a symbol in the Twi language from the Akan people of Ghana that speaks very strongly to me and gives me a frame on which to hang the theme of this dissertation project. It involves the idea of remembering and bringing forward important moments and aspects of our history for the future work we are heading towards.

Sankofa is an Akan term that literally means, "to go back and get it." One of the Adinkra symbols for Sankofa depicts a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward. The egg in its mouth represents the "gems" or knowledge of the past upon which wisdom is based; it also signifies the generation to come that would benefit from that wisdom. This symbol often is associated with the proverb, "*Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi,*" which translates to, "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten." The Akan believe that the past illuminates the present and that the search for knowledge is a life-long process. The pictograph illustrates the quest for knowledge, while the proverb

suggests the rightness of such a quest as long as it is based on knowledge of the past. (“African Tradition, Proverbs, and Sankofa”)

This idea gets at what I am looking for in this paper. I desire to have the Virginia Mennonite Conference specifically, as well as the larger body of the Mennonite Church USA, to go back to what we have forgotten. I want to give us language to go back and explore our historical praxis and the principles of our inception and use the wisdom of the past to inform our future.

Statement of the Problem

Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) has a rich and beautiful history of service and community engagement. Like many churches, though, it is facing an uncertain future. VMC is confronting a changing cultural landscape and is dealing with changes within its own tribe as well. Conversations around same-gendered relationships and other hot-button issues have caused internal struggle. Virginia Mennonite Conference is looking at a changing organizational landscape and making adjustments for the future. Church planting should be a part of that conversation going forward.

The pace of cultural change has been breathtaking, and Virginia Mennonite Conference is being forced to reconsider the way in which it functions in this world. A fine-tuned church planting strategy to reach into this new world is a part of the calibration that VMC must face. This paper is an attempt, not to form a full church planting strategy for the conference, but to begin the conversation and offer some signposts for the journey.

Minnesota pastor and neo-Anabaptist Greg Boyd writes of his discovery that he is a Mennonite. He writes on his blog of his appreciation for the ministry and faith of the Mennonites. Then he adds a paragraph that highlights the need for this dissertation project of going back for the Anabaptist ways of being which may have been forgotten.

Boyd writes:

But there was another very interesting thing I learned about the Mennonites: they're in trouble. I heard this from a number of people, including John Roth. One man literally wept as he told me how he's been grieved seeing Mennonites abandon their core vision of the Kingdom and core convictions over the last several decades. They're losing their counter-cultural emphasis and becoming "Americanized" and "mainstreamed" (as various people told me). Consequently, many Mennonite leaders are getting involved in partisan politics in a way that goes against the Mennonite tradition. While Evangelicals tend to be co-opted by Right Wing politics, these leaders are being co-opted by Left Wing politics. They're basically defining Kingdom social activism as supporting radical democratic policies. Yet, three fourths of Mennonites are Republican. Hence there's growing tensions between the leadership and the body of the Mennonites. (Boyd)

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this study was to explore Anabaptism, as expressed in Mennonite theology and history, and best practices from outside traditions considering how that might inform future efforts at church planting. The outcome then is to incorporate those insights into a new path forward for Virginia Conference as it looks to build bridges of connection with new people and begin new communities of the Kingdom in those contexts.

Research Questions

To begin to explore the idea of church planting in the Virginia Conference Mennonite Church context, three Research Questions have been identified to help guide the process. These RQs look at history as well as the future for insight.

Research Question #1

How has the Mennonite Church historically approached church planting and what were the convictions and patterns for church planting in the historic Anabaptist/Mennonite Church?

Research Question #2

What are current convictions and patterns connected with new church planting efforts outside of the Mennonite tradition that might inform the Mennonite practice?

Research Question #3

What are the principles from these best practices from both inside and outside the Mennonite experience that can be applied to the work of beginning new church works in the Virginia Mennonite Context?

Rationale for the Project

This project is crucial for a variety of reasons. Church planting is important. Gathering people into shalom communities to follow God in relationship matters. Approaching church planting in a focused manner, which honors tradition and Scripture, is vital for the future. Through church planting and discipleship efforts the community of faith is expanded and the life of God shared.

As people of God, Christians are a sent people. God is a sending God. God sent Jesus and Jesus sent the Spirit. Through the Spirit of God, Christians are a sent people. Followers of Christ are sent to live among the people of the world to bear witness to the love and presence of God. This witnessing work is the mission of the people of God and the collective mission of the community called the church.

This project matters because God calls the people of Christ to gather. Churches are a communal expression of the desire to follow God. A transforming power is at work in the body of Christ when it gathers to worship. The Spirit of God is alive and moving amongst the people in unique ways when they are gathered. Christians can pray individually and should do so, but there is a transformative element through the prayers of the gathered people. This calls to mind the old Aristotelian mathematical axiom, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Cohen).

This project matters because people matter to God and people are seeking out connection with something deeper than themselves. That search for connection with God may not look like it has looked and the church may have to form in new ways. The church will need to draw on its past to go faithfully forward in these new ways. While

easier to be an alarmist while looking at the church attendance trends and draw the wrong conclusions, the life of faith requires hope. As an analogy, there are not as many phone booths as there once were in America. One response to that trend would be to lament. One could look at the data and say no one wants to talk on the phone anymore and assume communication and phones are dead. Seminars could pop up to train each other on how to have more attractive phone booths with sessions to talk about redecorating and reintroducing phone booths. Lived experience, though, tells even the most casual observer that phones are more vital than ever; that communication is important, but is carried out in different ways. Delivery systems may have changed but the need is still there for phones and communications. The deeper need remains, much like with the church. The hunger for the Divine remains in the contemporary world. The church may have to look at new ways of being to connect. This project matters because it is beginning the work of remembering the deeper vital need and what can be changed.

Virginia Mennonite Conference is in need of beginning a conversation and seeking different approaches to church planting as it faces a changing world. The argument may be made that Christians need only stick with Scripture and the rest will take care of itself, but even a cursory pass over the church planting stories in Acts reveal that they show variance in how the work of new churches has been approached even then. Merely reading the book of Acts and trying to replicate the methods Paul used might get the church planter in quite a bit of trouble today. The example of the beginning of the work in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-41) is particularly arresting. A church begins in Ephesus that day through a riot and a massive book burning. Other churches Paul begins by meeting

people who shared the same occupation he did (Acts 18:2-3). In reading Acts 17 the church planter can see Paul making connections with the culture of his day and affirming much of what he sees there.

These and the other church planting stories may not hold the best normative patterns for the contemporary church planter. They are vastly informative though, as the planter remains open to what God may be doing in the life and work of the community of faith. Being open to perceive the movement of God is the only model of church planting that can be unequivocally submitted as normative and life-giving for all times, places, and contexts.

Contextually, the undertaken project matters because Virginia Mennonite Conference is looking for a way forward in church planting. A fresh wave and desire to plant churches is present within the Conference. With help from Virginia Mennonite Missions, the conference has identified the beginning of new church works in areas where there currently is no Mennonite presence as a priority.

If the church is to continue to follow along on the mission of God, it must recalibrate from time to time. The church can keep in mind that important to readjust the way the it organizes itself as the people of God. The mantra of 1990s-era church planting was that the message was sacred, but the method never was. This project was an attempt to do some of that hard work of recalibration and reevaluation. This project was in no way an attempt to cast aspersions on the work of anyone else and was in no way a denigration of past planting work.

Definition of Key Terms

To help with understanding the project discussed herein and to aid in clarity, several terms are defined and discussed here. Most terms used should be familiar, but it is helpful to clearly define the meanings attached here.

The term *missional* is used here to very simply define a posture of being engaged in mission and existing for the benefit of the world outside the boundaries of the church. The term *missional church* is a descriptive one used to channel the energy of the people of God to the mission of God. “Mission means sending, and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history” (Guder 4). The church is blessed to be called and used in the fulfillment of the mission of God in the world. This external focus is drawn out; rather than seeing the church as the point of the mission of God, the missional community sees the church as supporting the mission of God to reconcile all things to Godself. According to a pair of church planting thought leaders, “Missional means adopting the posture of a missionary, joining Jesus on mission, learning and adapting to the culture around you while remaining biblically sound” (Stetzer and Im Loc. 261).

The church is the assembly of God’s people across the spectrum of numbers and organization. Sometimes *church* refers to the organized and clearly defined administrative structure and sometimes the term is used as the looser assembling of the people of God in a certain time, place, or even while performing an activity. Understanding of the church has grown over recent years to a less rigorous definition. Craig Van Gelder writes that church when missional “becomes a sign that God’s

redemption is now present in the world, a foretaste of what that redemption is like, and an instrument to carry that message into every local context and to the ends of the earth” (Van Gelder 19).

The emphasis here of the Mennonite tradition refers to the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation that began baptizing adult believers in 1525. While not a monolithic group in doctrine, they were notorious for preaching nonresistance and renunciation of the use of the sword, along with the championing of the idea of believer’s baptism. Those who opposed the Anabaptists first applied that name to them as an insult, referring to these new believers as re-baptizers. The Mennonites were a strain of the Anabaptist movement that coalesced around the leadership of Menno Simons. The modern Mennonites, while no longer known for their distinctive plain clothes as they once were, are still marked by a strong commitment to peace, community, and the idea of the priesthood of all believers.

Part of the rationale for this project is the church planting of Mennonite Churches among new and nontraditionally Mennonite demographics. While this can mean many different things, it is used here mainly as a broad term referring to those who have not held previous membership or attendance experience in a Mennonite Church. This terminology may refer to those with previous experience in other churches or to those with no religious background. Mennonite churches have grown substantially in previous years in non-Caucasian groups, which can be seen as nontraditional demographics, but the term used here is a more expansive one.

Benefit is gained through investigating best practices across traditions. Best practices are an opportunity for learning from others by applying principles and practices from the hard-won experience of others. *Best practices* can be defined as the ways of doing things that are acceptable as most effective or most helpful. By following best practices research from others, a project manager can increase the odds of success in an endeavor. (Young 18)

Delimitations

For this project, I decided to limit the scope of the work to church planting praxis within the Virginia Mennonite Conference rather than look at the entirety of Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA). The larger context of MCUSA was simply too vast and included too many variables to be adequately addressed here. The use of Virginia Mennonite Conference reflected sufficient history and variety as to be useful to establish a church planting method.

Limiting the context to Virginia Mennonite Conference helped to ensure that the project was more useful and stood a chance of implementation. While connected to the larger Mennonite Church USA leadership, I was more involved in Virginia Conference leadership, with service on the Conference's Visioning Task Force and other committees. The Visioning Task Force was charged with discerning and enunciating the future going vision for Virginia Mennonite Conference, including the development of a new Vision and Mission Statement, as well as new possible ways of organizing and being connected as the conference heads into the future.

The project looked at the Virginia Mennonite Conference church planting history and discussed the method of how those churches were planted. While not all churches and their histories could be examined, representative churches and movements were chosen to stand in for various planting activities and methods employed. The goal here was to look at how church planting has been approached historically and how might it be approached in the future.

Review of Relevant Literature

This project was informed by a wide swathe of literature and sources. This project consulted biblical, theological, sociological, and ecclesiological literature to glean insights into church planting methodology and rationale. Not all works read were referenced and not all books were read with assent, but even the problematic works added insight to this project.

I consulted materials from both within and outside Mennonite praxis, with more weight given to Mennonite materials in their own context. These Mennonite penned works were leaned on in a more pronounced way. The material in the Mennonite church planting school of thought was very helpful for this task as these writings were familiar with and accounted for the particularities of Mennonite and Anabaptist theological stances. I included materials not written by members of Mennonite churches. Authors such as David Fitch do identify as neo-Anabaptists. As Anabaptism gained in popularity, there were more and more works and thinkers to consult and wider nets cast to glean insight.

Literature from outside the Anabaptist movement that would have thoughts to bear on the postmodern cultural context was also consulted. Works that both dealt strictly with the philosophical components of the postmodern mindset and the ways in which the good news of Jesus can be contextualized for that postmodern mindset were valuable. Literature too around such things as the Celtic ways of evangelism and Emergent theology were beneficial.

Material consulted included much work from practitioners of the missional posture of church planting. While new material from writers such as Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch may not be rooted in Mennonite theology, their writing has been influential and formative in the wider missional conversation. Writing of the more theoretical nature has been consulted in the discussion of the theology of church planting and so forth. Literature on best practices from other church planting organizations was consulted as well.

Research Methodology

The research in this pre-intervention project was done in a variety of manners. For this study, qualitative methods were used. In addition to consulting the literature reviewed above, I relied on one-on-one interviews with church planting pastors across Virginia Mennonite Conference, both current and former planters. Interviews were also carried out with past and present Conference leaders. The data gathered was kept secure and private to protect the interviewees.

Historical data of church planting efforts in Virginia Mennonite Conference was consulted. This included time spent in the VMC archives housed in Eastern Mennonite

University's library. Research there included reading past minutes of various Mission Boards and conference committees.

Type of Research

A combination of qualitative methods was used in this project to formulate a pre-intervention study of the way forward to church plant in Virginia Mennonite Conference. The leaders of church plants were contacted via email. One-on-one interviews were conducted after willingness to participate was indicated. Additionally, reading into Mennonite theology and practice of mission helped guide the project. Finally, best practices reading from outside traditions helped to shed light on a way forward for Mennonite church planting

Participants

The project involved leaders of Virginia Mennonite Conference and leaders at the national Mennonite Church USA level as well. The national coordinator of church planting for MCUSA was interviewed, as well as the Executive Director for MCUSA. Past and current church planting practitioners with varying styles of church expressions and sizes participated. There was considerable church planting experience among the interviewees spoken with. Interviews were conducted with a diverse group: Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic church planters, both male and female. Most of the church planters approached have earned at least a Master of Divinity degree. Ages of participants ranged from early 20s to 60s.

Instrumentation

The main instrument of information gathering was the interview. The interviews of church planters and denominational leaders yielded qualitative data regarding connection to Mennonite practices, organizational culture, connection to Virginia Mennonite Conference, and the planting practices of the churches. Discussion with Conference and denominational leaders were helpful for the higher perspectives and gave insight into system-wide planning and structures.

Data Collection

I conducted one-on-one interviews with these church leaders, both live and via video conferencing formats such as Skype. Originally, plans were made for focus groups and a lot more in the way of group discussions. I deviated from that plan to allow planters to be more open and forthright in their conversations. Several Conference leaders strongly urged the change to the individual conversations. Each interview covered the same questions.

Data Analysis

Interviews with church planters and denominational leaders were conducted for this research project. Each interviewee was asked the same set of 15 questions, with a section of open-ended conversation included. Transcripts of the interview were not created, but notes were taken. Notes taken from the interviews were then examined for content related to this project. Comparisons of similar concepts or discussions of common themes and different perspectives among the interviews presented categories and themes. Then, those categories were analyzed and themes among the interviews were

chosen. These themes were identified through looking for common ideas and points of response. Key points, themes, and patterns in the responses were listed for systematic analysis.

Generalizability

This study was limited in scope. The study did not seek to educate participants about the Anabaptist/Mennonite Church tradition. The project sought to poll current planters and denominational leaders about the intersection of Mennonite distinctives of theology and praxis with church planting. This dissertation project will be helpful to those seeking to plant Mennonite churches in a way that is faithful to the lived Anabaptist heritage. The wider church will be more informed about the principles of Mennonite Church planting because of this study. The study will also assist the Mennonite Church leadership to understand the current state of church planting by identifying the experiences and thoughts of its active church planters.

Project Overview

This project explored Anabaptism as expressed in Mennonite theology and history and considered how that might inform future efforts at church planting. Looking at the larger church planting conversation and gleaning best practices from outside the tradition that might help Mennonites plant were included. The outcome incorporated those insights into a new path forward for Virginia Conference as it looks to build bridges of connection with new people and begin new communities of the Kingdom in those contexts. Chapter 2 discusses the most influential writers and practitioners regarding church planting, missional engagement, and Mennonite thought leaders around the issue of church

planting and ecclesiology. Chapter 3 outlines the various ways I investigated my research questions. Chapter 4 analyzes the findings that emerge from such qualitative methods as one-on-one interviews, small groups, and historical analysis. Chapter 5 outlines the study's major findings with implications for crafting a new way of church planting for Virginia Mennonite Conference.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

As followers of a sending God, followers of Christ are in turn a sent people. A key ecclesiological expression of the missional sending process is the planting of new churches. That church planting work is a vital component of the Anabaptist movement. From early on the Anabaptist movement spread by communal worship and the formation of shalom communities of Jesus.

The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century faced a new reality. They tackled a question that still affects the church today. When the special status of the church as the center of the secular community and the privilege afforded the Christian tradition slip away, the church must find a new way of being in the world. The challenge in is deciding what posture the church should assume for itself? Most of the reformers and even the Catholic Church expected and insisted on the shield of the state. They insisted that the duty of the state was to protect theological norms and institutions. Anabaptists did not; they believed that the church of Jesus Christ should exist outside the protection of the state, trusting in the protection of God and not in the sword (Klaassen 67-68).

This project looked at the history of Mennonite church planting efforts to benefit planting efforts within the Virginia Mennonite Conference and began work around forming a way of forming Shalom communities of faith for the conference. The project grew from there to include surveys of other church planters from other Mennonite conferences and some outsiders to the Mennonite tradition. Additionally, best practices

from outside Mennonite history were considered to see what might be brought in to help Mennonites' planting labors. The project was especially interested in exploring ways of reaching out beyond traditional ethnic or historic Mennonite populations into new demographics. As Virginia Mennonite Conference seeks to live into the future of the *Missio Dei*, it will serve it well to find a new way forward in church formation.

This Chapter looks at various foundations underlying the search for a new way forward. The Literature Review chapter is divided into three sections: Biblical Foundations of Church Planting; Theological and Historical Understandings for Mennonites; and Implications for Developing Newer Models of Ecclesiological Formation.

Biblical Foundations

The purpose of this study was to explore Anabaptism as expressed in Mennonite theology and history and consider how that might inform future efforts at church planting. Included in this was looking at the larger church planting conversation and gleaning best practices from outside the tradition that might help Mennonites plant. The outcome then was to incorporate those insights into a new path forward for Virginia Conference as it looked to build bridges of connection with new people and begin new communities of the Kingdom in those contexts.

There is a rich history of biblical foundation to the work of church planting informing the historical and contemporary ecclesiological understandings and applications. Mennonites and the larger Anabaptist stream have a history of committing themselves to the study of the Scriptures and seeking life and support in what they find.

The church benefits from a fully orbed approach to the consistent missional foundation of the Bible, because as Christopher Wright puts it at the beginning of his work, *The Mission of God*, “Mission is what the Bible is all about” (17).

The reorientation of mission in the intrinsic sending nature of God rather than making mission the work of the church is a recent theological innovation of the last century, according to Mennonite church leader and author Daniel J. Bosch (389-93). Mission is not something the church forces to happen, but rather mission is God’s work in which the church is privileged and invited to participate. God is indeed a sending God and a God who calls God’s people to join in the work of mission.

Mission is the heart of God and the church is invited to join the work, rather than structure mission as something that the church does alongside the other programs of communal life. Bosch sums up this reworking of the posture towards mission:

Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the *Missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. (390)

The New Testament book of Acts is often considered to be the only biblical book to deal specifically with the work of church planting, though other Bible passages do provide insight, impulse, and theological underpinnings for the beginnings of new ministry works. The idea of the missionary and sending nature of God is made visibly

present and clear throughout the Old Testament in the call of Abraham in Genesis and the inclusion of the charge to the people among the exiles sent out in Jeremiah to “seek the welfare of the city I have sent you to” (Jer. 29 NRSV), among other places. The Spirit of God is alive and active throughout the entirety of the biblical text.

In the New Testament, the words of Jesus to his followers in the Gospels give clear direction to the hearers on how they are to live in the world as people sent by Jesus and following in his missional footsteps. This includes very specific instructions on going out in pairs and entering a new town to proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God. Further, in the biblical narrative, the apostle Paul in his letters gives insights into his missionary church planting work by offering correction and addressing those who have followed him in the church starts he pioneered. The writings and records in the Christian Scriptures are awash with the call of Christ followers to invite others into the beloved Shalom community. This applies both in church planting and in more established church communities.

Old Testament Foundations

Too often in discussions on the mission of God and the accompanying role of those who name themselves as followers of that God, the impetus for mission is seen only in the writings of the New Testament. There is much that would be gained from spending time with the texts exploring the earliest interactions of God with God’s creation throughout the Old Testament. The story of the Hebrew people in their wanderings and exiles and interactions with the people of their world clearly points to the missionary work of God and the role of God’s people in this work.

Inherent in the foundational call of Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 is a call of blessing for the other:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

This is a profound passage of calling and covenant making between God and the man whose name will soon change to Abraham. This call and charge given by God here is a global call. This is a call to actively go out among the other. God’s original call was not a call of separation, but a call of active blessing and engagement. God is sending Abram even in the beginning. There is something here that is intrinsic to the nature of God Almighty. God is a sending God. God sends Abram here in Genesis and later God sends Jesus. Through Jesus, God sends us. Here even in the early Genesis story, a precedent is set of calling the people of God to be a people of blessing.

The church planting movement would do well to relocate itself in this narrative of God being a blessing. There is much for the church to discover its roots in the faith of Abraham and Sarah. Barry A. Harvey suggests that the posture the contemporary church should adopt in dealing with post-Christendom is one of engagement with its early Jewish roots. Harvey writes at length of how the Jewish faith lived an embodied truth that connected the community together and to their God (147). It was not a faith that tried to

merge with the dominant structures or make general truth claims for all people. It was a faith that saw life as a pilgrimage and a journey.

The church model Harvey uses predominantly is the idea of church as alternative *polis*, or as the book title would suggest, the church as another city. It is a city that exists within the confines of the visible political landscape. The *polis* that Harvey suggests is a city that exists not in antagonistic opposition to the prevailing powers, or for its own benefit, but rather it is a city that exists for the sake of those outside structures. This stance gets much closer to the original thrust of the New Testament Scriptures and even the models of post-exilic living of Jeremiah and others from the First Testament writings as well. Missional church planters seek to locate the church planting work in this narrative of God of being a blessing. Missional church planters seek to church plant as a response to the call of God in their life, and the inherent call of God to be a blessing to others.

Abram's call is illustrative of the fact that God's desire is that God's people become a movement that will touch the rest of the world in blessing and not a call to become a tribal gathering. God's desire was to bless the world through Abram. Abram's obedience in response to that call of God is the root for the Hebrew people and consequently to the fuller Christian church movement. Today's Christian Church shares in that call of God to be a blessing, it is the task of the Christ follower to make known that call. God sends out the Israelite people from Abram and the church today continues to be sent in support of the mission of God.

The thread of God's sending nature continues throughout the Old Testament. It is picked up in the conversations God has with the Hebrew people preparing them to go and be the people of God and the pursuers of the kingdom. The charge given to the Hebrew people as they go into Babylonian exile, as recorded in Jeremiah is another pivotal passage in looking at the Anabaptist missional church-planting stance. Specifically, this charge is given in Jeremiah 29, verses 1, 4-7, and 11-14, which reads:

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. [...] Thus, says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare (shalom/peace) of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. [...] For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you

from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

This charge from God given to a people who were being ripped from all that they had known and sent to a new place is indicative of the alternative *polis* ethos of the church plant and its missional nature. This is to be the mission of the church, to join alongside God in seeking the Shalom of God's world. Churches are to exist for the people outside of the church. Church plants are particularly adept at living into this ecclesiological theory. Beginning new church works is indeed an attempt to actively seek to be a blessing in a new community and to seek the Shalom of God in the life of a place. The Spirit calls the church into being through mission (Bevans 10). Beginning new church works for the Mennonite Church is a way to join in the work of reconciliation, redemption, and renewal as Christ followers seek the peace of the towns and cities where they find themselves.

New Testament Foundations

The Jesus movement of the New Testament flows from the sending nature of God expressed in the First Testament. The coming of Jesus in a small village in Israel is the ultimate act of mission and Shalom seeking. Anabaptists and Mennonites throughout history have wrestled with the meaning and impact of the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth and have endeavored to take the call of peacemaking and mission seriously.

Mennonites from the very beginning have been a people that sought direction and inspiration from the Bible as the orienting principle for their life and churches. A

uniquely Christocentric expression of the way of following Jesus, Anabaptism is marked by the insistence on following Scripture in the way that they live together in the world. The passages that are often referred to as making up what is referred to as the Great Commission found in Mark 16:15-16 and Matthew 28:19-20 were key texts for the early Anabaptist movement (Shenk, *By Faith* 21). Few words other than the Sermon on the Mount text were given more weight than these words of Jesus, delivered as his earthly time with his followers was ending. This Anabaptist insistence on the centrality of the Great Commission texts was a direct rebuttal to the dominant magisterial expressions of Christianity that downplayed these Great Commission passages as unnecessary or even as a threat to the parish system of the Christendom model churches (Shenk, *By Faith* 21). While the Anabaptist movement identified itself with the early church era, they emphasized the Great Commission texts much more than the early church. The early church cited the Matthew 28:18-20 passage more as a text for supporting the theological precept of the Trinity or other theological tenets, rather than as evangelism appeals (Kreider 10).

Anabaptists insisted that the charge to go forth into the world and to evangelize for the cause and life of Christ were charges that each succeeding generation was meant to renew and live into, rather than instructions to be treated as a more specific teaching for the apostles (Kreider 10) as many of the more magisterial reformers in the Lutheran or Calvinistic tribe would have felt. There was not a strong passion for evangelism with the other reformers, as they operated under a more church-and-state-merger model.

Mark 16:15-16 reads: “And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.’” The corollary passage is found in Matthew 28:19-20, where Jesus tells the disciples:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The dual aspect of the Matthew 28 passage appealed to the ethics of the early Anabaptists. Connected with the call to evangelize the world and to proclaim the good news to the whole world is an implicit call to disciple those people. Saving souls in some sort of a vacuum that does not train those new converts in how then to live is not a faithful response to the charge of Jesus. The first century church used the Sermon on the Mount as a discipleship training text and the early Anabaptists picked up that pattern (Gallardo 142). Mennonites have a strong emphasis on the value of discipleship and training in the way in which God would have the community of faith to go. The soul of the Christian life, as the Anabaptist proclaimed and lived it, is being a disciple of Jesus. These disciples then, that are made, share in the chain of discipleship to pass the faith on and share in the joys of living in the community of discipleship (Kasdorf, *Anabaptists and the Great Commission* 310).

Early Anabaptist Hans Hut attracted large crowds to his preaching. After baptizing those who confessed Christ as Lord, Hut charged them with obeying the Great

Commission to tell others the Good News. They always went, “where the representatives of the state churches dared not go, and for the Gospel’s sake were made pilgrims and martyrs throughout the known world.” When asked what prompted them to go, they answered without hesitation: “the Great Commission” (Kasdorf, *Anabaptist Approach* 62).

In keeping with the missional sending impulse of the early Anabaptists, Luke 10:1-12, 17-21 has been a commonly used passage in Anabaptist circles, cited in different eras. This Luke passage is quite literally a record of a sending out from Jesus to the world. In Luke 10 Jesus commissions and sends out the seventy ambassadors of the kingdom. His words here are simple and direct:

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and

say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town."

The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." (Luke 10:1-12,17-21)

This passage from Luke is a formative one in many ways. These church planting pioneers are called out to be Christ bearers. Jesus sets out principles and plans that are often cited in Mennonite Church planting endeavors (Kanagy 24). In a study conducted among Church planters who planted in a fifteen-year window with the Mennonite Church from 1990 to 2005, Conrad Kanagy draws out 10 principles from this Luke passage to apply to the church planters from that period. Kanagy writes in-depth in *No Purse, No*

Shoes, No Sandals, section of the Mennonite Mission Network series of books for Missio Dei, that “the lives and ministries of Mennonite church planters mirror the concise, but demanding instructions given by Jesus to the seventy” (27).

The teachings of Jesus in these vital New Testament passages to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach them to obey presuppose the beginning of new communities of faith into which these newly baptized converts would belong and be baptized and be taught to obey (Green 1). These early ambassadors of Anabaptism saw themselves as initiators of new communities of faith. Where they were able to proclaim restoration to their ideal first century church, they would gather the converts together to live out this community. The new church plants were a direct outgrowth of the Anabaptist leaders following the way of Jesus, as they understood it. Through their efforts in commitment to the words of Jesus, they were soon able to plant and begin many new communities of faith (1).

The New Testament book of Acts is replete with church planting stories. From the first sermon given by Peter in Acts 2 that led to thousands being saved and joining the very first church plant to Paul’s many journeys across the known world preaching “Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2) and forming house churches for the kingdom wherever he went, there is so much to process in the early history of Christianity. Historically Anabaptists and Mennonites harkened back to these early writings to inform the methods that they used to spread the message and disciple the people. Church leaders used these passages to inform their rationale for going out in the first place.

Merely reading the book of Acts and trying to replicate the methods Paul used might get the contemporary church planter in quite a bit of trouble. The example of the beginning of the work in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-41) is particularly arresting where a church begins through a riot and a massive book burning. Other churches Paul begins by meeting people who shared the same occupation he did (Acts 18:2-3). These and the other church planting stories may not be the best normative patterns. These stories are, though, vastly informative, as Virginia Mennonite Conference remains open to what God may be doing in their lives and works.

The apostle Paul was on many levels a man on a mission. He planted many churches and watered them through teaching, letters, and prayer. He worked to bring people to the kingdom of God. He established church that did indeed go across age and income barriers, striking through all layers of societal structures and obstacles. He called people to radical discipleship and faith in Jesus. His work to establish churches in defiance of a prevailing hostile culture spoke to the early Anabaptists living in the shadow of a Constantinian religious structure that sought to kill them and remove their faith movement from the face of the earth. There are parallels to be drawn to the culture of the twenty-first century as Mennonite church planters endeavor to plant counter cultural shalom communities of the kingdom.

Paul's work in Athens as recorded in Acts 17 is a key text for many church planters. His message preached at the Areopagus was one of sharing a clear call to join in the life of Christ in a culture that did not have any of the usual common cultural understandings on which to share the knowledge of Christ. In contexts with an

understanding and history of Judaism, Paul would draw connections there that he could not draw here. Still, though, he managed to connect an awareness of Jesus with the Athenians' established awareness of the Divine. He was able to exegete the cultural context he found himself in and shared a compelling message about Christ in the setting.

The Mennonites and early Anabaptists saw the formation of communities of faith as integral to the living out of these biblical imperatives to mission and sought to form a more "pure church" applying these texts and others (Murray, *Naked Anabaptist* 102). As the Anabaptists, as the radical wing of the Reformation era, sought to restore the true church, they established worshiping communities to help the new converts live into the faith they proclaimed. This needed to happen outside the established state sponsored churches of the day. The Anabaptists, including the early Mennonites, wanted to live their guiding biblical passages out in the life of the faith communities.

The missional imperative applies not just in church planting but also to the whole of the Christian church. We are all responsible for living out the missional work of God in our lives and ministries. Church planting is a call, but indeed God has a missional invitation for all of God's people. A church planter should never be so arrogant as to believe that the only authentic way to live out God's call is church planting and that those who are not church planting are somehow occupying a second tier of faithfulness. That simply is not true. The church must all wrestle with what living missionally requires of the church in a particular time and place.

As a ministry practice, church planters endeavor to orient church praxis by the missional call of God. This connected directly to Article 10 of the *Confession of Faith in*

a Mennonite Perspective: The Church in Mission (Miller and Harder et al. 42-45). The church is undeniably called to proclaim and to be a sign of the kingdom of God. This is our communal call and our holy prompting.

Theological and Historical Understandings for Mennonites

Each context and community has its ethos and ways of understanding its reality and experience. Each understanding then shapes the stories that a community tells and the values that they attempt to replicate within the given system. Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary President Sara Wenger Shenk argues this point when she writes:

Who we are is, in part, defined by the ideals or standards upheld by a tradition the community deems authoritative and seeks to embody. A given community culture that is somewhat identifiable from mass culture will have a vision of life as a "deliberate cultural and ethical aspiration" and will seek to shape the character of its members and its communal life around that vision. (141)

Identifying as a Mennonite brings another set of questions. The question arises then about who really are the Anabaptists and do Mennonites believe in mission. Simply put, the Anabaptists were a reform movement that grew out of Martin Luther's reforms that began in 1517 and resulted in great change in the church and cultural landscape. "If Lutheran describes the followers of Luther, and Reformed the followers of Calvin, Anabaptist describes the more radical members of the Reformation who were often hated, regularly persecuted, and sometimes killed by both Lutherans and the Reformed" (McLaren 200).

“The early Anabaptists practiced active missionary zeal, going everywhere, preaching and teaching. This contrasted with the ‘Christian’ society in which they lived where the state magistrate or prince decided the religion of all his subjects. Many Anabaptists died for their faith and their fervor for evangelism” (Good and Good 48). The early Anabaptists were concerned with sharing their faith and evangelism, which was virtually unheard of with the magisterial expressions of faith that they shared space with. These Anabaptists saw a very real need to share their Jesus and plant new worshipping congregations.

Additionally, “On August 20, 1527 at Augsburg, Bavaria, a group of Anabaptists leaders met and laid plans for evangelizing the region. Many who were given specific assignments at the conference met their deaths shortly thereafter. Their gathering became known as the Martyrs Synod” (Good and Good 48). “The conference authorized missionary teams that went out from the meeting in small groups to visit existing Anabaptist congregations for strengthening these groups as well as establishing new congregations” (W. Shenk 18). The methods these Anabaptists used to share their faith were decidedly pragmatic and relational. They went person-to-person and preached to as large a group as they could assemble (W. Shenk 18).

When a movement of any kind, either religious or completely secular, takes its name from a person, it is usually the name of the founder that the followers are known by. Martin Luther lit the match of the reformation in the 1500s and his followers were known as Lutherans, for example. This was not the case with Mennonites.

While the Mennonite name comes from Menno Simons, he was not the founder of the Anabaptist movement nor was he even among the first generation of leaders. What Menno Simons was appreciated for was as the rescuer of a tattered movement after the debacle at Münster. In Münster a group of Spiritualist Anabaptists attempted to set up a “New Jerusalem” and failed miserably in a cycle of death and destruction. This misguided and cultish experiment nearly destroyed the fledgling Anabaptist movement. The need existed for a person to step in and give leadership, both theological and practical, to bring order to this diverse group of people. Menno Simons did just that.

Having served as a Roman Catholic priest for about twenty years, Menno converted to the Anabaptist cause in roughly 1536 and quickly became a leader in the movement. He was instrumental in putting together a discipline and structure to prepare the movement to go forward. Menno Simons was one of the few Anabaptist leaders to die of natural causes.

In Menno’s theology, he pointed his hearers back to Jesus with a strong Christocentric message. He taught Jesus, not simply as a normative model, but as a principle for those who would choose to follow in the way of Jesus. In every writing he included the phrase, from 1 Corinthians 3:11, ‘For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ’

Menno Simons called Christians back to the New Testament by using the New Testament example, rather than simply basing his discussions on Church history. Biblically based, he quoted quite liberally from Scripture. For most every point he made he included a Scripture reference. In some ways, this became his defense mechanism

against those who charged that this Anabaptist movement was outside of the biblical norm.

The theology of Menno Simons brought a counterpoint to the theologies of the day, including that of Martin Luther. Menno and Luther used the same passages to build their theologies of justification by faith, but where Luther ended the sentence there, Menno focused on the results of the justification being a changed life (Grislis, *Menno Simons* 54).

Menno laid out his views on discipleship rather plainly and practically. Again, this centers on Christ, as the incarnation is key to understanding all of Menno's theology. For him the idea of discipleship entailed the understanding and assumption that the believer must follow Christ in life (Snyder, *Keywords* 83). Before this can take place though, "by Menno's accounting, repentance, turning from evil, and faith in Christ must precede," writes Arnold Snyder, "But following after Christ will lead one into the church, and only by such faithful following after and taking up the yoke can one truthfully claim to be a Christian and to have obtained remissions of sins" (86).

Menno laid out a path to discipleship in his work, as follows: 1) Hearing and Faith, 2) Repentance, 3) Spiritual Resurrection, 4) New Birth, 5) Regeneration, and 6) New Beings/Discipleship (Snyder, *Keywords* 86-89). Discipleship for Menno was the outcome of a life properly directed to following Christ, beginning with hearing the word of God and continuing until one is a new creation. There was a process that all believers had to go through.

This idea of being trained in discipleship and in turn discipling others was a major component of early Anabaptist life and faith. The early Anabaptists worked to recover this concept from the Patrician era of the church. Additionally, this was a concept peppered throughout Scripture, from the Old Testament through to the New Testament. Discipleship was a core practice and the natural way of training others to follow God in the way of Jesus. Discipling to live in the way of Jesus was central to the early Anabaptist ways of understanding what it meant to be a believer.

The entire discipleship process was Christ-centered. Followers of Jesus are to be peaceful, obedient, and fair, just as Christ was. Menno wrote, “The Gospel of the Kingdom, the Word of His Father, He (Christ) has proclaimed; He has taught and left unto his followers an example of pure love, and a perfect life” (Simons Loc. 468). This again bears out the truth of Menno’s theme verse of 1 Corinthians 3:11; for Menno the foundation of everything is Jesus Christ.

One of the key elements of discipleship and the Christ-following life was baptism for the believers. This was, of course, the flashpoint for the major clashes of Anabaptists and the society around them. Menno Simons and the larger Radical Reformation participants did not practice infant baptism, instead insisting that baptism was an action for the adult understanding believer only. Infants could not undertake it, as “Baptism is not a sign of grace but a sign of obedience. Baptism does not precede, but follows faith,” Menno wrote (qtd. in Grislis, *Martin Luther* 12). Menno argued strongly from scripture against infant baptism. He wrote, “If sola scriptura was the way to reform the church and its theology then quote a text” (12).

It was standard procedure in the early 1500s for all infants to be baptized and placed on the tax rolls immediately. At the time of the Reformation, baptism meant citizenship. Anabaptists with their radical notions threatened the social order and a good leader had a vested interest in continuing that established social order. This is one of the reasons that the rulers of the day ruthlessly attempted to put down the Anabaptist movement by any means necessary.

Menno was also attacked as not believing in original sin. This made a convenient assault but was simply not true. He did not deny original sin but believed that the guilt of original sin was not charged until the person could make decisions for themselves. (Grislis, *Martin Luther* 19)

Menno also refuted the linkage of infant baptism as the replacement of circumcision from the Old Testament. He saw circumcision as a covenant and a covenant was not salvific; circumcision was for males, whereas baptism applied to both males and females. Menno, “denied that circumcision of the Israelites was the prototype for infant baptism,” according to Egil Grislis (*Martin Luther* 19).

Mennonites, and their wider Anabaptist brothers and sisters in the faith, were from the very beginning a missionary movement. The early members of this Radical Reformation worked to form new communities of faith that ran counter to the dominant contemporaneous church culture. The fledgling Anabaptist expression of faith in Christ was forced by the dominant Christendom model of the time to worship in secret in caves, forests, and even on boats. Early Anabaptists were deeply convinced that the Christendom expression of faith that they experienced in the 1500s was not consistent

with the model of Jesus or even the early apostolic vision (Shenk 20). The idea of mission and calling people to a deeper and more radical life of discipleship to Christ was strong in the theological and ecclesiological lives of the faithful.

The Anabaptist commitment to following the example of the early church earned them a reputation as the party of restitution as viewed over against the remainder of the reformers as the party of reform (Littell 17). The theme of the Anabaptists was of the restitution, as they saw it, of the authentic early church that had been brought low by the years of corruption and sin. They looked back at the early church before Constantine, particularly the community as portrayed in Acts 2, as the golden age of the church (17).

The temptation is to view Mennonites through a simplistic and one-dimensional lens. Nostalgia and Hollywood movies lead one to see contemporary Mennonites as a uniform and quaint people. The reality, though, gives a much more robust picture of who the Mennonites are. There are diverse theological expressions with the Mennonite spectrum of belief with a myriad of ways to delineate the ways of being Mennonite. Some of the streams would appear little different from mainstream Evangelicalism. There are Mennonites actively working at social justice and Mennonites in both the conservative theological factions and the liberal and progressive assemblies.

Rodney J. Sawatsky makes an attempt to label the different streams in his chapter “The One and the Many: The Recovery of Mennonite Pluralism” included in *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays on Anabaptist/Mennonite Studies in Honor of C. J. Dyck*. He opens his chapter with the observation that:

The category “Mennonite” typically conjures up for the uninitiated a unitary entity based on limited data. Perhaps a brief encounter with the Mennonite Central Committee or a passing picture of an Old Order horse and buggy or a chance reading of a short story by a Mennonite author premises such a unified perspective. Such naiveté is impossible for the initiated. For those who know Mennonite reality, pluralism is, if not *the*, at least a central reality.

The large assortment of ecclesiastical subgroupings is only one evidence of this pluralism. The variety of theological and sociopolitical orientations, worship forms, organizational structures, and other expression of faith and faithfulness—both individual and corporate—add further substance to this pluralistic fact. Any attempt to define a unitary “Mennonite” in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, for example, is an exercise in frustration, given that “Mennonite” embraces the many as much as the one.

(141)

Sawatsky goes on to delineate four archetypes of Mennonite expression with four distinct areas of emphasis. Dale Schrag developed a chart based on Sawatsky’s writings (Nafziger). Sawatsky, as interpreted by Schrag, sees the four main streams of Mennonites as:

Mennonite Stream	Emphasis	16th Century Corollary
Separationist	Social/cultural nonconformity to the world	Swiss Brethren with Schleithem Confession
Establishment	Biblical nonresistance/personal holiness	Menno Simons
Reformist	Discipleship of Christ/service to the world	Pilgram Marpeck
Transformationist	Political/ideological nonconformity to the political powers	Hans Hut and apocalyptic Anabaptists

Figure 2.1. Sawatsky's four Mennonite streams.

Author Stuart Murray is the leader of the Anabaptist Network in the United Kingdom, having spent 12 years as a church planter and leader. He has written extensively on church planting and Anabaptism. He penned the book *The Naked Anabaptist* in 2010. This book was an attempt to strip away the Mennonite, Amish, and other clothes put on the form that is Anabaptism. He listed seven core convictions of the heart of authentic and faithful Anabaptism.

These core convictions are aspirations of an Anabaptism creatively at work in the world today:

1. Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer, and Lord. He is the source of our life, the central reference point for our faith and lifestyle, for our understanding of church, and our engagement with society. We are committed to following Jesus as well as worshipping him.
2. Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation. We are committed to a Jesus-centered approach to the Bible, and to the community of faith as the primary context in which we read the Bible and discern and apply its implications for discipleship.
3. Western culture is slowly emerging from the Christendom era, when church and state jointly presided over a society in which almost all were assumed to be Christian. Whatever its positive contributions on values and institutions, Christendom seriously distorted the gospel, marginalized Jesus, and has left the churches ill equipped for mission to a post-Christendom culture. As we reflect on this, we are committed to learning from the experience and perspectives of movements such as Anabaptism that rejected standard Christendom assumptions and pursued alternative ways of thinking and behaving.
4. The frequent association of the church with status, wealth, and force is inappropriate for followers of Jesus and damages our witness. We are committed to exploring ways of being good news to the poor,

powerless, and persecuted, aware that such discipleship may attract opposition, resulting in suffering and sometimes ultimately martyrdom.

5. Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission, places of friendship, mutual accountability, and multivoiced worship. As we eat together, sharing bread and wine, we sustain hope as we seek God's kingdom together. We are committed to nurturing and developing such churches, in which young and old are valued, leadership is consultative, roles are related to gifts rather than gender, and baptism is for believers.

6. Spirituality and economics are interconnected. In an individualist and consumerist culture and in a world where economic injustice is rife, we are committed to finding ways of living simply, sharing generously, caring for creation, and working for justice.

7. Peace is at the heart of the gospel. As followers of Jesus in a divided and violent world, we are committed to finding nonviolent alternatives and to learning how to make peace between individuals, within and among churches, in society, and between nations. (Murray, *Naked Anabaptist* 45-46)

One of the critiques towards Murray in this otherwise very thorough and helpful book is his lack of inclusion for the role of the Holy Spirit. He simply does not give much attention to the ongoing work of the Spirit in the life of the church and of the believers.

He does not seem antagonistic to this space but does not make any provision for the third and co-equal member of the Trinity.

Murray's core convictions can bring light to the way forward for any attempts that Virginia Mennonite Conference would make towards church planting. They help to encapsulate the work and message of Anabaptism and the way in which new Mennonite church plants can make their way in the world. With these core convictions, future planters and denominational leaders can carve out a unique space that speaks to a postmodern demographic with no connection to the Mennonite church family. Murray points out that these convictions are not creeds, though the Mennonites have produced confessions that are created as theological distinctives (Murray, *Naked Anabaptist* 45).

Murray dives back into Anabaptist history and draws out the pearls and bits of wisdom from that theological history. He then shows ways that these ancient practices and patterns can be used going forward into a new future. He asserts strongly that Anabaptism at its heart is a missional movement (*Naked Anabaptist* 39). Murray states that discipleship has been one of the core attractions and challenges of the Anabaptist tradition (65).

Murray connects much of the practice of Mennonite ecclesiology with the theology. He draws out the connections of the practice of the Lord's Supper with the life of the faith community. Murray highlights the writing of Balthasar Hubmaier. Hubmaier was an early Anabaptist leader and one of the more educated of the first generation of those leaders. He wrote liturgies for the life of the church, which centered around the

sharing of the bread and the cup. Hubmaier included a pledge of love in the Eucharist liturgy.

An understanding of the Lord's Supper is key to ecclesiology. They reflect each other. For Anabaptists, the body of Christ, as witnessed to in the Lord's Supper, is best seen in communal relationships in the church. In contrast, with Martin Luther's model the emphasis of the Lord's Supper experience is worship's vertical relationship with God. Luther is concerned with the participant partaking from God. No family bonds are made with other worshipers. No pledge of love is given or sought.

The Anabaptist ethos is a natural context for sharing and consensus rule in church governance than the more reformed or Lutheran model. This grows out of the idea of the pledge of love and the idea of the Lord's Supper as a binding act. Through the act of engaging in the bread and cup, the community commits itself to each other, each member taking on responsibility.

This desire to prioritize discipleship is a consistent thread in the lives of Mennonites. According to Hans Kasdorf, Mennonite Brethren Missiologist, no other Christian movement between the apostolic and the modern mission period has articulated and demonstrated more clearly the meaning of discipling than have the Anabaptists (*Anabaptist Approach* 53). Kasdorf has written extensively on Anabaptist missiology and church planting history. He writes of distinct eras and movements in the church planting experience of early Anabaptists.

Kasdorf writes that the early Anabaptists set definable goals for their early missionary impulses, and that they followed a very orderly system:

The Anabaptists firmly believed that it was significant to observe carefully the order laid down by the Lord in the Great Commission for the sole purpose of making disciples: 1) there is the going into all the world; 2) this is followed by the preaching of the Gospel to every creature; 3) upon preaching there is a sense of anticipation that man will respond to the Gospel by believing; 4) then comes the act of baptizing those who respond by faith. Only they have the promise to be saved. 5) Incorporation into fellowship is the erection of a “true Christianity.” (*Anabaptist Approach* 52)

Furthermore, Kasdorf writes that early Anabaptists originally labored under what today might be referred to as the homogenous unit principle (*Anabaptist Approach* 54). They sent their missionaries to reach converts that would not be unlike themselves. The Anabaptist leaders sent the educated to reach the urban sophisticates and the laborers to reach the laborers. They generally focused as missionaries on people that were like themselves (54). While this practice is perhaps completely understandable, nonetheless it is interesting to see that this principle of reaching people with whom one has much in common has continued. This is in some ways a direct line to the thrust of this project.

Kasdorf in his writings enumerates missionary practices of the Anabaptists and divides them very clearly into several epochs. He discusses the “Spontaneous methods before August 1527” and after the pivotal Missionary Conference of Augsburg, often referred to as the Martyrs Synod, the “Strategic methods after August 1527” (*Anabaptist Approach* 58-59). Early on the Anabaptists were looser and less organized. Prior to

August of 1527, the Anabaptists followed along with four methods in their mission and evangelism and church planting work.

They relied on preaching to pilgrims as evangelists, much as the early apostolic church did, and thereby everyone got to play a role. Much like the early church, persecution drove the pilgrims out to other places where they could meet people and share the faith. Persecution drove the expansion of the faith (Kasdorf, *Anabaptist Approach* 55).

Kasdorf also lists house meetings as a common method before 1527. This was an attempt to convert whole households to faith. There are records of deeply emotional responses to Gospel presentation at these house meetings. New converts were often baptized and converted all in the same meeting (Kasdorf, *Anabaptist Approach* 56).

In the highly persecuted and dangerous world of the early Anabaptists, these followers of Jesus did not have the luxury of insisting on a highly trained clergy class or long drawn out leadership training programs. Vital leadership function was entrusted to new converts and lay people. Those who could read would be assigned to the roles of preaching and spiritual care. Everyone was expected to live the mission of the church, that is, to practice what they considered to be the Great Commission. They were all called to baptize and to make disciples (Kasdorf, *Anabaptist Approach* 56).

After the famous Martyr's Synod took place in Augsburg over 20-24 August 1527, the Anabaptist movement took a more deliberate approach to witness and evangelism. They became more systematic in the way that they sent out witnesses to new communities. The leaders put plans in place to cover the territories they were aware of to

reach the people groups of which they were aware. These new Anabaptists were convinced, because of horrific persecution, that they did not have much time left in this world and they wanted to be intentional about reaching out with the gospel and calling people to repentance in response (Kasdorf, *Anabaptist Approach* 59).

Much can be learned and applied from the early Anabaptist mission method. Many postures can be commended from the way that these Anabaptist evangelists reached out to their contemporary world. While the circumstances and contexts are different between the 1500s and the new millennium, principles apply. Kasdorf draws a few lessons from the early years of Anabaptists in mission. He points to the central importance of radical obedience to the call of Christ (*Anabaptist Approach* 68). This theme of radical obedience is a recurring one. It is a constant clarion call to the Anabaptist and Mennonite community members. This called-for obedience does not emanate from a servile or legalistic attitude, but from an attitude of freedom of the will that is in harmony with the will of God (68).

An important refrain for Anabaptist church planters and missionaries was that they were seeking to begin worshipping communities where the priesthood of all believers could be radically practiced. Luther, even though he had begun with a more egalitarian message, soon began to back away from this way of defining church (Snyder 3). Anabaptist reformers did begin to implement that more egalitarian praxis in the life of the faith community which allowed a larger role for women in the church planting and missionary endeavors.

Much debate has taken place about the role of women in early Anabaptist history. This point has seen more scholarship applied towards it in the last 50 years. Lois Barrett penned a chapter for a larger book on the role women in 1975, *Women in the Anabaptist Movement*, where she argued that men and women were on equal footing in the early Anabaptist movement. Barrett contends that as many as a third of all Anabaptist Martyrs were women (*Part I: Anabaptist Europe in the Sixteenth Century*). Other writers refuted this, such as Keith Sprunger in his essay *God's Powerful Army of the Weak*.

C. Arnold Snyder produced a comprehensive look into the subject in 1996 with his book *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers (Studies in Women and Religion)*. Snyder writes that both women and men were called to lives of ultimate faithfulness in a call to live their faith and be willing to be imprisoned and even martyred (Snyder 8). The Spirit, Snyder writes, called both men and women to leadership in the young Anabaptist churches and, through doing so, these same young churches practiced what for the day was a radical egalitarianism (8). This radical spiritual egalitarian praxis extended to the inclusion of both peasants and aristocrats (8).

Anabaptist women were not among the prominent leaders of record, but the Anabaptist movement, more so than many others, was a movement propelled through the works of the ordinary people, not simply the educated or wealthy elites (Schmidt, Reschly, and Zimmerman Umble 16). In this vein, leadership and other key roles opened for women like seldom before. Though women and men may have shared leadership roles, often women do not have comparable power and authority in religious movements (16).

Living witness has been a key theme in the very practically oriented life of the Mennonite church from the beginning. Kasdorf highlights this as an important element of the ancient Anabaptist witness in the 1520s that still has the power to convict and challenge. He says that as all believers have the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives they can indeed be living witnesses to give expression to their faith in God. As believers witnessed by telling, being, doing, and even dying for their faith, people outside the faith are convinced of the reality of the way of Jesus (*Anabaptist Approach* 69).

Mennonite Church Planting in America

As the Mennonite Church left the initial thrust of mission behind, varieties of planting efforts have been employed with a mixture of levels of sustainability and long-term success. Much church planting happened in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries due to what might be called the migratory approach to mission. This was mission work done as groups of Mennonites were fleeing persecution all over the world. This led to churches beginning as the result of roundups of any local Mennonites who happened to land near each other in the diaspora (Krabill, *Process*).

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, attempts were made to define the mission field. Usually the missiological target became the poor living in the “godless” cities. The targets could as well be foreign peoples who were not believed to have heard the message of Jesus because missionaries had not made it to their shores (Krabill, *Process*). John F. Funk, bishop of the Mennonite Church and an active leader in the church from the late 1800s to his death in 1930, was instrumental in church planting in the city (Gates). He pioneered much of the Mennonite Church urban outreach ideas of the time.

He encountered much push back against his efforts, even being told by another church leader that, “You cannot be a Mennonite and live in the city” (Krabill, *Process*). Support was given to church planters in this time, but the assumed main method of financial viability was of self-support through outside employment, a bivocational posture.

The Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church was active in church planting in the 1950s. In fact, they doubled the number of churches under their auspices during the decade (Krabill, *Process*). This was the result of the Mennonite Mission Board campaign to train every church to see itself as an outpost. This grass roots evangelism encouraged each church to engage in its own context to share the message of Jesus. While this method of gospel sharing may seem outside the typical Anabaptist living testimonial style, every church an outpost did bring renewed fervor to the denomination (Krabill, *Process*).

The 1950s also saw the selection and dispatching of church planters change in the Mennonite Church. College students began to be commissioned as church planters with the idea that they would form teams to develop churches in unreached areas within driving distance of the Mennonite Schools (Krabill, *Process*). The Y-Church program was particularly active at what was then called Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Young people from the school started church communities up and down the Shenandoah Valley. Many of these churches that they started with this effort continue to exist and thrive into the new millennium. The Y-Church program is still active at what is now Eastern Mennonite University.

In the 1930s to the 1970s, race relations were a dominant theme in American culture and the Mennonite Church was no different. Urban church planting became the norm during this time with many churches with predominantly African American congregations being started and led by white Mennonites. Great debate arose within the church as to how “people of color” or racial-ethnic groups within the church, who were for so long the objects of church planting efforts, can increasingly be empowered and equipped to become the active force behind new church planting initiatives (Krabill, *Process*)?

After the Lancaster Conference of the Mennonite Church experienced renewed energy around church planting and mission, the conference entered a strong period of focus on starting new church works in the 1950s to the 1980s. In fact, few district conferences worked as intentionally at church planting as Lancaster Conference did. (Krabill, *Process*). Conference leaders set specific goals to reach in terms of new churches and members. They articulated a theology of church planting that became the formative Mennonite church planting text, *Creating Communities of the Kingdom*, penned by later Executive Director of Mennonite Church USA Ervin R. Stutzman as well as church leader David W. Shenk. The conference even created a catechetical book based on the Mennonite Confession of Faith for the new converts. Lancaster Conference hosted training events such as the “School of the Apostles” and “World Missions Institute.” All this intentional focus realized results in increased numbers of members and congregations, including many immigrant and other minority demographic churches (*Process*).

Shenk and Stutzman define the nature and role of new communities of faith in a particularly Anabaptist way as, “The church is the new community which brings healing to the divisions of humankind” (138). They go on to say, “Nevertheless, the new community happens only as people respond in faith to Jesus Christ. The response to Christ becomes possible as the disciples of Jesus proclaim with clarity the truth of the gospel” (141).

The year 1985 saw the unveiling of a bold new strategy for the Mennonite Church around church planting (Krabill, *Process*). Vision 95 was a ten-year plan of renewal and growth that laid out a series of goals for the denomination, including:

1. Increased membership of existing congregations
2. A specific goal for church planting of 250 new church starts
3. Increased financial giving to the denomination and conferences. (Krabill, *Process*)

Much of the work done here was of increasing vitality of local missional engagement. Mennonite leaders wrote tremendously helpful books that aided every member in the Mennonite Church pew to reach out to their friends and neighbors to share the love of Jesus. One of these books, the influential work, *Friendship Evangelism* written by Arthur G. McPhee, laid out ways for Christians to simply, in the course of regular life, share their faith. The issue of this era centered on the balance between working towards revitalization in existing Mennonite congregations and the planning of new communities of faith (Krabill, *Process*). These questions between focusing on

church planting and putting energy towards existing, or legacy, churches continues to be a tricky endeavor.

The Abraham and Sarah Project of the General Conference Mennonite Church was an effort in the early 1990s to begin 50 new churches in a five-year period between 1992 and 1997. It was a successful effort, with 50 new works begun and of those 37 were predominantly among immigrant populations. Some reports were that it was hard to distinguish these churches as Mennonite Church, with their predominant style being more mainstream Evangelical (Krabill, *Process*).

The latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have witnessed a wide variety of church planting models with multiple church plant styles. Church plants have embraced many different postures from Mennonite intentional communities such as Reba Place in Evanston and Chicago, Illinois, the homeless support and substance abuse ministries of the Early Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia, the missional arts community of the exchange in Winchester, Virginia, and many more. Churches have grown with the Hmong people in North Carolina and the widely diverse church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania sponsored by Franconia Mennonite Conference. The question of this era might be if some church planting styles and forms are more reflective of Anabaptist Christian understandings of the church or is anything acceptable so long as it is justified by the Scriptures and meeting the felt needs of the people in the context where it is located (Krabill, *Process*). This project is an attempt to answer that question by beginning the work needed for creating a faithful way forward for Anabaptist Mennonite church planting in this time that might result in the formation

of shalom communities of the kingdom. Church planting will allow the Mennonite Church to grow and to share the faith with new people and new groups. When it comes to the history of Mennonites reaching beyond their comfort zone, there are questions about the effectiveness of the outreach in the past. “Some ways are effective. Some are not” (Schirmer 18).

Hindrances to Growth of New Mennonite Churches

As in all church movements, hindrances to growth of new Mennonite church plants exist. Both new and legacy churches may struggle with obstructions to growth.

The countercultural nature of Virginia Mennonite Conference churches in what was, at least until recently, a conservative leaning state plays a role in growth. Mennonite churches have taken a stance towards pacifism and against war; this separation from the Christendom model is too much for some people. They cannot fathom a church not endorsing entrance into the military or other acts of patriotism.

Common misperceptions of what and who are Mennonites are a hindrance as well. Many of the uniformed assume someone must be born into the Mennonite Church. The assumptions go further, including the belief that if a woman joins, she will be forced into a prayer covering.

A robust understanding of the challenges being presented when going into a church plant is vital. Only once a hindrance has been understood can it be addressed and even defeated. Church planting is enough of a struggle with the known challenges, to allow issues to go unaddressed.

Anabaptist Distinctives in Theology and Praxis

Living out one's faith in community is a strong focus in Anabaptist circles.

Palmer Becker writes in his book *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith*, "All views of salvation include confession and forgiveness. Anabaptist Christians emphasize the transformation that happens via confession, forgiveness, and new relationships. They believe that a healthy vertical relationship with God results in a transformed life that yields fruit. Such a life is best achieved through both honest repentance from sin and an obedient, Spirit-filled following of Jesus in daily life" (Becker, *Essentials* 73).

Becker goes further in his book to enumerate three centers as the core values of the Anabaptist faith expression. These three centers are not a completely new idea, having grown out of Mennonite leader Harold S. Bender's influential 1943 address, *The Anabaptist Vision*. Bender's American Society of Church History speech was published and quickly became a linchpin of Mennonite thought and self-identity. Becker summarized Bender's main point as asserting that, "Anabaptist believers see Christianity as discipleship, the church as a brotherhood, and Christian practice as an ethic of love and nonresistance (Becker, *Essentials* 11).

Bender clearly asserts that Anabaptism is a distinct movement of the reformation, and Bender states in his speech that, "the Anabaptists were concerned most of all about a true Christian life, that is, a life patterned after the teaching and example of Christ. The Reformers, they believed, were not insisting on repentance, regeneration, and Christian living in their preaching. The Reformation emphasis on faith was good but inadequate,

for without newness of life, they held, “faith is hypocritical” (Bender). He further explains the differences of the Anabaptist movement:

“As a second major element in the Anabaptist vision, a new concept of the church was created by the central principle of newness of life and applied Christianity. Voluntary church membership based upon true conversion and involving a commitment to holy living and discipleship was the essential heart of this concept. This vision stands in sharp contrast to the church concept of the reformers who retained the medieval idea of a mass church with membership of the entire population from birth to the grave compulsory by law and force.” (Bender)

Bender goes further in *The Anabaptist Vision* to say that, First and fundamental in the Anabaptist vision was the conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship. It was a concept, which meant the transformation of the entire way of life of the individual believer and of society so that it should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ. The Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity, which made regeneration, holiness, and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief, or of subjective “experience,” rather than one of the transformation of life. They demanded an outward expression of the inner experience. Repentance must be “evidenced” by newness of behavior. (Bender)

Becker created a three centers illustration to clarify his point about what makes Anabaptism “uniquely different” (Becker, *Essentials* 11). He describes these three sentences as the “sacred core values of Anabaptist Christians” (Becker, *Christian* 2).

These three core circles are:

1. Jesus is the center of our faith.
2. Community is the center of our lives.
3. Reconciliation is the center of our work. (Becker, *Christian* 2)

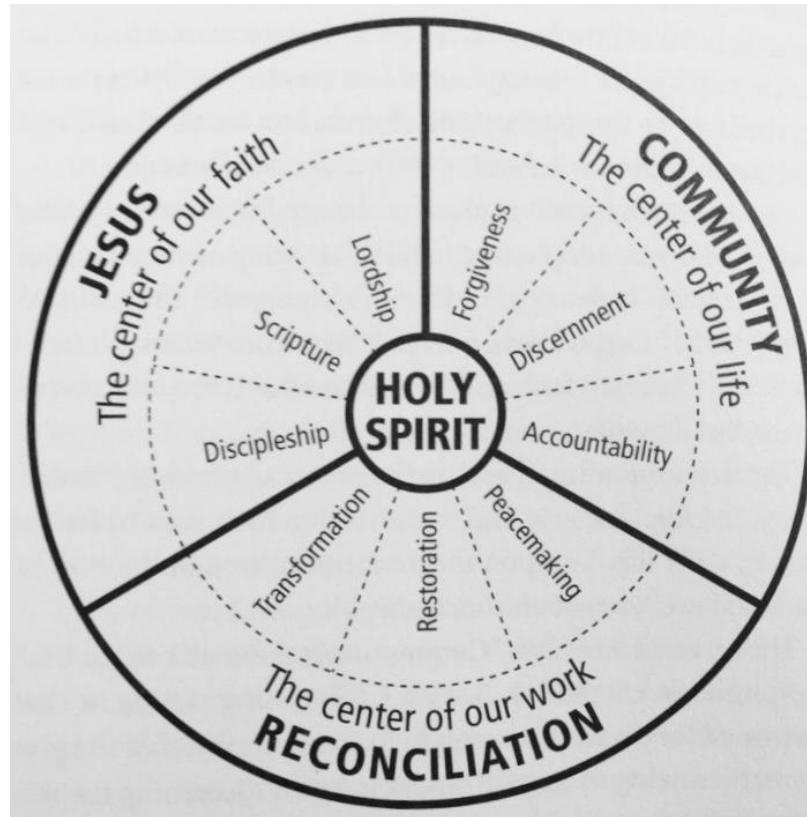


Figure 2.2. Becker’s three circles of Anabaptism.

(Becker, *Essentials* 12)

Becker further explains his three circles as:

Being a Christian from an Anabaptist perspective is a combination of believing in Jesus, belonging to community, and behaving in a reconciling way. Some things for which Anabaptists lived and died are now accepted and taken for granted by most Christians. Other practices and teachings may still seem challenging or perplexing. But more and more people are finding Anabaptist understandings of faith and practice to be very helpful as they seek to follow Jesus faithfully in today's world. (Becker, *Christian 3*)

Becker lists 10 signs of a unique Christian faith in his book, *Anabaptist Essentials*. He gives a brief history of the church and asserts that the Reformation wrought by Luther and Zwingli did not radically change the Christian church experience, but that the Anabaptists in 1525 radically changed church and civic order by loudly saying, "that the Church should be composed of those who make an adult confession of faith and who commit to following Jesus in daily life" (Becker, *Essentials*21).

Becker goes on:

These early Anabaptists broke completely with the concepts of Christendom held by both Catholic and Protestant leaders and institutions. They insisted church existed not only when the word was preached truthfully, and the sacraments were administered properly but also when its members lead revitalized lives of public obedience to Jesus Christ. For the Anabaptists, faith by itself was

insufficient for either salvation or community. Only those willing to repent of false loyalties and be obedient to Christ in daily life could be members. Love was the chief market of the church—a love that expressed itself in mutual care for each other, for those around them, and even for their enemies. (Becker, *Essentials* 21)

Finally, Becker ended his work with a checklist of questions for interested persons to ponder. Becker suggests that if the hearer agreed with his list, it marks the hearer as an Anabaptist. The list was as follows:

1. I see Christianity as discipleship and seek to follow Jesus in daily life.
2. I interpret the Scriptures from an ethical Christocentric point of view.
3. I have accepted Jesus Christ as both my Lord and Savior.
4. I believe forgiveness is needed for both salvation and community.
5. I discern God's will through Bible study and the giving and receiving of counsel.
6. I affirm that face-to-face groups are basic for accountability and a vital church.
7. I believe transformation is the result of God's work and my response to that work.
8. I seek to resolve conflicts through mediation and the Rule of Christ.
9. I reject all forms of violence and seek to overcome evil with good.

10. I have publicly confessed my faith in Jesus and am experiencing the Holy Spirit in my life and ministry. (Becker, *Essentials* 172-73)

Implications for Developing Anabaptist Faithful Means of Church Formation

That desire to share Christ has been a strong one in Anabaptist and Mennonite circles. This desire leads naturally to church planting. Church planters do well to harken back to these principles of evangelism and of living out the faith. Japanese Mennonite Church leader Takashi Yamada writes of the role evangelism plays in church planting. He highlights the roles of evangelism and social action, which he sees as conflicting with each other in society. They need not be. In fact, any perceived dichotomies between evangelism and social justice work are transcended by the work of church planting (199). He goes on to identify what he calls the three basic keys to Mennonite church planting and evangelism:

1. Establish Mennonite identity.
 2. Encourage as much participation of church members as possible.
 3. Permeate deeper into the world and enlarge contacts with people of the world.
- (199)

Yamada also points to the fact that if church planters are to pioneer new church works in the hoped for future, denominational structures must change. He very truthfully contends that Mennonite church structures must be more flexible and adaptable to facilitate church planting. He also goes on to caution that some of the changes may be painful and cause disruption, but the church must adapt to change (200).

Part of the changing reality that the Mennonite Church is responding to has led to the emergence in the last twenty years of the thrust of missional theology, though some Mennonite writers have adapted the terminology. In fact, Stanley W. Green and James R. Krabill edited a book in 2015, wherein they change the vocabulary away from using the term *missional*. They do this for a variety of reasons, most of which they enumerate at the very beginning of their book. They attempt to avoid what they fear might be becoming a buzzword. While affirming the intent and theology behind the verbiage, they worry that *missional* may be becoming a marketing buzzword that may soon feel as dated as other terms (13). They put the emphasis on being fully engaged in all the layers of life with God.

Wilbert R. Shenk writes in the first chapter of *Fully Engaged*, “*Why Missional and Mennonite Should Make Perfect Sense*” that the missional impulse is strong in the Mennonite Church core belief system (W. Shenk, *Why Missional* 20). It is a part of the history of the church at a very deep level. The missionary impulse is a marker for the Mennonites in unique ways. They recovered missionary zeal in the 1500s when everyone around seemed to be a part of the church, so no urge was felt for evangelism. The Anabaptists felt the urge. They wanted to call their neighbors and friends back to what they saw as the restored church. They recognized that “the Christendom concept of the church was at odds with the apostolic vision” (20). “The Anabaptist felt compelled to recover the apostolic understanding of the church” (20). This is an endeavor which continues within the Mennonite denomination.

The early Anabaptists wanted to call their world back to a radical and complete faith in God. They spoke strongly of renewal and restoration. Their wing of the Reformation was not a halfhearted work. This can be a strong cry in contemporary postmodern America. This call to whole life discipleship and commitment to the dual pillars of evangelism and social action can be a guiding principle for contemporary Mennonite church planters. Anabaptists in history and Mennonites in recent work saw a very real connection to the faith they professed and the social life they lived as all being changed into the image of Christ. John Howard Yoder in his book, *The Politics of Jesus*, writes on this idea of being like Jesus:

There is thus but one realm in which the concept of imitation holds—but there it holds in every strand of the New Testament literature and all the more strikingly by virtue of the absence of parallels in other realms: this is at the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross in its relation to enmity and power.

Servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absorbs hostility.

Thus—and only thus—are we bound by New Testament thought to

“be like Jesus.” (134)

Shenk warns though that the evangelistic fervor has waned in the five hundred years between the Reformation and the time of his writing. However, he does assert that the missionary impulse remains (25). There are many factors for this, not the least of which would be the intense persecution that Mennonites have experienced over the years.

He sees the Mennonite church as having their focus turned from outward to inward from the pressures they have faced (26). Shenk would say that this is a bad thing.

Mauricio Chenlo contributed a chapter as well to the *Fully Engaged* book. Chenlo, the denominational minister for church planting with Mennonite Mission Network, contributed a chapter specifically around the topic of church planting. While his comments could have been more grounded in the larger Anabaptist and Mennonite story, he does locate his comments in a bit of the history with implications for the future. Chenlo highlights the entrepreneurial nature of church planters and connects this with the history of Anabaptism (230). In history Anabaptist leaders came usually not from a highly educated or privileged demographic, but instead the push of Anabaptist expansion came from “farmers, carpenters, businesspeople, and men and women in many other types of vocation and professions who responded to the call to start something out of the blue, wherever God had placed them” (230). To many observers, this looks like the way of the future. The days of the fully funded Mennonite church planter who is able to focus full time and exclusively on beginning a new church work are over, if indeed this model ever really was the norm.

Chenlo sketches out some broad principles for choosing potential church planters and some of the support they might receive. Much of what he writes borrows from business or corporate imagery, including a comment about likening the assessment process to “quality control” (230). He lists the top three characteristics of a church planter as he sees them:

1. Visioning capacity

2. Intrinsic motivation
3. Ability to create ownership of ministry (231)

Going further, Chenlo looks at other important issues for the work of church planting. He discusses the importance of partnering with local congregations and conferences (231). This is an important step particularly in the Virginia Mennonite Conference structure that values relational accountability and relational connection. “Partnering is intrinsic to God’s Trinitarian nature and the church as a diverse body of believers,” he writes (231).

Sustainability in a church plant is an important question and Chenlo does address it as well in his chapter. He identifies four main components that work towards building sustainability in a new work. These elements are as follows:

1. Coaching
2. Long-term planning and development
3. Bonding with a local network of missional peace churches
4. Accountability structures (232-34)

Coaching is the intentional development of a relationship with a seasoned pastor. This allows for questions and encouragement around church efforts which might can affect personal issues, conflict etc. Chenlo suggests that church planting coaching relationships should develop organically, if at all possible (232).

Chenlo recognizes the honest reality that many church planters struggle with long-term planning. Often paired with the entrepreneurial nature of church work is a belief on the part of the church planter that a system can simply be improvised as the

process moves forward. This can cause an uneven effort, as approaches are not carried through or abandoned in short order. He writes about project management and developing strategic management skills (233). Chenlo points to an awareness of church planter training in areas of planning for the new church work.

The third component of connection to a network is an important one. Church planting can be very lonely work and relationships with people are vital to the overall health of the church planter and the church plant itself. Chenlo writes about the importance of the network connected to Anabaptist sensibility, with an emphasis on the vision of peace and justice as central values of their practice (233). Relationships with pastors and planters who share similar values and focus is vitally important. These connections to a larger network will be incredibly important as the Virginia Mennonite Conference moves forward into new church planting efforts.

The fourth component of accountability structures is an important one as well. When planting a new church work in a solo planting assignment, these accountability relationships can be assigned from the conference. The church planter may be allowed to develop his or her own accountability structures, either way a safe space for sharing can be lifesaving. Whether they originate from the church plant or are imposed from outside leadership structures, it is important that the accountability arrangement be open and honest and safe. A place where church planters can confess and share deep personal wounds without worry of repercussion can be the difference between a thriving local church work that reproduces itself to reach many new people groups or another negative story of a burned-out former planter. Chenlo helpfully goes on to expand the idea of

accountability beyond personal issues to cover areas such as financial stewardship, relational integrity, financial training, etc. (235).

Chenlo then closes his chapter with a discussion on the value of multiplication. This is a new area of emphasis in the Mennonite Church. It connects with the idea that Christians are a sent people. Missionaries are sent by God and in turn free others to be sent (235).

The editors of the book *Fully Engaged* included a section on reaching out to new demographics. Though light on principles and details, they do include stories of the experiences of other churches as they work to expand the message of Jesus beyond traditional Mennonite demographics. These stories can be an encouragement and example to the Virginia Mennonite Conference as the conference seeks to grow. While not extrapolating principles, these five chapters do give hope to the reader and to the church planter wanting to reach out past traditional demographics to help connect with new groups of people.

The twentieth issue of the Mennonite Mission Network series of short books, *Missio Dei*, deals with the idea of hearing from others with the title, *New Anabaptist Voices*. The book highlights stories of men and women from outside the Anabaptist tribe who now find themselves making a spiritual home in Mennonite circles. It includes both inspiring stories and helpful principles that can be used going forward for other conferences including the Virginia Mennonite Conference and churches that wish to widen the Mennonite tent (Krabill and Stutzman).

There is much to commend in the *New Anabaptist Voices*. There is a brief discussion of connecting with nontraditional demographics. Jeff Wright, Mennonite Pastor and Pacific Southwest Mennonite Conference Minister, writes in the Forward about how Mennonites have traditionally stayed in their “faith-based fortress from the world” (4). He goes on to ask some vital questions for Mennonite church planting, including: “Does being Anabaptist require of us a strong boundary of similar practices, similar institutions, and similar safeguards?” (4).

Church planting gives the church a natural opportunity to discuss the intersection of ecclesiology and mission (Murray, *Church Planting* 53). The church community has the privilege to come together in the moment of the planting process to discuss what it means to be the church and how they wish to conduct themselves going forward. Given a chance, new church works can be a mini-reformation to more fully listen to the voice of God as the community of God’s people. This process allows the church to be a missional force reaching out to new people with the love of Christ. Conversely, “church plants that represent no more than redistribution of church members in two different premises pose few missiological questions” (Murray, *Church Planting* 53).

One such newly incorporated Mennonite is a church planter in Orange County, California. Tommy Airey was not raised in the Mennonite Church. He discovered Anabaptists while a student at Fuller Theological Seminary. His is a chapter in *New Anabaptist Voices* consisting of lists. Airey lists the Four Key Factors that pulled him towards Anabaptism. He lists the importance of Anabaptism as well in today’s culture (9-12). Offering a stirring defense of the importance of holding to Anabaptist distinctives

and praxis, he does not propose much in the way of concrete recommendations for including others from outside the tradition.

Mennonites hold community as a high value. For outsiders to enter into the Mennonite circles can be challenging. With a high value on community, it can be difficult for others to break into that sense of closeness. Everything is done in community, from service trips to theological interpretation. Mennonites live into their “calling by living together with other believers who are also pursuing God’s purposes. We join the church of Jesus Christ and stay with it through thick and thin, pouring out our lives with our brothers and sisters in Christ for the love of God and the hope of salvation” (Mast 17).

The communal hermeneutic model is an appropriate one particularly in Anabaptist settings. Not only would it be currently fitting, but also historically it is the one embraced by those who set out to reform their church. Early reformers set about their work of rediscovering the way of God against a backdrop of rigid biblical interpretation of the Catholic Church. The prevailing hermeneutic winds tended to read the Bible in ways that reinforced the status quo and those powers that ruled that status. In this light one of the main tenets of Anabaptist hermeneutics was that people were free to read the Scriptures for themselves. A follower of Christ did not need a priest, bishop, or pope to proclaim what Jesus said and meant, when that same Christian could go to the words of the Savior personally.

The genius of documents such as the Schleitheim Confession of 1527 was that the people of the community of faith came together and argued and prayed and sought the leadership of the Holy Spirit to answer the question of how then they should live. Though

penned by early Anabaptist leader Michael Sattler, these were the communal conclusions of a group that had gathered to discern God's will for their time and place. This community sought to be faithful to God and came together to seek an interpretation of Scripture that would be their model for living. What they ended up with was a far cry from prevailing theological presuppositions of the day.

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1. Select core-team members for their complimentary gifts as opposed to simply recruiting friends.

- Friends are often either too much like the planter, OR

- They are naturally servants but not capable leaders.

2. Church-planting is partnering with the Spirit to begin a church (and not simply an outreach).

- Churches need a strong supply of mature Christ-followers, who in turn, can support all the complexities of people with messy lives.

- Outreach ministries, simply focus on outreach.

3. Specifically targeting a particular generation can create a very warped church.

-All generations have something to offer and have plenty of blind-spots, but you may need to target a mindset.

4. New churches that the Spirit uses are skilled at doing something (teaching, community, social justice, etc.) instead of being a lesser version of generic churches.

-New people will put up with lots of mediocrity if there is something that is very strong.

5. Ministry books are almost worthless, almost, all ministry is local.

-Unless you have the same personality, background, gifts, and culture as the writer, it's rarely helpful to follow their suggestions.

6. Passion for a ministry model can subtly hold a new project back.

-Many planters get hung up on an interesting model more than effectiveness.

7. The Spirit usually works through our unique gifts—we cannot simply emulate our favorite writers, speakers, and mentors.

-Many planters waste valuable time trying to be who God did not make them to be.

-Trusting God involves trusting the way He put us together.

8. College-educated and professional persons want and need a pastor who is a professional.

-It's not always helpful to be just a Christ-following ordinary person, many are looking for someone with expertise.

9. Modern missionaries offer a very different narrative than the average American holds to; however, they also understand the worldview of those they are reaching with a large helping of empathy.

-If people are interested in church, it is because they are looking for something different.

-But, they need to know, that you get them and where they are coming from.

10. Effective church-planters are passionate followers of Jesus, but they do not consume Christian media.

-You understand people who enjoy the same forms of media that you do.

11. Wise leaders help unbelievers get involved serving as soon as possible- and don't do it all.

-Most contemporary people "catch" faith slowly, that happens through involvement.

12. Wise church-planters (who come from messy backgrounds) would do well to see a counselor or therapist proactively.

-The stresses of church-planting: slow results, little money, working long hours, etc. bring out all the planter's personal issues. (Ross)

Research Design Literature

The research design for this project included individual interviews, as well as research into Virginia Mennonite Conference history and the history of the larger Mennonite Church USA. This was done to gain as much insight as possible and to learn from the practical lived experience of pastors. Insight from the decision-makers was sought as well in order to see from their higher vantage point. In keeping with the practice of interviewing, as much space as possible was made for open-ended conversation. “Open-ended questions let the interviewee pursue any direction and use any words to express what they want to say” (Sensing Loc. 2371).

Some of these pastors have begun works in areas and among people with Mennonite Church connections, including a church that began as an offshoot of a large Mennonite Youth Fellowship group that wanted to put into practice ideas for evangelism and discipleship that they felt could not be accomplished in their legacy congregation.

The individual interviews were conducted with a wide range of persons, both within and outside the Virginia Mennonite Conference leadership structure. This was an attempt to gain perspectives from as many different contexts as possible. Listening to the hearts of Virginia Mennonite Conference leaders as they struggle to balance all the demands on their organizational time and resources was helpful.

Interviews are a time-honored method of researching experience. “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make out of that experience” (Seidman 9).

Summary of Literature

Chapter 2 of this project was an attempt to survey the landscape of the literature around Mennonite Church planting. The specific focus was on how this literature related to planting new churches in nontraditional demographics. The goal of the work is to be able to begin the effort towards putting together a sustainable model for church planting that is faithful to the Anabaptist tradition from which the Mennonite Church springs.

Concerned with the state of the church of his age, Menno Simons was committed to the process of restoring the church and crafting new faith communities and became a leader of the early Anabaptists (Simons Loc. 2420, 10344, etc.). His words and actions can still guide today. The Anabaptist tradition carries a unique ethos and soteriological outlook. This distinctive theology should be reflected in the ways that new Anabaptist churches are planted. Virginia Mennonite Conference church planting efforts should honor that ethos while carrying it forward. Many times, Anabaptist church plants simply borrow from other traditions. In doing so questions arise of connectedness to the Anabaptist distinctives and the impact is of a church that reflects more of the prevailing Evangelical culture.

Anabaptist history is one of challenge to the prevailing church culture and more recently of being the quiet in the land and ministering from the margins. In the original thrust of the movement, Anabaptists were a hunted people. They were considered agitators and heretics and a general threat to the larger community. Early adopters to the Anabaptist faith expression were hunted and martyred in very graphic ways.

Modern Anabaptist expressions include Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren, among others. Traditionally, Mennonites have been predominately of Dutch, Russian, or Swiss German heritage. These traditional ethnicities are rapidly changing.

Mennonite Church USA has started churches over the years, as has Virginia Mennonite Conference. The purpose of this study was to look at Mennonite and Anabaptist history and to ask questions of Anabaptist-minded church planters in order to provide a foundation to plan for church planting movements in the future for the Virginia Mennonite Conference in a new era with new demographics. Ultimately, this study can be a snapshot of where the current planting efforts are and can be to help Mennonites think together of how to successfully plant new churches in the future. This project is an attempt to stay faithful to Anabaptist theological roots as lived in the Mennonite context, and use those heritage roots to assess the current realities of church planting in the Mennonite Church setting, and then to begin the process of dialoguing about the future of church planting for the Virginia Mennonite Conference. The present needs to honor the past, to live faithfully in the future. The past is best honored not by simply rote pattern repetition or quoting those who have come before. The present church stays faithful to the past by incorporating principles and praxis and wrestling with how to carry those findings into the future. We do best by doing what others did to be faithful followers of Christ in their time and place. Each generation must take up the journey for themselves.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter 3 lays the groundwork for the width and depth of this project and serves to put stakes in the ground for the work that has been done. Here the scope is defined and the research methods laid out.

This chapter addresses the behind-the-scenes work of data gathering that was done in pursuit of the stated dissertation goal of beginning to form a way forward for new Virginia Mennonite Conference church planting work. The chapter covers the history consulted and the Mennonite church leaders interviewed, along with the MCUSA and Virginia Mennonite Conference church planting practitioners who lent insight and thoughts to the project. It also addresses the process of information gathering that was done and gives an overview of the scope of the project. The information procured by these research methods is then addressed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Anabaptists and Mennonites have their own theological and ecclesiological history to draw on as well as many capable and dynamic practitioners in the field doing church planting work. The purpose of the research done was to critically evaluate the history of what has been done in pursuit of Mennonite church planting in the United States of America and to begin a plan for moving forward in a sustainable way for the Virginia Conference as it looks at future works of church planting.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

Mennonite Church USA is one of the more commonly known modern expressions of Anabaptism in the United States of America. In comparison with other, better-known, denominations, it is quite small. With roughly 79,000 members overall, Mennonite Church USA as of January 2017 has roughly eighty-nine new church works nationwide (*Who We Are - Mennonite Church USA*). The specific context used for this study is the Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC). VMC is a member of MCUSA and covers the state of Virginia, as the name would imply, as well as having member congregations in West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia. With nearly seventy congregations (Conference), VMC covers an increasingly populated area. Discussions have been held about how and when, and indeed even if, the Conference should engage in church planting activities.

This Research Project is an attempt to glean understandings from both the history and modern practice of the Virginia Mennonite Conference and Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA) and begin a conversation around crafting a historically faithful and currently applicable model for the beginning of new church works that honor the Anabaptist ethos and theological particularities. While Virginia Mennonite Conference may well choose to borrow models and applications from other faith traditions, these ideas and practices should be done critically. Too often Mennonite have chased after what the bigger denominations are doing and have lost the specifics and uniqueness of the Anabaptist heritage and way of knowing.

This project should in no way be considered a rejection of work done currently or historically or to negate the hard work done by so many passionate and committed people. This is rather an attempt to learn from these people and to help them reach their goal of calling committed disciples of the way of Jesus. This project will not answer all the questions but can serve as a dialogue point for future work. The inclusion of best practices from outside church planting movements can extend the impact of this project.

Research Questions

RQ #1. How has the Mennonite Church historically approached church planting and what were the convictions and patterns for church planting in the historic Anabaptist/Mennonite Church?

To answer this question around historic practices of the traditionally Anabaptist church in general and in what is now known as Mennonite Church USA specifically, I engaged in historical research. Taking a two-pronged approach, I gleaned information both through historically-oriented texts and time spent with Mennonite historians and leaders. I attempted to learn what has been done and the theological and missional impulses that informed the work. Mennonite history has much to say about the way that church planting is done, as it has been a movement that from the beginning has formed communities of faith to encourage and strengthen the followers of the Anabaptist way.

RQ #2. What are current convictions and patterns connected with new church planting efforts outside of the Mennonite tradition that might inform the Mennonite practice?

To address this Research Question, I looked at traditions outside of historic Anabaptism that might have practices and programs that are sympathetic and complimentary to the Anabaptist and Mennonite ethos. These included the embodied and low to the ground ideas of some of the strains of the Celtic Christian mission system. I also looked at contemporary ideas around the missional movement, of which much has been written in recent years. I also did research around the ideas of certain new church work systems that emphasize the discipleship element of church planting. There is much in these contemporary models and focuses of church planting that can and should translate over into the Anabaptist and Mennonite church planting thrusts.

RQ #3. What are the principles from these best practices from both inside and outside the Mennonite experience that can be applied to the work of beginning new church works in the Virginia Mennonite Context?

This third research question begins the work of synthesizing the beginnings of a church planting philosophy that is faithful to Mennonite heritage and tradition. This is definitely not the only way to do church planting in Mennonite and Anabaptist circles, but it is indeed an attempt at one way. Many variances and directions could be chosen. This synthesis is at the principle level and avoids rigidly prescriptive analysis. Undeniably, contextualization is extremely important. That is one of the core principles to be advocated here. The church planter and the larger church agency should be free to learn from a wide variety of sources and apply the principles learned in a way that connects with the specific context the church planters find themselves in. Distilling the

principles that are learned from historical analysis and contemporary exegesis and future planning can help to birth meaningful Anabaptist church plants and ministry efforts.

Ministry Context

This research project is born from researcher experience. I am a church planter, with experience in a variety of planting contexts. I have worked both within denominational structures and independently on a nondenominational basis. I have planted four churches at this point, including the current one. I am working this time under the auspices of the Virginia Mennonite Conference, with some relational support from Virginia Mennonite Missions.

While not raised in the Mennonite church specifically, my family roots are in the Conservative Mennonite movement. Having joined my first Mennonite church community in 1986 in Broadway, Virginia, I have been in and out of MCUSA circles since that time. While finishing my Master of Divinity coursework at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, I was approached about church planting again and felt comfortable enough to embrace the Virginia Mennonite Conference as my theological and ecclesiological home.

I am passionate about Anabaptist theology and praxis, coming to this project with a convert's zeal for the traditions and praxis and theological writings of the movement. I believe that there is much in Anabaptist history that can speak to our postmodern world. Interest in Anabaptism, wherein Christians are looking to the Mennonites and Anabaptists for models of church praxis, is growing. This research project can contribute in a small way to this larger conversation. Anabaptist practitioners owe it both to themselves and the larger community to share out of this tradition.

Mennonites, traditionally, are a communal denomination that places a high value on consensus and relational connection with the congregational body. Having a reputation for being a separatist community, it has often not been thought of as highly engaged in the outside world. Mennonites are quite active though in pursuit of justice and peace in the world. Through the work of the Mennonite Central Committee and other boards, Mennonites have worked hard to speak into the ways of the world. Service and action are high values in Mennonite experience. Much emphasis is placed on doing the Christian life and living a good ethic of service.

Participants

Criteria for Selection

This study was a pre-intervention model designed to bring together both theology and practice. It sought to begin the process of crafting a way forward for theologically Anabaptist faithful church planting in the Virginia Conference of Mennonite Church USA. In support of that goal, I selected participants based on very simple criteria. As wide a net as possible was cast to include as many church planters as possible. I consulted active and non-active church planters from across differing eras. While concentrating mainly on Mennonite-related church planters, I conducted interviews with planters outside the Mennonite specific tradition as well. Efforts were made to include church planters from varying demographic groups, including women and ethnic minorities. Though the majority of the planters interviewed were connected to the Mennonite Church, not all planters were officially Mennonite Church USA planters and not all planters were Virginia Mennonite Conference connected planters.

Interviewees were found through the Mennonite Church USA listing of church plants as well as through relational connections with church planters. Virginia Mennonite Conference leaders referred several planters. All subjects approached for the research project agreed to be interviewed.

I invited a variety of Mennonite Church leaders for conversation in addition to the church planters interviewed; this included both denominational leaders and leaders from the Virginia Mennonite Conference. I had conversations with leaders specifically tasked with encouraging church planting and with those who had more general leadership responsibilities. These conversations were designed to gain a deeper insight into the general Mennonite Church approach to beginning new church works. Understandings of how practices are patterned within the Virginia Mennonite Conference and the larger MCUSA were also sought.

Description of Participants

I sought out church planters and leaders of various demographic groups as interview subjects for this project. It was important to the research project design that various viewpoints be represented. Conversations were held with Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic church planters, both male and female. Most of the church planters approached have earned at least a Master of Divinity degree. Ages of participants ranged from early 20s to 60s.

Ethical Considerations

I implemented protocols to protect the anonymity of the participants in this research study. Each church planter and leader interviewed was assigned a number in

order of interview. All responses and information recorded were recorded under the assigned number. This was done so that participants could freely express themselves during the interviews conducted. Several church planters expressed concerns about their overseers hearing words of critique and connecting the words back to the planter.

Each research project participant was made aware of the research goal as well as the data collecting process; they were informed that the information gained from the research is to be used in the final dissertation. I gave the participants a consent form to read and sign, and I informed them of their right to back out of the study or end the interview at any time if they so chose.

The text of the Consent Form gave my contact name as the DMin student conducting the study and the Research Project name and objective. The Consent Form is included at the end of this dissertation under Appendix B.

Instrumentation

A researcher-designed survey form for individual semi-formal interviews was used as instrumentation on this project. This semi-structured interview protocol connected to Mennonite theology and perspectives on practice includes fifteen open-ended questions. The open-ended questions “establish the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants” (Seidman 69), while the preset questions and order work to make sure that needed information for the study would be uncovered (Sensing 107).

Reliability and Validity of Project Design

Reliability refers to “consistency in the research process” (Wiersma and Jurs 215). To establish reliability and validity, consistency in questioning was enforced. The same questions were asked of each interviewee. As well, I gave each interviewee an open discussion time to cover whatever the interviewee might have felt was being left out. This was for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was so that the interviewee could feel heard and I could ensure that there was adequate space given to address any themes that needed to be covered.

To ensure alignment with the stated Research Questions that this project began with, the interviews touched on the topics presented. To ensure consistency in the actual interviews themselves, I conducted all the interviews personally and made the same communication methods available to all respondents. Additionally, I gave each interviewee the same set of instructions at the outset and no one was given any more explanation than anyone else. To get at the ideas of Mennonite distinctives, I did not define the distinctives and asked the interviewee to explain what these distinctives might be. This helped me gain a sense of the interviewee’s perception of indeed whether the Anabaptist faith expression contains any distinctives.

As background and historical study, I researched each of the topic areas. Finally, interviews with the current church practitioners yielded stories of their experiences. Their stories were valid and worthy of being heard. Interviews and personal perspectives offered a valuable insight into the way things are done within a church plant. Interviews were used here as a tool of understanding.

Data Collection

I designed this research study and project to glean wisdom and insight about Anabaptist Mennonite church planting both from historical records and more current practitioners. These understandings then were designed to be used to form a historically and biblically faithful system for the Virginia Mennonite Conference church planting efforts going forward. This project was not designed to craft a fully-formed and detailed model. Further, I make no claims that this could conceivably be the only way forward or the only Anabaptist faithful model to exist. This research project is to be a conversation partner with other efforts of missional engagement and church planting for the Mennonite Church.

I designed this project as a pre-intervention, mixed-method study relying heavily on unstructured interviews and historical research. The use of unstructured interviews, here with church planters, was designed for open-ended questions in a conversational setting and more of a flexible exploratory approach to the interviews (Sensing 2692). The interviews were an attempt to capture the true lived experience of church planters. “In some research situations the in-depth interview, as the primary and perhaps singular method of investigation, is most appropriate” (6).

I interviewed church planting practitioners, because “every word that people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness” (Vygotsky 237). Simply listening to the stories of church planters is key for learning.

Themes were gleaned out of these interviews. I asked questions around how the church planter experienced their church planting efforts. Additionally, for those with

Anabaptist-related denominational affiliations, i.e. Mennonite Church USA, The Brethren Church, etc., questions were posed about how deeply the planter worked to reflect the Anabaptist theological distinctives and if they did indeed at all specifically desired to develop a church plant that reflected Anabaptist theological expression.

The informal interviews conducted were loosely structured, but certain areas of questioning were common throughout the discussions. Awareness of Anabaptist heritage and identity on behalf of the church planter were probed. I asked questions about whether the Anabaptist theological and ecclesiological heritage and distinctives were positive or negative factors. For those outside the Anabaptist traditions, questions were asked around their awareness of Anabaptism and their experiences in their church planting efforts.

Common questions for the interviews centered on the idea of how Mennonite theology was expressed in the new church formation. Questions included discussions around topics, including: 1) Communal importance, 2) Jesus as model, importance of daily being a follower of Jesus, 3) Christocentric approach to theology and biblical interpretation, 4) The countercultural narrative and active separatism from Christendom, and 5) Commitment to active and intentional discipleship.

Additionally, on a very pragmatic level, this was an opportunity to survey church planters as to their experience of church planting on a support and connection level. I explored with the church planters how connected with and supported by their larger institutional structures and overseers they felt. Questions were sculpted around what they would have liked to receive and the positives of what they had received.

Before the informal interviews with church planting practitioners, I consulted historic works and knowledgeable persons. This was to serve as mooring points for the comments of the practitioners. In trying to locate current church planting efforts of Anabaptist expressions in the theological distinctives, it is important to know the past and to be faithful to that past. This does not require repetition, but does allow for tributes to the shared experience. These historical research and consultations served to give life and context for the idea of an Anabaptist model of church planting.

The procedure for information collection in this project was indeed simple and straightforward. Mixed methods of both research and informal interviews allowed for understanding and future planning. As many interviews were done as could be performed in the time given for the project in order to hear from as many voices as possible. This allowed the church planting community to speak and to be heard.

Data Analysis

In doing historical research into Mennonite history and approaches to church planting, I paid close attention to the ways in which church planting was done and the models of church they attempted to begin. Patterns in practice did begin to emerge.

The semi-structured interview protocol provided qualitative data for this project. While no transcription of the interviews themselves was created, notes of themes and statements were taken. In listening to the interviews, I highlighted themes and common refrains. These themes were then grouped into related topics. Special attention was paid to patterns that emerged from topics and responses that came up repeatedly in interviews.

These patterns were then developed out to look for conversation points to meet the research questions set forth in this project.

Additionally, some simple mind mapping techniques for rapid qualitative data analysis were used. Out of the interviews, phrases and expressions emerged that connected with other interviewee's responses. In asking the same questions of each interview consistency of response and feedback could be identified. The open-ended time at the end of the interview allowed for more thorough discussion and insight.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter of the dissertation is a chance to examine the evidence found in the research and one-on-one interviews with church planters. The information is grouped then in support of the three research questions presented. Major findings from the research are enumerated and addressed. These findings will then be discussed further in Chapter 5.

This chapter also gives more insight into who was interviewed, along with feedback from the interviews. The information gleaned here then, including that of best practices, gives a handle of work to be done for Virginia Mennonite Conference in its church planting efforts.

Participants

For this project 25 individuals were interviewed between August 2017 and January 2018. Interviews were conducted one-on-one, with the interviewee choosing the manner of interview. Methods of interviewing included FaceTime®, Skype, face-to-face conversation, and phone calls. Each interviewee was asked the same series of questions, with open-ended discussion included as well. With each interview, an option was given after the formal questions for the interviewee to bring up other issues and observations. This open discussion time was rich ground for learning.

Of the twenty-five individuals I spoke with for this project, twenty had direct church planting experience. The remaining five were Mennonite Church leaders with

various responsibilities around church governance and church planting. All were between 25 and 70 years of age, with the majority in their 30s and 40s. Most of the interviewees were married and held college degrees, with some Master's Degrees and higher. The demographic ethnic majority was Caucasian, with the next highest group being of Hispanic heritage. The majority of those interviewed were males, with a statistically significant number of women represented. Interviewees were found through personal relationship with me, recommendations from denominational leaders, and referrals from church planters themselves.

Of the twenty planters I spoke with for this project, all had experience in the Anabaptist tradition, though not all were planting directly under Mennonite Church USA auspices. One planter interviewed had Anabaptist pastoral experience and earned a Master of Divinity degree from a Mennonite seminary, though then this planter chose to leave MCUSA to begin the church planting work. This planter expressed a belief that the denomination was no longer a good fit for the planter's theology.

The remaining 19 planters interviewed planted with varying levels of connection to either the denominational structures of MCUSA, a member conference of the denomination, or a Mennonite mission board. I felt it was important to gain understanding from a cross section of church planters doing work in a variety of settings across the North American context of MCUSA. Church planters represented a variety of conferences including Virginia Mennonite Conference, Central Plains Conference, and Illinois Conference. Several planters interviewed had connections to a Mennonite mission board but existed outside of formal conference or MCUSA bounds.

Another important demographic component was length of time involved in church. The interview subjects for this dissertation spanned a complete spectrum. One interviewee was very early in the church planting process, not yet having relocated to the city where the new church was to be located. At the other end of the spectrum, one interviewee planted a church roughly thirty years ago and is still connected to that church. The majority fell into the middle of this continuum. I felt it helpful to the research process to have a pool of interviewees with a diversity of lengths of experience to bring as wide a mixture of perspectives as possible.

The interviewees represented a variety of different models of church planting, with some working from a small group Bible Study design, and others focused on missional communities, and some on large Sunday gatherings. Included in these methods was the church mentioned earlier that began as the offshoot of youth fellowship that desired to put into practice the concepts discovered and debated in Bible study. All church planters with public worship gatherings showed signs of ongoing viability.

Research was done as well into past Mennonite belief and praxis via interviews and historical readings. This was done mainly to connect with the past church planting activity of the Mennonite Church. I also read on Anabaptist approaches to mission.

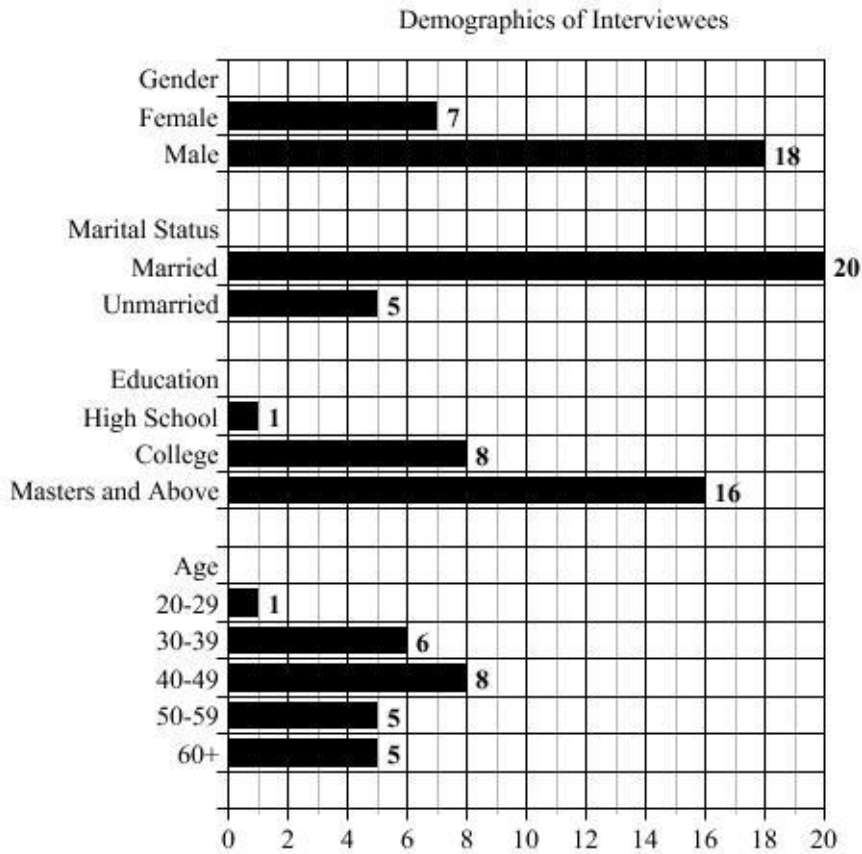


Figure 4.1. Demographics of interviewees (N=25).

Research Question #1: Description of Evidence

How has the Mennonite Church historically approached church planting and what were the convictions and patterns for church planting in the historic Anabaptist/Mennonite Church?

I addressed this first research question mainly through historical readings and research. Additionally, I read on current Anabaptist and Mennonite theologies of mission. Interviews with church planters and denominational leaders brought insights to bear as well.

The early Anabaptist movement was a church planting movement. Persecuted Anabaptists went from town to town beginning new worshiping communities. These new congregations might meet in homes or in caves, including the famous cave Tauferhohle (Daniel 90). Church planting, though, was a necessity for the early adherents to this way of following Jesus (Dyck Loc 716).

Paul Toews wrote of the Mennonite experience in America and wrote specifically of church planting in this context. He writes,

For sixteenth-century Anabaptists the impulse to plant new congregations in villages and towns had been central. However, intense persecution and consequent social withdrawal had quickly subverted that drive. For centuries Mennonites and Amish found it difficult to break out of cultural barriers that developed from that withdrawal. Into the late twentieth century some Mennonites were still struggling to find the cultural and theological posture that would let them plant new congregations outside of traditional Mennonite population pockets. (Toews 227)

Harold S. Bender's *Anabaptist Vision* still resonates today with Mennonites. Several of the planters interviewed indicated that though they had not grown up in the

Mennonite Church, they came to Anabaptism due to finding appeal in Mennonite ecclesiology. Interviewee #8 specifically mentioned Bender's *Anabaptist Vision* and said; "I found a lot of hope in the Anabaptist Vision for a different kind of church with a different focus than the denomination I grew up in."

Palmer Becker's writings on Anabaptist essentials were listed as influential in many of the interviews conducted with planters and mentioned by every one of the denominational leaders spoken to as a high value. Becker's contention that Anabaptism is "uniquely different" was echoed in many of the interviews conducted for this project, both with planters and denominational leaders (*Anabaptist Essentials* 11). He calls his three centers illustration the "sacred core values of Anabaptist Christians" (*Anabaptist Christian* 2). They are:

1. Jesus is the center of our faith.
2. Community is the center of our lives.
3. Reconciliation is the center of our work. (*Anabaptist Christian* 2)

Every interviewee and each resource articulated Anabaptist distinctives with subtle differences, but all pointed to certain common threads. The role of the community as expressed in the Mennonite Church was often mentioned. Interviewee #11 said, "The ecclesiological focus on community appealed to me. The emphasis on community in the Mennonite church and the equalitarian nature of that community seemed to me to be a lost expression of the New Testament church. To plant that and to plant into that was a wonderful ideal."

Interviewee #9 stated, “The peace aspect was my entry into the Mennonite Church. The ecclesiology is what made me stay.” Interviewee #9 went on to add, “My attachment to Anabaptism is that this is the way the church is supposed to be.” Interviewee #9 mentioned also, “The Mennonite ideal of nonconformity and nonresistance was a huge distinctive to me. In Anabaptism, it is emphasized that Christ calls us out to be distinct on behalf of the world; we are to be different. Nonconformity and nonresistance grow out of Mennonite two kingdom theology.”

Interviewee #10 believed that, “We need to be planting Mennonite churches as a way of showing a different way of doing and being church.”

John Howard Yoder, an influential thinker both inside and outside of Mennonite circles, in a book of his collected lectures, *Theology of Mission*, advocates for the idea of migration evangelism (237-39). Yoder develops the idea at length of migration evangelism; he describes early church growth as, “the growth of the whole church going places, as slaves, merchants, or economic refugees. They went to places where they could or were forced to make a living and then expressed their Christian faith there” (237).

Yoder also sees the missional imperative switching from “Go and make disciples” to a more migration focused imperative of “As you go, make disciples...” (*Theology of Mission* 400). Yoder makes the appeal that evangelism and mission are the work of the ordinary Christian, not the work of a special class of professionals. Yoder’s missiology includes all members of the church and would extrapolate out into church plantings. Church planting is not the work of the specialized class, but the whole church. It may involve a community relocating to a place for a work, but it is not a parachute drop of a

highly trained church planting commando pastor (216). He says, “An unintended, but nevertheless unavoidable, result of the foreign missionary movement has been the feeling of many conscientious church people that the ‘missionary call’ is a special experience or special status reserved for a very few people” (416). Yoder says too much attention and reverence is paid to the “missionary’s special title, mobility, and secure livelihood” (416).

Interviewee #6 responded to the idea of migration evangelism: “Ethnic migratory development for church planting is too slow and doesn’t work. Mennonite church planting models of ethnic migration have inhibited actual church planting and what the Spirit wants to do.”

Interviewee #7 said, “For far too long Mennonites have relied on ethnic migration. We planted that way for way too long. Moving to a new place is ultimately not what we need.”

Interviewee #25 maintained that, “We can no longer rely on the flow of immigrants to sustain our church numbers.”

Interviewee #13 alleged that, “As Mennonites, the heritage we hold and the faith we practice has something to say to the world around us. We need to figure out to build new churches with people that don’t know a Mennonite from a Mormon or a Methodist.”

Mennonite models of church planting in the post-WWII period were often closely connected to a new area where Mennonites had moved. “Few Mennonites were involved in or even much aware of mission outreach beyond their own tight-knit communities” (Krabill, *Foreward* 8). New churches would spring up where pockets of Mennonites were found. Additionally, new neighboring churches would begin often nearby for

nontraditional demographics (Lehman 203). Evangelism was a key component of Mennonite church planting efforts. Door-to-door evangelistic efforts and front-porch Bible studies were commonplace as entryways for non-ethnic Mennonites (203-06). Innovative approaches were attempted in some of the church planting efforts. In Lakeland, Florida in 1965, Chester Wenger, a prominent Mennonite church leader of the time, “encouraged an innovative approach to church planting” (252). Robert Quackenbos, who had moved to the area to pastor a fledgling Mennonite church plant, was interviewed in 1967 by the local newspaper and was quoted as saying:

The plan in Lakeland is to build a congregation without dependence upon a building. This is a kind of experiment. Perhaps as American society disintegrates, the church of Christ will again find itself more at home worshipping in privately owned buildings. Places such as homes, restaurants, community halls, and schools offer an opportunity for church growth without a corresponding investment in expensive properties. (252)

Interviewee #10 claimed that, “We put a lot of effort into trying to plant churches in years past. But too often we tried to plant churches that looked like where they came from. We pushed plain clothes and other manifestations of what Mennonites are. Other than nonresistance, though, we didn’t focus on the why of our codes.”

Interviewee #22 stated, “We spent a lot of money over the years and have literally nothing to show for the investment.”

Interviewee #11 declared, “We are trying to plant into the Mennonite ideal of discipleship. We want to plant a church to help each other walk in the way of Jesus.”

Interviewee #4 said, “In our church, we try to honor the Mennonite way of doing things. But we try to make that way work for the present age.”

Much information came up in the interviews and readings that strengthened the idea that Anabaptism as expressed in Mennonite practice has some distinctives and convictions that have something to say our wider church community, and indeed the wider secular culture even.

The interviews conducted with active church planters for this project were very helpful and provided honest insight into the current experiences of church planters in a Mennonite or Anabaptist context. The passion for reaching people with the love of Jesus and the commitment to the church planting journey came through clearly.

How has the Virginia Mennonite Conference planted in the past 20 years?

The Virginia Mennonite Conference, along with other conferences of Mennonite Church USA, has a planting history to look back upon. Specifically, in the Virginia Conference twelve identified new churches have been planted since 1998, twenty years prior to this project. The majority of these began among immigrant populations.

Interviewee #20 believed that, “Denominationally the life is in immigrant churches.

Across the whole of the Mennonite Church 80 percent of the new church plants are immigrant populations.” The immigrant churches are in many ways planted and

structured as traditional Evangelical churches. Interviewee #19 said, “Most of us

Hispanics in the church are hard core Evangelicals. But we’re learning, we’re building in some Mennonite DNA.” Interviewee #4 stated that, “The majority of the congregants

here at our immigrant churches don't really have any concept of who Mennonites are. But we are trying to build that connection.”

The Hispanic population in the Virginia Conference had been the largest constituent of the immigrant demographic, but one new church plant began among the Korean population. Pastored by a Korean immigrant, the church has struggled to survive and has moved through different towns and locations.

One new church in Virginia arose as a social activity among the local deaf community. They began with a bi-vocational pastoral team while meeting in a home. They continued to meet in a room of pastor's home, a room that the pastors added specifically for the church plant to meet. The church has grown and many of the new attenders do not have a Mennonite background. The church practices an informal ecclesiology, where the pastors admit it is without many of the markers of Mennonite theology or praxis.

One of the newer churches in the Virginia Conference had been actively downplaying its Mennonite connection. The pastor stated that he was not interested in being known as a Mennonite church and did not have a positive reflection on Mennonite theology or praxis.

There had been disagreements between the Virginia Conference and the Virginia Mennonite Mission agency over which organization had oversight over the new church plants. Most new churches, though, had begun as a partnership with the mission agency. There had not been a single model of church planting used in the churches that began in the time frame studied.

These new church plants represented a cross section of demographics and people groups, though they individually had not made many inroads into other people groups. Many stayed with the ethnic groups they began with. Three small churches had made slight gains in reaching out cross-culturally, specifically in the African American population.

These new Mennonite church plants were effective in reaching beyond the usual stereotypical makeup of congregations with traditional Swiss German and Russian roots, as well as transplanted persons not formerly affiliated with Mennonite congregations in other places. Two of these new churches had purposefully incorporated Mennonite ways of being the church into their formation. Practicing community and group consensus, they connected with people outside the Mennonite tradition at the same time.

Interviewee #2, after receiving an M.Div. from a Mennonite affiliated seminary, was planting a new church outside of the Mennonite Church, though Interviewee #2 did have history as an Anabaptist. The new church under the leadership of Interviewee #2 emerged as a diverse cross-cultural church. This church had a sizeable percentage each of African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic members. This church was in a diverse context and had been intentional from the beginning about connecting with all the people groups in the community. This church looked like the community. The leadership board at this church was quite diverse by design across gender and cultural lines.

How Have the New Mennonite Church Plants Fared?

The churches listed above had reached different levels of sustainability. Out of the twelve churches begun since 1998, five churches have closed. Four churches

remained under a 50-member threshold. The remaining three churches had grown well. Two of the new churches were in the process of sending out missionaries and church planters to begin daughter churches in other areas.

Research Question #2: Description of Evidence

What are current convictions and patterns connected with new church planting efforts outside of the Mennonite tradition that might inform the Mennonite practice?

This project was designed to look first into the Mennonite story for insight regarding church planting, and then continue with a study of the wider Christian tradition. Indeed, much outside the Mennonite experience can be brought to this analysis of church planting. Life and passion around the field of church planting exist in other traditions. While Anabaptism in general is rising in popularity, Mennonite church planting does not have the same status.

One of the premier voices in the wider church conversation around church planting is Ed Stetzer. A church planting practitioner and resource person for a variety of organizations, Stetzer served for a time as Executive Director of LifeWay Research, a division of LifeWay Christian Resources. In that post he wrote extensively on church planting. He included many Best Practices lists during his time at LifeWay. The 2007 Church Plant Survivability and Health Study, that Stetzer authored with Phillip Connor, listed four significant factors associated with church plant survivability (14). According to their research into 2,266 church plants, these factors are:

Church Plant Expectations

If, for the church planter, the expectations of the church plant meet the reality of the church planting experience, the chance of survivability increases by over 400 percent. Of those who said their expectations were realized, 87 percent of their churches survived compared to only 61 percent of church plants survived among those who did not have their expectations met.

Church Member Leadership Development

If the church planter provides leadership development training for new church members, the odds of survivability increase by over 250 percent. Of those church planters who provided leadership training to church members, 79 percent of their churches survived compared to only 59 percent of church plants survived among those who did not provide leadership training.

Church Planter Peer Group

The church planter meeting with a group of church planting peers at least monthly increases the odds of survivability by 135 percent. We found that out of those church planters who were part of a peer group, 83 percent of their churches survived whereas only 67 percent of church plants among those who did not have a peer group survived.

Stewardship Plan

The church plant having a proactive stewardship development plan enabling the church to be financially self-sufficient increases the odds of survivability by over 178 percent. Of those church plants who had a stewardship development plan, 81 percent of churches survived whereas only 68 percent of church plants survived among those who did not have a stewardship plan. (14)

The Discipleship Ministries of the United Methodist Church listed twenty-three best practices of beginning new church works in North America. The ministry arm dedicated to this work is Path1. The twenty-three “Church Planting Best Practices” were divided into four categories (The United Methodist Church). The categories were:

1. Find
2. Equip
3. Plant
4. Multiply (The United Methodist Church)

Under the second and third sections of Equip (1-4) and Plant (5-13), there were fourteen best practices listed:

1. Where possible, enable these high-potential leaders to serve on a successful planting team or within a vibrant, growing congregation before beginning their work as lead planter for a new church.
2. Develop training for prospective planters in new church development and multiplication or make use of regional United Methodist planter “basic training” as needed.

3. Assign a qualified new church development coach to the project for at least three years to work with the planter, the local partners and the district superintendent (Consider working with a Path 1 recommended coach for this critical role).
4. Develop appropriate benchmarks in conversation with the new church start coach, planter(s), connectional partners, district superintendent and conference staff person for new church starts.
5. In planning, think first in terms of the people we seek to reach with the Good News of Jesus Christ, taking into consideration the generational, cultural and theological contexts. This is much more important than putting a point on the map.
6. Always seek to plant with a well-developed connectional partnership plan – a partnering church, a partnering group of churches or some other dependable resources (people and seed funding) to help begin an effective launch team quickly (If you need to delay a year until appropriate local partners become ready, please wait).
7. When planting racial/ethnic and multi ethnic faith communities there are a series of recommendations for effective partnering (contact New Church Strategists for Path1 resources for specific racial/ethnic planting).

8. Only appoint planters to projects after they have completed an assessment and discernment process.
9. Develop a plan tailored to each community context, with these considerations: financial streams, stewardship development, connectional giving and sustainability. Financial streams include funds from launch team and planter tithing and may also include individuals, connectional partners, district and annual conference. Build into the budget the congregation's giving back to the conference.
10. Establish benchmarks that support an exit strategy. Allow benchmarks to guide decisions related to continuing funding, ministry strategy, fruitfulness and leadership effectiveness. (Occasionally, you may adjust benchmarks but please don't ignore or discard them.)
11. Be sure the planter appropriately matches the needs and challenges of the community. If the planter is new to the area, look for ways s/he might live and serve in the community before the planting appointment formally begins.
12. Resist the temptation to launch weekly worship prematurely or to wait too long. Right timing depends on the leadership of the Holy Spirit, critical mass, momentum and cultural context.

13. Build a system of small groups within the planting team before launching weekly worship. Small group multiplication and discipleship systems lay the foundation for success and sustainability of a new church.
14. When, eventually, a succeeding pastoral appointment occurs, the cabinet pays extremely close attention to gifts and calling of the second pastor, as well as the unique local church culture, and works collaboratively with the church and planter in the appointive process. (The United Methodist Church)

Further, in the 2017 United Methodist Church report, *The State of Church Planting in United States*, the authors list these thirteen “Recommendations at Large.”

1. Avoid over-funding new plants and channel finances smartly to support projects with the best potential to succeed.
2. Teach planters good fund-raising practices.
3. Support and promote planting residencies at vital churches to train new leaders.
4. Encourage planters to hire a coach.
5. Continue supporting new traditional churches along with new, experimental faith communities and projects. No one size fits all!
6. Multisite are by far the most popular and least risky way to plant, but they depend on the presence and oversight of strong existing

churches, which means they may not be the best way to reach non-Anglo communities.

7. Quality intercultural communication training for all—pastors, staff, and lay leadership.
8. Advocacy for intentionally planting ethnically diverse faith communities.
9. Hiring more diverse pastors and staff at all levels of The United Methodist church.
10. Strategic planning for churches that are surrounded by ethnic diversity.
11. Training for existing churches seeking to grow ethnic diversity.
12. Use of intercultural proficiency assessment tools such as Individual Development Inventory, intercultural Effectiveness Scale, and Cultural Intelligence Center for all leaders.
13. Celebrate gains in ethnic diversity at all levels (Lewis, Ruffle, and Brooks 14)

Interviewee #2 was planting outside the Mennonite Church after training at a Mennonite Seminary. The association that Interviewee #2 was planting the church with has their own set of best practices. Interviewee #2 shared that, “Our association is big on planter cohorts. Each planter is assigned a coach and a cohort to be a part of. I wouldn’t be able to keep going without my cohort brother and sisters.”

Research Question #3: Description of Evidence

What are the principles from these best practices from both inside and outside the Mennonite experience that can be applied to the work of beginning new church works in the Virginia Mennonite Context?

Much can be gleaned from both inside and outside the Mennonite tradition to help guide the way forward in church planting. Traditionally, Mennonites have been slow to learn from other faith traditions, preferring to see themselves as a renewed and more faithful application of New Testament ecclesiology (Dyck Loc. 474).

There is openness to learning from other faith traditions. Interviewee #7 admitted, “I never wanted to lead a Saddleback or Willow Creek or be a Warren or Hybels, but they have certainly influenced me.”

Some of the interviewees expressed hesitation about learning church planting principles from traditions outside their own, while expressing appreciation for the Mennonite tradition that they found themselves in.

Interviewee #10: “I struggle with learning from other traditions. I want to learn more of the Mennonite way.”

Interviewee #9: “Yes, we can learn from others, but I will filter everything that I read through the lens of Anabaptist tradition and thought.”

Interviewee #18: “I want to plant a Mennonite Church. Each tradition has their own way of approaching the work. I want to focus in on the Mennonite way.”

Interviewee #13: “They (denominational leaders) send planters to Exponential. That’s a bit too mega-church for me. I am much more interested in a small community minded church than they present there.”

Interviewee #11: “I value my experience as a Mennonite, of leading in a Mennonite Church. It is important to me. Mennonites have something to say, but we can listen to others.”

Not all church planters surveyed indicated reluctance to learn from outside traditions. Interviewee #6: “I don’t care about being a Mennonite Church particularly. I am grateful for the Mennonite heritage, but I am not interested in planting a Mennonite Church. I want to plant a biblical church.”

Interviewee #7: “I was raised Mennonite, but the church of my childhood and the Mennonite Church I see today are two different animals. I want to be broader in my approach to church and church planting. I will learn from and work with anyone faithful to the Bible.”

Some of the best practices listed in the outside contexts would resonate in a Mennonite tradition. Many of the principles transcend a particular theology, while others would reflect more the particularities of a theological stream. Interviewee #21: “We can learn from others. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel here. We may give the ideas a Mennonite twist, but if the ideas are sound we can learn from them.”

Ideas of training in a church plant before going on to serve as lead on a second church plant came up in several of the interviews. Interviewee #6: “I have never had any training on church planting. I had served on staff as a youth pastor but had no idea of how to plant. Considering that, I want to have young prospective planters here to serve with us, to see what we do, to learn here and then they can go elsewhere to plant. They won’t have seen everything, but they will have seen enough to give them the tools they need.”

The importance of leadership training came through in the interviews as well, in often-repeated phrasings. Interviewee #1: “I never thought of myself as a leader. I was just me. But to give the church life, I had to think differently. I needed to learn to lead. I could have used some help with that early on.”

Interviewee #7: “You’ll never grow a church with just good ministry. You need leadership and leadership training. Seminary trains you for ministry, but seminars train for leadership.”

Interviewee #10: “I needed to learn to lead in appropriate ways. How not to over function for my people, but how to give good leadership. I needed to learn to model leadership that encouraged others to step out in their calling.”

Interviewee #2: “As pastors we have to invest in leaders. I meet with leaders in my church to train them and mentor them in leadership. Someone did this for me and now I have to do this for others.”

Summary of Major Findings

Several major findings emerged based on the analysis of the data reviewed for this project. Five of these findings are listed in summary form here and will be further detailed in Chapter 5. Each of these five major findings from this project was highlighted by more than 50% of the interviewees. Exact wording and phrasing varied from interviewee to interviewee, but these themes came up repeatedly in the interviews. Again, I made connections between the responses of each interviewee to draw out these five findings for a way forward for church planting that honors theological distinctives.

MAJOR FINDINGS	INTERVIEWEES DISCUSSING	PERCENTAGE
1. Church Planting Training	22	88%
2. Leadership Models	13	52%
3. Strategic Planning	21	84%
4. Community and Support	22	88%
5. Mennonite Identity	18	72%

Figure 4.2. Frequency of interviewee response in major findings.

The five major findings of this project are:

1. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers training in church planting. Mennonite church planters value training in church planting praxis.

2. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers leadership models. Mennonites have an uneven history of interacting with leadership. Church planters have expressed interest in learning skills for appropriate community leadership.

3. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers planning. There is a deep importance of thinking through the planning of church planting.

4. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers community and support. This desire for support exists on several levels, from financial to emotional support.

5. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers a Mennonite identity.

There is an appreciation for the shared Mennonite and Anabaptist theological history among the church planters. The question becomes whether or not this identity filters down to the congregational level as well or is held mainly at the leadership level.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

Through this research project, I sought to provide the foundation for the creation of a way forward in church planting in the Mennonite Church, particularly in the Virginia Mennonite Conference context. While this was not designed to be a fully fleshed out plan for church planting, it can be the beginnings of one. The Virginia Mennonite Conference has a rich history on which to draw from for the future of church planting. Best practices from outside the faith tradition can be evaluated and, if the practice is not in opposition to Mennonite theology, it can be implemented in ongoing Virginia Mennonite Conference church planting efforts.

Much of the church world is looking at Anabaptism with the rise of neo-Anabaptists. As the wider American culture transitions more fully to a postChristian setting, the church of Jesus Christ will find itself ministering more from the margins. Anabaptists have lived in this territory before and can add valuable insights for faithful praxis. This new context is deeply unsettling for much of Christian America, but Anabaptists have insights and experiences that would be a valuable part of the conversation going forward about what it means to be the church in a new age. This project is an attempt to find ways to grow and speak as faithful witnesses of God into this world.

The results of the project, with interviews and research, suggest a few findings. I listed these findings in the previous chapter but expand them more in this chapter. While

these may not be ground-breaking findings, they do hold to the Sankofa bird concept of going back and picking up the things we left behind. These findings represent a return to who we are and a reminder of what makes us the way that we are. They are important and vital as a way forward for Mennonite church planting.

Major Findings

First Finding

1. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers training in church planting.

In 1991, I started in the first church plant project of which I would be a part. As a 21-year-old living in the next town over, I knew no one in the town the church was beginning in. A friend of a friend knew I'd been involved with starting some Under 21 Clubs previously and I was asked by the group starting this new church to come on board as Youth Pastor and Outreach Coordinator. There wasn't even a designated pastor for the effort yet, but they were looking to call this person and eventually would do so. There was so much I didn't know, and so much I wasn't aware that I didn't know. There was group conflict and general lack of awareness of how to form ourselves. In short, none of us knew what we were doing. We were a mixed-age group with varying levels of experience in business and school and so forth, but none of us had a clue as to what we were doing. The work could have been so much better and the results more life-giving for the Kingdom if we had been given some training around church planting.

Church planting is a calling requiring a particular set of skills. Recognizing this need for skills training is a best practice across the board. When asked about training for

church planting, most interviewees expressed a desire for training, and for the training to reflect an Anabaptist ethos.

Interviewee #8 remarked, “I received quality theological training in a Mennonite seminary. But I wasn’t trained in how to begin a new church. I had to go elsewhere to get any of that.”

While recognizing that not everyone responds positively to the same style of instruction, training is something that should be offered. There are many avenues for training, from a cohort-style discussion to online offerings to periodic in-person gatherings. Trainings can be presented on a menu basis, allowing planters to access the guidance that connects with their needs and schedules.

Across the board, training in church planting is an idea on the rise. Many seminaries, including Asbury Theological Seminary (“Asbury Theological Seminary: Church Planting Initiative”), offer courses or entire concentrations in church planting. Neither of the two Mennonite-related seminaries offer concentrated work on church planting.

Beyond the seminary context, Ecclesia Network, a group formed in 2007 to promote missional church engagement, is one organization that provides an intensive church planting training (“Ecclesia: Our Work”). They offer a weeklong intensive program, called Genesis (“Genesis: Church Planting Training”). While not a specifically Mennonite program, Ecclesia is heavily influenced by Anabaptist and neo-Anabaptist thinkers. This is a smaller gathering of fifteen to twenty potential planters that covers a wide variety of topics. Topics covered include:

- Planting Missional Churches
- Planting Equipping Churches
- Staying Healthy While Planting
- Developing a Philosophy of Discipleship
- Incarnational Ecclesiology: Reading Your City
- Developing Models & Approaches
- Developing Your Team
- Navigating Team Dynamics
- Fundraising for Church Planting
- Administrative & Legal Issues
- Character and Competencies for Church Planting (“Genesis: Church Planting Training”)

In the Literature Review in Chapter 2 conducted for this study, the need for training for the skills essential to plant and grow a new church was highlighted. Learning these new behaviors is vital for long-term sustainability of the fledgling church plant.

In researching this project, many best-practices lists in denominations outside the Mennonite church named training resources as important. It is an undiscovered area for the Mennonite Church in large part. Going forward, an intentional training program for Mennonite Church planters in the Virginia Conference would be a positive addition for the missional proposition.

In a new Mennonite approach to church planting, the training program would be tailored to the needs of the individual planter with offerings of bookkeeping or theology

or homiletics. The training would consist of mentorship with practitioners, web-based discussions, book-based learning, etc. Whatever is needed for the church and the church planter. The right kind of training will go far in the life of the planter and pay dividends in the life of the church, from generation to generation.

From a biblical standpoint, there is much that commends the importance of training. Paul emphasizes the value of teaching in his letters to Timothy. Among a long list of character elements to be present in the life of the elder, Paul lists the ability to teach in 1 Timothy 3:2, a skill-based requirement. Over and over again, young leaders are trained and mentored by older leaders: Timothy and Paul, Elisha and Elijah, Jethro and Moses, and the list goes on.

Second Finding

2. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers leadership models.

Leadership in the Mennonite Church has undergone significant changes in recent years. For many years Bishops effectively ran the ecclesiological show with almost unrestrained authority. They assigned pastors, made decisions on what happened in churches and whether new churches were to be planted and where.

The role of the Bishop has decreased over the years as the role of pastors has increased correspondingly. Leadership is often a functional/positional reality and an uneasy one at that. Interviewee #6: “I was blown off by leadership in the Mennonite church. If I didn’t fit into their neat little boxes of position, then I met with dismissal.”

The early Anabaptists and Mennonites struck down the hard border walls between laity and clergy classes. The early Anabaptists agreed with Martin Luther on the concept

of the “priesthood of all believers” though they would seldom have used the term at the time (Bender and Miller).

The term did come into vogue with Mennonites in the twentieth century, but there was often confusion as to the meaning:

In the 20th century some Mennonites and non-Mennonites have made passing references to "the priesthood of all believers" to characterize some aspect of an Anabaptist (or presumably Anabaptist) view of the church or Christian life. For some, it means that every Christian is a minister (Kauffman/Harder, Yoder). For some, it signifies a process of making decisions in the church (Littell, Yoder). For one, it refers to the believer's access to God without the mediation of a priest and to be a channel of grace for other Christians (Bender). For another, it represents the Radical Reformation's rejection of dividing the church into clergy and laity (Williams). So far, Mennonites have neither developed a common understanding nor elaborated a particular view of "the priesthood of all believers." (Bender and Miller)

In Mennonite common practice this priesthood concept is an often referenced, but seldom-defined theme.

Interviewee #1: “I had no idea how to lead. I had to make decisions and plans that I was not at all prepared to make. I didn’t even know how to make these decisions.”

Mennonites have traditionally had a conflicted relationship with leadership. Many

Mennonite members see the need for leadership but are uneasy with the use of it. As with all people, some seek leadership and can be too aggressive where they lack dialogue and humility. Others seek leadership for popularity and are too pliable where they lack conviction and consistency.

Interviewee #7: “I haven’t seen any leadership training in the Mennonite Church. I haven’t gotten any of that inside this denomination. I learned leadership from John Maxwell and Rick Warren. I never learned leadership from Mennonites. This denomination is set up to not let leaders lead.”

Interviewee #6: “There is no place for apostolic leadership in the Mennonite Church. All of the apostolic leaders left to go be missionaries.”

At the denominational level, there are Leadership Resources available for Mennonite leaders (“Leadership Development”) and additional leadership training manuals and materials are provided for the local Virginia Conference context. The larger communication challenge is if church planters are even aware of these resources’ existence. Interviewee #13: “I am sure they have paperwork and stuff up there. But they’ve never told me about it.”

Leadership training is, again, an idea that shows up on many of the best practices lists from other faith traditions. Leadership training helps the planter or church leader to find a basis from which to make decisions and lead.

Alan Hirsch and others have gone to great lengths to reorient leadership in the missional church. With his development of the APEST model in *Forgotten Ways* (Hirsch) and other works, he has helped many emerging leaders to see effective models

of leadership and ways to inhabit the pastor's role. Access to Hirsch's materials and other leaders such as Mike Frost, who wrote on his blog of the leadership needs for the church and the world, would be immensely helpful. He wrote:

We need to find those leaders who are daring and imaginative, who can return to the source and imagine future possibilities for being God's people in our current age. We need brave leaders who can see the big picture, not just the next small step. We need leaders who enjoy the process of change, and who are patient and steadfast in effecting it. We need emerging leaders to be focused and present, who empower others, who create non-anxious environments for innovation and experimentation. We need open-minded leaders who aren't fearful of new ideas, who don't agree with everything they hear, but can entertain the possibilities while sifting ideas to find what God wants for us. We need leaders who aren't terrified of failure. (Frost)

As mentioned in the Chapter 2 Literature Review, Mennonites emphasize the idea of Servant Leadership. In Article 15 Ministry and Leadership of the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, is open leadership to all persons "The church calls, trains, and appoints gifted men and women to a variety of leadership ministries on its behalf" (Miller and Harder 59-61). The passage refers to those who lead as those who "serve the church" (59).

This servant leader metaphor is a potent and biblical outgrowth of the life and ministry example of Jesus of Nazareth. In Luke's retelling of the Last Supper narrative (Luke 22:25-27), Jesus speaks to a debate among his disciples. "He said to them, 'the kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.'"

1 Peter 5:1-4 goes on to cast Jesus as the chief shepherd and leaders in the church as shepherds working with God's flock. These are incredibly helpful metaphors for leadership in the church. The effort needs to be put in to work with these texts that Mennonite leaders have relied on for many years and to translate them into emerging contexts.

Interviewee #14: "Can space be made where Mennonite pastors and church planters wrestle with how we lead well and how do we lead with integrity and grace. Mennonite leaders are not autocrats and we shouldn't be set up to lead in ways that don't fit our culture."

Interviewee #10: "I want to learn to lead in ways that call out the best in people and free them up to be who God has created them to be."

Third Finding

3. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers planning.

As a serial church planter, I have worked with four church plants. I have planted in a variety of settings with a variety of outside structures. The plants that have seen the most light have been the churches that involved the most preplanning and forethought. In my Mennonite Church planting, no one has ever asked for a plan from me. Many church planters are ones who resist planning and structure. Too many church planters are rule resistant. The discipline of planning and a thoughtful process can go a long way towards aligning the planter with the missional will of God.

This is a recently rediscovered area of growth in Mennonite church planting. The Central Plains Conference of Mennonite Church USA, for example, requires a fully crafted plan for new church plants. While not technically a business plan, it shares many of the same features. The form includes Core Values, the stories of how they came together and where they feel God is calling them to go, the ideas of engaging the community, etc. The act of crafting this document forces the church planting team to think through their process and wrestle with how God is calling them to live as a people of God.

In the Chapter 2 Literature Review section of this dissertation, Mauricio Chenlo, a staff member with Mennonite Mission Network with responsibility for fostering church plants, discussed the need for long-term planning for church sustainability. This connects with the history of intentionality in the Mennonite Church. The bishops did not allow church plants haphazardly at any random place. They studied the local community and

then looked for a plan. The detailing of a plan connects with the desires of the planters as well.

Interviewee #25: “The only thing to learn is that there is no single method to this work. Whatever model you choose, think it through.”

Interviewee #6: “I don’t care about models, let gifting prescribe the model. Reflect on who you are and who God is calling you to reach.”

Interviewee #22: “The questions the planting team needs to think through are these. 1. How can the culture be at home in this culture? 2. How can the gospel challenge the culture in this context? Planters need to reflect deeply on these questions and how they plan to live into the responses.”

Interviewee #5: “I was encouraged to develop a plan for the church plant. But I did not at first. I would be better off if I had.”

Interviewee #5: “Eventually I did write the plan, being forced to write things down and think things through was a good discipline for me. I am grateful for it now, though I wasn’t at first.”

Interviewee #3: “Writing a plan forces a planter to think through issues. And when you at least have given a potential problem a previous thought you are better able to deal with it when it comes.”

Many of the lists of best practices consulted included having a good solid plan in place. Any plan that a human creates will not be perfect or work in perpetuity. The planter will need to rethink approaches. The team will need to rethink the process.

Drawing out a detailed plan can, at least, create a goal for the church and the church leader.

Even in secular settings, the idea is accepted that having a plan and a goal in mind at the end of the journey is a powerful act. Stephen Covey, the Grand Master of accomplishment, says: “To begin with the end in mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction” (73ff). Bobb Biehl writes extensively about the importance of having a plan, or as he calls it a Master Plan. His writing is geared toward the business world, but it does force the planter to think through actions and impacts of choices.

Preplanning is a concept present in Scripture as well. Jesus himself said, in Luke 14:28-30:

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.”

From Old Testament wisdom literature, Proverbs 15:22 states, “Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed.” Also, Proverbs 16:3 declares, “Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established.”

Workshops would be offered in crafting a ministry plan in this way forward for Mennonite church planting. Other simple resources such as templates and access to

people gifted in planning would go a long way towards fulfilling this need of planters. Making ministry plans, even if the plan will soon need to be changed, is a good exercise for planters if done well. The act of crafting the plan is often more important than the actual plan itself, still a plan can give valuable insights for future actions and keys for ongoing decision making.

Fourth Finding

4. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers community and support.

I designed this project to speak to how the Mennonite Church can go forward in church planting in the context of the Virginia Mennonite Conference. Inherent in that is the idea of the health of the church planter. Whether that is a single church planter or a church planting team, emotional, spiritual, and physical wellbeing must be supported. Church planting can emotionally batter a planter; the hours and the work can take a toll on a planter's spirit. Church planters expect that the conference leadership should offer support as needed to keep the newly formed missional effort going forward.

Church planters in the interviews conducted for this project repeatedly expressed a desire for more training, leadership development, structure, and indeed for this point; support from the denomination and conference leaders.

Interviewee #6: "I received really no support from Virginia Conference. I had coffee once or twice with someone, but nothing else, even less from the folks at MCUSA. Now that we're successful they like to come and ask questions, but no one ever follows through on my suggestions or recommendations. Why didn't they support us then?"

Interviewee #10: “I never felt really supported by the Conference. I wanted to be connected. I wanted to come to them, but I was turned away.”

Interviewee #6: “I was met with dismissal and arrogance every time I went to the Conference.”

Interviewee #5: “There was no way I would have gone to the Conference when I felt God’s call to plant this church. I went to my pastor and my church leadership. I got support there.”

The interviews I conducted revealed pain and anger in the church planter ranks for Mennonites. There are multiples reasons for this. Church planters across the board mentioned struggles with the theological wrangling that has taken place over the last number of years in the conference. Discussions over LBGTQ issues and stances have caused some planters and pastors in general to question their involvement with and connection to the conference and the wider church.

Interviewee #6: “The conference is disorganized now. The Mennonite church has sold out its positions on the authority of Scripture and its theology of sin for a practice of ‘Let’s just stay together.’ This is not the way to be.”

Interviewee #9: “I am not at all interested in MCUSA. I want to be a Mennonite, but MCUSA is in such chaos I want to be a Mennonite without any connection to MCUSA. We will have no partnership with MCUSA as long as they stay as liberal as they currently are.”

On balance, several church planters did express a feeling of connection and support from the Mennonite leadership, particularly at the Conference level. Interviewee

#1: “We had a pretty good relationship with Conference. We had a really nice connection with our District Minister.”

Interviewee #13: “I got along with my conference simply by not expecting too much from them. They have a role to play, and that role isn’t holding my hand. They are there for oversight and a bit of guidance and record keeping. And in that I felt supported by my Conference.”

Interviewee #14: “We have a good relationship with our conference. Not as good with MCUSA. I don’t know MCUSA, but I know my local leadership and I know the pastors in my area. We get together with these colleagues.”

The support desired from planters is not simply a financial investment.

Interviewee #10: “We don’t expect cash outlays from anyone. Money is tight all over. But there are ways to show support and to help us to feel like we’re all in this together. Offer me discounts to Conference Assemblies or comp my fees at gatherings. Give me a table at events to give out fliers. Offer to include all of the church planters on a prayer list.”

Central Plains Mennonite Conference, based in the Midwest of the United States, is working at how to give support to planters over their conference that covers a large footprint. They have made formalized connections wherein pastors and church members are to attend each other’s worship gatherings at regular intervals. Central Plains leadership is working at the connection in other ways as well (“Seedbeds and Orchards”).

Virginia Mennonite Missions (VMM), the largely independent mission arm of Virginia Mennonite Conference, has worked at addressing the support for church planters

that it gives. They generally copy the efforts of the Central Plains Conference by beginning to bring legacy congregations near to church plants to mutually encourage and offer mutual support. VMM has, in the recent past, worked to formalize the support given to church planters and the structure expected of the planter. These developments are encouraging and should help long-term efforts of support, as energy continues to be given to them.

The idea of support for the church planter was cited in the Chapter 2 Literature Review section of this dissertation. Support over the years has taken on a variety of methods. Sometimes it has involved financial support. Other examples include work teams from legacy congregations to conduct Vacation Bible Schools or do children's ministry in a new church start, etc. Most Mennonite pastors were not full time paid clergy until recent decades.

Biblically, offering financial support to missional church starts is seen all over the New Testament as Paul, while being very clear that he works as a tentmaker so as not to be a burden to others (1 Cor. 9:15-18; 2 Cor. 11:7-10, 2 Cor. 12:14-18), still solicits support for churches in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-9:15; Rom. 15:14-32) and receives offerings from the church in Philippi (2 Cor. 11:9, Phil. 4:15).

The support offered to church planters should go beyond the financial offerings, though that would be welcome at any time by most any church planter. Relational connection between churches and pastors would be the greater goal. Having someone for the church planter to call during a rough patch or when a listening ear is needed is invaluable. Offering something as simple as a babysitter and a gift card for a night out

would only strengthen the connection. There would be reverse benefits to this course of action as well. The excitement and zeal from the church plant will energize the missional efforts of the legacy church.

A strong mentorship program for church planters, such as the one Eastside Church in Harrisonburg, VA developed as they embarked on their efforts of church planting (“Eastside Church: Missions”), can be incredibly powerful in the life of the church. Mentorship is a great way to communicate and train a novice. Paul with Timothy and others worked at this, as did Jesus himself:

Jesus, the ultimate mentor, mentored His followers in at least three ways. First, He mentored His disciples by teaching them. He taught them through stories, parables, and object lessons how to live in the kingdom of God. Second, Jesus mentored His followers by revealing the power of God in their lives (Mark 6:32- 44). Jesus was building the faith of the disciples by His miracles. Third, Jesus mentored His disciples by modeling and teaching them a life of prayer (Luke 11:1-4). (Cheyney, Putman, and Sanders, 33)

Fifth Finding

5. A way forward in Mennonite church planting offers a Mennonite identity.

For the final of the five findings to discuss here, focus shifts squarely to the Mennonite churches themselves and the identity in which members and churches see themselves.

I admit I come to this project with the zeal of a convert. I happily identify as a Mennonite. I am grateful for my theological ancestry in the Anabaptist and Mennonite movements. I claim some physical ancestry there as well. I am committed to an Anabaptist theology as expressed in the Virginia Mennonite Church context. This project began because I wanted to help in a small way with Mennonite church planting efforts. I see much good in our Mennonite heritage and want to share those positives with others. I rely on much in Mennonite and Anabaptist history as theological distinctives for guidance and inspiration and I quite simply wanted to see if others felt the same way.

In the interviews I conducted, I discovered that Mennonite church planters are connected to their Mennonite heritage and would see their connection to the Conference as strong. The variety came in when interviewees were asked if the church members themselves would see that same connection as being lived out in their lives. The reality is that for many church planters looking at reaching people outside of the traditional Mennonite ethnic demographic, the pastor is the one who holds the Mennonite identity for the congregation.

Interviewee #7: “My church is officially connected to the Mennonite Church and to my Conference. But they are in no way relationally connected. I have maintained my connection. I serve on conference committees, but most people in my church would not at all think of themselves as Mennonites.”

Interviewee #6: “I am a Mennonite, but my church would have no idea what that means. We have talked a good bit about being Anabaptist, but we don’t talk about being Mennonites.”

Interviewee #9: "I am a Mennonite. We will have Mennonite in the church name, but we are not identifying or associating with any official Mennonite structures."

Interviewee #5: "I have mostly spent my life in Menno World, but I don't really see the church we are starting as a Mennonite Church. My history is there, but I don't know that my church's future is there."

Interviewee #5: "I have been formed by Mennonites. My theology has been shaped by Mennonites. The peace position and the Christological focus and the simplicity of life are dear to me, but I don't see value in calling this a Mennonite church."

Interviewee #5: "I don't pay any attention to the Mennonite Church. I do focus on Anabaptism. The theology is awesome and compelling. If the Mennonite Church committed to evangelism we might have a future."

Interviewee #8: "There is so much to celebrate in the Mennonite and Anabaptist history. I am not sure there is much currently to celebrate."

Others attempt to bring the Mennonite awareness into the lives of their church members. Interviewee #3: "This is very much a Mennonite church. We want to be faithful to that heritage. When we began this church most of the people had no real awareness of Mennonites or Anabaptism. We started out more Evangelical. We have chosen to focus on that more recently."

Interviewee #3: "If I would plant something else, I would do it with a Mennonite emphasis from the beginning. I appreciate what that movement brings to the table."

Interviewee #1: "We talk a lot about what it means that we are a Mennonite Church. It is a high value for us."

Interviewee #10: “We’ve shared from the beginning with the people that have joined us that this is a Mennonite Church. There have been a lot of discussions about what that exactly means. Do we require horse and buggies and prayer coverings? We talk about what that means and what it doesn’t mean in our lives and the lives of the people here.”

The state of Mennonite identity may depend on the vantage point of the one looking. Several planters remarked on feeling that church planters and leaders were not on the same page. Interviewee #8: “I see a huge disconnect between leadership and actual planters. It doesn’t make sense.” Interviewee #10: “Our leaders seem to think all is well and church planters are happy and well.”

Historically, as discussed in Chapter 2 during the Literature Review, Mennonite identity was built into the church plants. Discussion of the wider Mennonite church and the beliefs and requirements thereof were a common topic for discussion. The Bishops would travel the circuit visiting members and church and bringing news that connected each church member with the wider church community.

Church leaders can work to tell the Anabaptist story and how it expressed itself in the Mennonite context. As pastors and leaders tell the story of our faith, they explain the distinctives of the shared faith to church members. Church members are not concerned with conference or denomination in many ways. Members have a local church focus, but does this include a District focus?

Ministry Implications of the Findings

This research project, along with its findings, provides a base to begin the hard work of fashioning a way forward for the Virginia Mennonite Conference in church planting that is faithful to the shared Anabaptist heritage and modern realities of post-Christian America. By looking to the past and gaining insights for the future, Mennonite church planters can be effective to bring about positive change. This impact is the goal.

This project by no means includes a fully developed plan for a Mennonite way of church planting, or even covers all the details needed to craft a plan. As the wider church discerns the future, and how to be a faithful movement, the voices of the church planters need to be heard. This dissertation project was a place for them to speak.

Anabaptist and Mennonite history has much to offer and discover. Modern Mennonites would do well to recover the missionary zeal of our forebears. Connecting with people outside the church can return a fire to the Mennonite circles. Early Mennonites and Anabaptists were passionate about telling the story of Jesus to everyone. They invited everyone they met to come into a relationship with Jesus. This passion to share the story of their Savior allowed them to bear the life of persecution and potential martyrdom with joy.

Reading deeply of the Mennonites who came before in the line of faith is a challenging and inspiring move. There is an implication that followers of Christ should befriend those who do not follow Jesus. Christians are to love all those who are both in and outside the church. Christians cannot hold simply love for the members of our tribe. Churches must connect with and love those who do not know Jesus. This missional

posture is not an added program to the life of the church; it is wholly the life of the church.

The early Anabaptists taught a strong commitment to discipleship and being made into the image of Jesus. The early Anabaptist leader Hans Denck is perhaps best known for his quote about living for and knowing Jesus. He said, “No can truly know Christ unless one follows him in life (and no one can follow Christ unless one has first known him)” (Siegrist 40-41).

For early Mennonites all of life flowed from the understanding that believers are to follow Christ in life. Christians are to be a transformed people, living every moment of every day as followers, to be different from the world outside, and be radically committed to following Christ and being his body. The implication for ministry is a reminder that church leaders need to work to recover the discipleship element in the Mennonite Church. For too long the discipleship ethic in Mennonite communities was one of ethical decision-making, which is a worthwhile element of the Christ life, but it is not the entirety of it. Subsumed all too often by a modern socially conscious posture, our faith is expressed most concretely in how we fight for justice or live frugally or recycle. The Mennonite Church needs to rediscover the call to walk closely with Jesus, to know him and be known by him. The implication is a key reminder from the Mennonite heritage. We must go back and recover the idea of the life of Christ being a life focused on discipleship to the person of Jesus. This will bring energy and vitality back to both legacy churches and to new church works.

Anabaptist theology and praxis attempted to recover what the early reformers saw as the New Testament vision of the church. A church faithful to its Mennonite legacy would be attractive to young people, particularly the coveted millennial age group. “Millennial Christians see local churches as business as usual, focused inwardly, more concerned about the needs of the members than the needs of the community and the nations” (Rainer and Rainer 257). The church is to live for those outside its walls, to practice service, and live in peace; it is easy to imagine the appeal of such a lived expression of faith in Christ.

The community emphasis of Mennonites will appeal to Millennials as well. The call to meaning and relational connection can reach the disconnected in deep and profound ways. “We are called to be church in the world whether we are choosing a college major, finding our first job, facing a midlife crisis, we’re heading into retirement” (Mast 17).

The work of church planting connects to the work of church revitalization in many ways. Much of the principles from Anabaptist heritage that enable the Virginia Mennonite Conference to plant new church works can be brought to bear on the larger call for church revitalization. When legacy churches can be brought alongside a new church plant, it brings excitement to both churches.

Church planting can reinvigorate the entire Mennonite movement. The actions of active engagement in outreach into the community can bring institutional life. As leaders and churches are bound together in mutual support of a mission, relational ties are

strengthened. In a time when the relational connections of the Mennonite Church are strained, this can only be a good thing.

As the church planters are forced to go through steps of organizing and thinking through missional activity, legacy churches can be doing the same work. This will bring focus to the mission of the entire conference and of the wider denomination. “Apostolic leadership works more effectively when the church rediscovers itself as a missionary movement; when it organizes itself as a centered set; when it builds organic structures, gears for metabolic growth, and develops a missional leadership trading system” (Frost and Hirsch 247).

Going forward, I would advocate intentionality in the Virginia Mennonite Conference and Mennonite Church USA and connected mission networks to support and encourage church planters. This training is an important time to remind of the importance of who and what Mennonites are as Mennonites. Discussion could cover shared Mennonite background. Teaching can be done to make clear the things that make Mennonites the body that they are..” Going forward, an intentional training program for Mennonite Church planters in the Virginia Conference would be a positive addition to the discipleship work of church planting and indeed the larger mission of helping people to follow Jesus.

The intentional effort of getting church planters together and connecting them with pastors will be exponentially helpful, again to both the legacy churches and the new church work being planted. The Virginia Conference could do affinity groups of church planters. Additionally, VMC sponsored groups would connect planters who have been in

the church planting journey for fewer years with pastors and planters who have traveled further down the road of church life, say 10 or 25 years. The Conference could get people together to converse about issues and challenges and struggles. The insights and practical tips shared would be of immense value and would save much struggle and heartache. The collegial connection might even save a planter or two from burning out in the spectacular ways that pastors tend to go.

The way that we do development in the Mennonite USA at the moment is not the most helpful. Mennonites can do better, indeed, must do better. Christians honor God by seeking to be the most life giving and mutually supportive that they can be, both on individual and communal levels. They honor God by seeking to make disciples of Jesus. As the body of Christ, churches are pockets of grace and too often churches are also pockets of empty souls. Christ followers must walk together, discipling and encouraging and calling each other to the light of God.

Limitations of the Study

There are certainly limitations to this study. Doing more interviews would expand the data pool. Speaking with more church planters would have added to our knowledge and awareness of the issues.

I did not speak to legacy church pastors about their approach to Mennonite distinctives and whether or not they sought to emphasize approaches in their churches. I would be curious to talk about the Mennonite identity in legacy churches. This would be a beneficial exercise for all concerned. Work could be done to investigate whether these

existing legacy churches see sharing their theological heritage as a desirable goal or do they focus elsewhere.

I would have loved the chance to do focus groups with each of the congregations represented by the pastors I communicated with. A conversation with a demographic cross section of attenders and members of the various churches would have gone a long way toward a deeper answer for the Mennonite identity questions. Rather than taking the pastor's perceptions as fact, Mennonites would have had a more direct and ground level response.

Unexpected Observations

The interviews conducted for this research project were shocking to me. To see the differing perceptions of the current state of planning from some pockets of church leadership set me back. I heard some unexpected comments from church planters that I was not entirely sure what to do with or where to include. I held back some of the most critical comments, as they did not fit in this project or answer questions posed. There was some frustration on the church planters' side. Several times in one day I spoke to leaders who would give one set of observations from their vantage point and then later in the day speak with a church planter who had an equal and opposite reaction.

Recommendations

Several recommendations are made to improve the size and scope of this project. Again, expanding the church planter circles would only improve the data. This would give a wider and more complete sampling of perspectives. Interviews with existing

legacy church pastors in order to gauge their perspectives on the work of church planting and the depth of Mennonite identity and commitment would be interesting.

A further strong recommendation arising from this research and dissertation is to do something about fostering church planting. Churches are good at saying something is a priority, but when everything is a priority then nothing is. Conference leaders need to put energy behind the work. Bringing the thrust of their support can carry weight in Mennonite polity to remind all pastors and members of the importance of engaging missionally and hearing the faith as Mennonites live their lives.

Postscript

Some of this paper may be considered negative. It was not intended to be negative or dismissive. This project was not to be dismissive or destructive of the work of others. Indeed, it is a project that highlights the past and seeks to bring this past into the future. I am encouraged by the passion and commitment displayed by so many planters and church leaders. I am hopeful for the future. I am hopeful that Mennonites can join together to recommit to that which Mennonites say they believe. The church can move forward and walk in faith with Jesus and with the surrounding community. I have seen a beautiful picture of a people wrestling with what it means to serve God and to be the people of God in a particular time and place. May leaders take what is presented here and strengthen it and grow in the call of God.

I am different because of this project in that I came into this Doctor of Ministry process hurting. I came into this looking for a word from God and reassurance from my church planting sisters and brothers on my future and my calling. I feel the support from

my Mennonite community and my new dear friends in the wider church. My ministry is different in that I have a renewed energy and a renewed commitment to the ways of my tribe. Through this project, deeper than the dissertation, I have a new way of supporting and being with my fellow Mennonite church planters.

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Q1: What is your name?

Q2: What is your current church related position?

Q3: What is your level of education?

Q4: What is your connection to the Anabaptism in general and the Mennonite Church?

Q5: What is your awareness of and commitment to Anabaptist Theological Distinctives?

Q6: What do you see as Anabaptist Theological Distinctives?

Q7: What do you see as your prevailing model for your church planting efforts?

Q8: Do you work to emphasize Anabaptist Theological Distinctives in your church plant?

Do you feel that it is important in the life of your church plant to emphasize these distinctives?

Q9: What theological stream do you feel most influenced by?

Q10: What church planting training have you had?

Q11: How have you been supported by your denominational overseers?

Q12: How would you like to see the church planting efforts of your denomination structured?

Q13: How connected do you feel to your denomination and conference?

Q14: How connected do you believe your church members would feel to Anabaptism in general and the Mennonite Church?

Q15: Anything else you would like to add to this conversation?

APPENDIX B

Ethical Considerations Worksheet

Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER
An Anabaptist Way Forward in Church Planting

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Chris Scott enrolled in Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you have valuable experience around church planting and leadership.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to have a conversation to reflect about your thoughts and experiences around church planting and the way these can be done in an Anabaptist faithful manner. This conversation can be had via Skype (which cannot be guaranteed to be a secure/confidential method of communication) or in person. While there is no payment for participation, your input can go a long way towards forming a way forward for church planting in the Anabaptist Tradition.

Your confidentiality will be ensured. If any information is given about you, it will not be attached to your name and no one will know your name. A Participant Number will be used instead of your name. Data collected will not be anonymous but will remain confidential.

You can ask Chris Scott questions any time about anything in this study. As a voluntary participant you may back out of the study or end the interview at any time as you so choose. Your responses and any notes will be destroyed immediately if you choose to leave the study.

Signing this form means that you have read this and that you are willing to participate in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what will happen with your responses.

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study

Date Signed

Contact Info:

Chris Scott

722 Academy Circle, Winchester, VA 22601

540-535-8086

christopher.scott@asburyseminary.edu

APPENDIX C

Virginia Mennonite Conference Mission Statement

Virginia Mennonite Conference equips pastor, lay leaders, and congregants for worship, service and bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to neighbors near and far.

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