

Life in the Body:
Reflections on Mennonite Church USA

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Durham, NC

Those who are one with Christ in Spirit, love, and life, who teach that which was commanded them by Christ, namely, repentance and the peaceable Gospel of grace... are the body and bride of Christ, the ark, the mount and garden of the Lord, the house, people, city, temple of God, the spiritual Eve, flesh of Christ's flesh and bone of his bone...

~ Menno Simons, 1544¹

Introduction

“Religion begins — and ends — with bodies,” writes Thomas Tweed.² As Christians our faith binds our bodies together in worship; and as we worship, our bodies are brought into the body of Christ, where we are enlivened with the Holy Spirit. Yes, our religion is about how our bodies are drawn into the intimate presence of God; the church is the name we have for the assemblage of bodies where Christ indwells us through the power of the Spirit. Our religious practices become ligaments that join people together as members of the same body, Jesus’ body. One definition of religion in the history of the church has been “to bind together.”³ Our lives are bound together through our faith, our religion: corporate worship and fellowship grow ligaments between us that form us into the body of Christ.

Eight years ago I found myself drawn into a small Mennonite congregation in North Carolina: Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship (CHMF). As I returned again and again for worship, I felt my life growing into theirs, and their lives growing into mine. Their version of Mennonite worship became a home for my faith. Ligaments of Christ’s body pulled me into a new religious world, the world of Mennonite faith and life. While I have discovered that I belong with these Mennonites in Chapel Hill and Durham, I soon realized that the Anabaptist faith embodied at CHMF was not normative for other congregations in the Mennonite denomination in the United States. Congregations within Mennonite Church USA express their Anabaptist convictions in different ways, depending on their contexts and migration histories.

As I learned from books and conversations about the varieties of Anabaptism among Mennonite churches, I wanted to experience the congregational diversity for myself, in flesh and blood — a living Anabaptism, made available through communities whose cultures of worship articulate our faith. While some dismiss bodies of witnesses as husks within which are hidden the kernels of Anabaptist principles,⁴ I believe Anabaptism begins and ends with congregational bodies; churches are icons, inviting us into the flow of God’s grace

through history. Our convictions are displayed through our life and worship, thus all we can do is describe the movements of our bodies as we gather and are sent out, as we preach and pray, as we baptize and eat together, as we sing and share the good news.

In the following pages I describe the movements of eight bodies of faith, each of which is a member congregation of Mennonite Church USA. Over six months I spent eight to nine days at each church.⁵ From Sunday to Sunday, I attended as many worship services and congregational gatherings as I could. Interviews with church members and informal conversations provided further insight into the congregation and the community beyond the church walls. I am grateful for the gracious welcome I received. Church members welcomed me into their lives, and congregational leaders invited me to attend meetings where they openly discussed important matters of the church. I am indebted to their gifts of openness and vulnerability.

The Louisville Institute awarded me a Pastoral Study Project grant in 2010, which enabled me to visit these congregations; I am thankful for their generous support. I am also grateful for the people at my church who cared enough for my wellbeing as a pastor to offer me a sabbatical. During my visits I wrote articles that appeared in the *Mennonite Weekly Review*; I am thankful to Paul Schrag and his team for providing a venue for me to share my experiences.

I offer these reflections as snapshots taken at the beginning of my journey into the Mennonite church. They are brief glimpses from one perspective. If you want to fill me in on what I have missed, or if you disagree with what I have seen, I would welcome your corrections and insight.⁶ Due to a limited budget, I could only explore a few dots on the map of our denomination. In the future, perhaps, I will have opportunities to visit other congregations and take another series of snapshots.

Gospel at Mt. Zion: Boonsboro, MD

A handful of us file into the nursery on Tuesday morning for prayer at Mt. Zion Mennonite Church. I take a seat in the circle—in a rocking chair with a changing table for babies at my back. Praying in a nursery seems exactly right; for we are all children, utterly dependent on the God who shares with us the Spirit's breath of life. "God," Gene prays during our time together, "You supply all our needs and that's real nice." His intimate yet frank style hints at a long history of conversation with God. Gene continues, although I hear an edge of frustration in his voice — as if he has been praying this prayer for the past week and is tired of it: "We pray that BP Oil will get that well plugged up so that your beauty won't be messed up anymore." His prayer resonates with many in the circle who whisper their amens and nod their heads.

The suffering in and around the Gulf of Mexico seems like an alien world from the gentle beauty of Maryland's Cumberland Valley. Yet the prayers at Mt. Zion invite that place a thousand miles away into our lives. In this church nursery we pray ourselves into the fundamental connections of God's creation, into the tissues of grace that hold the world together in God's hands. Our prayers echo the early Anabaptist teachings about how the Word of God is preached through all of creation, because all creatures come from Christ. "The gospel of all creatures is about nothing other than simply Christ the crucified one," wrote Hans Hut in the sixteenth century. "The whole Christ suffers in all members."⁷ According to Hut, creatures continue to bear "the affliction of Christ" and reveal how Jesus "will also be crucified until the end of the world."⁸

With Christ's creatures of the Gulf of Mexico in our mind, we prayed our way from the fields of Mt. Zion Mennonite Church into the Crucified. "In this way," to use the words of Hut again, "the person is cast into the abyss of hell...[and] must simply wait until the comfort of the Holy Spirit comes upon

him.”⁹ So we wait, in a circle with heads bowed, letting our thoughts wander into the abyss in the sea, into the presence of the crucified Christ.

From the window of the nursery I can see the crowded cemetery that stretches across the hill alongside the church — a field planted with rectangular stones to mark the graves of the faithful: Stauffer, Newcomer, Reiff, Funk... A couple centuries of weather has made the older headstones undecipherable. Mennonites settled here along the Beaver Creek in the middle of the eighteenth century, and I imagine some of the jagged and blackened gravestones remember the dead from those years. The life of this church rests on the foundations laid by those who now populate the field of graves. Mt. Zion Mennonite Church is the fruit of those fields. As Robert Pogue Harrison notes in his book *The Dominion of the Dead*, “we are born of the dead, ...of the worlds they brought into being.”¹⁰

The nursery where new life enters the church also opens onto the field of the dead. Memories of the dead drift into the church with the breeze and continue to shape the Christ-infused world Mt. Zion inhabits.

We are always clothed with the faithfulness of the past; Anabaptism is a hand-me-down offered through cherished histories and memories, through cultures and traditions that invite us into a fresh experience of the same old gospel. Anabaptism is not a set of naked principles or essences, but the legacies of the dead handed down to us in real places, through particular congregations, and with specific people. Our faith in Christ is passed to us with hands, like the hands of Richard and Sue Lehman from Mt. Zion who handed me their 1927 *Church Hymnal* — a gift from “father and mother Petre on September 17, 1955,” as the first page of the hymnal recorded. Richard sang to us from this hand-me-down depository of Anabaptist faith. Every thread of the frayed cloth cover offered communion with faithful worshipers over the years. “He near

my soul has always stood,” Richard sang as Sue and I hummed,
“His loving kindness, oh how good!”

** An edited version of this reflection appeared in the July 19, 2010 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review as “Faith handed down, yet new.”*

Breathing the Spirit: Chicago, IL

After the Sunday morning worship service, members of Chicago Community Mennonite Church gather for a hymn-sing at Heritage Woods, a low-income assisted living community on the west side of Chicago. In one of the facility's common areas, we arrange the chairs into a circle and wait for residents to arrive. They make their way into the circle with walkers, canes, and in wheelchairs. As we welcome them, they are handed blue Mennonite hymnals. One of the women asks us as she sits down, "Are you the singing people?" "Yes," responds Pastor Megan Ramer, "We're from a Mennonite church nearby." The woman rests into her chair and sighs, "Oh, that's good. I always feel better with your singing." She pauses, and looking around the circle, she says, "You know we've missed you."

In a raspy yet gentle voice, the man next to me agrees: "Yes, our hearts are made glad when you come and sing with us." As he is speaking, newcomers make their way into our circle and he offers them words of welcome: "Come on in. We're one big family here." He slowly bends down and rustles through the grocery bag at his feet. As we begin singing, I can see him press the red button on an old cassette tape recorder.

The people in the circle make requests. Many of the songs are found in our hymnals, and some we sing from memory. After finishing the last words of "Amazing Grace," a man across from me offers an impromptu testimony: "If the man who wrote that song can change, then I can change too," he says, referring to John Newton. "He was a slave-owner, and God saved him — yes, if God can save a wretch like him, then God can save a wretch like me."

The testimony moves another person to reminisce about God's work of salvation. "I remember when I gave my life to the Lord — when I was at church, and we were singing a song, and the pastor said that the doors of the church were open, so I walked right up and..." He stops midsentence, closes his eyes,

and starts humming a tune. “Yes, that’s the song we were singing.” His voice wavers, fading in and out, sounding as if his throat is full of gravel. Yet he sings with confidence, “Just a closer walk with Thee. Grant it, Jesus, is my plea...” The rest of us join in his song. “I am weak, but Thou art strong. Jesus, keep me from all wrong.”

As we sing, our lives are drawn together. As we worship God, we rest into the presence of the Holy Spirit. The God who breathed life into the first humans now breathes through our songs, enlivening our spirits with the Spirit of God. Singing is our communion, as we share the same Spirit with each of our breaths — drawing into our bodies the breath that comes with the words from the ones beside us.

“Every song could be an expression of communion,” writes the liturgical musician Mary K. Oyer.¹¹

After pastor Ramer blesses us with a closing prayer, the man next to me reaches into his grocery bag again and presses the stop button on his cassette recorder. He notices my curiosity and leans over to me. “I like to get all this singing on tape,” he tells me, “and I play it when I’m lonely, at night sometimes.” I imagine how, from his tape player, the faint sounds of the Spirit’s breath at our hymn-sing will continue to echo in the rooms at Heritage Woods during the week.

** An edited version of this reflection appeared in the December 6, 2010 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review as “Breathing the Spirit’s song.”*

Earthly Life, Heavenly Life: Buras, LA

After driving an hour and a half south of New Orleans, I find myself at the bottom edge of Louisiana, the southernmost tip of Plaquemines Parish, in a small community called Buras, surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico. As I turn from the main highway into a neighborhood, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina seizes my attention: the skeletal remains of houses, wrecked boats awaiting repair, and groves of lifeless trees.

There are already a few cars in the parking lot of Lighthouse Fellowship, a Mennonite congregation. Pastor George Reno shows up early on Sunday morning to start the coffee. I walk through the empty sanctuary and make my way back to the kitchen and dining area. I am welcomed and handed a mug of coffee. I take a seat at one of the tables and listen as friends share stories about the past week. After a couple more people arrive, we make our way into the sanctuary. Someone from the congregation steps to the pulpit and offers us a welcome. We are invited to call out songs for worship, and we sing them together after each request: "Seek ye first," "He has made me glad," among others.

The songs come to an end and we rest in a moment of stillness before the worship leader prompts us to offer testimonies from the week. "After many difficult months," one woman shares briefly from her chair, "I feel like I've been resurrected!" Someone else expresses his joy in returning to worship after the destruction of the hurricane in 2005. "Even after the storm, God is able to bring something good back to life." He continues, "As the apostle Paul says, we know that all things work together for good for those who love God."

After a few others offer words of testimony, people begin to offer prayers. "Pray for Pinky, one of my old old buddies," requests one man. "He's having surgery this week." As each request is made, we bow our heads and someone offers up the petition to God. The prayer time concludes with a request for

sister Ruby to offer the gift of music with her harmonica. After she plays her tune, for those of us without ears to hear, sister Ruby interprets with her words what she spoke through her music. The song, she explains, was about God's everlasting mercies made new every morning.

Pastor Reno gets up from his seat and introduces the one visitor that morning — me. "This is brother Ike... Well, actually his name is Isaac, but I like to call him brother Ike." He looks at me. "Is that okay with you?" I nod, and pastor Reno asks if I would share the Word of God this morning.

After the sermon the congregation reassembles around the tables in the dinning room for a fellowship meal. Worship at Lighthouse Fellowship begins and ends around tables, with friends and a stranger sharing food and drink, with what the historian Hans-Jürgen Goertz describes in his book *The Anabaptists* as "conversational liturgies."¹² At these tables ordinary life is transfigured into worship.

George and Ruby Reno invite me back to their house a couple blocks from the church. I sit and listen as they speak of God's grace and provision in the midst of the storms of life, and we pray together for God's continual sustenance in our lives of faith. As I get ready to leave, sister Ruby tells me to come back for another visit, but next time to bring my wife as well. Then, with a confidence that comes with ninety years of life with God, she says, "And if we don't get to see you back down here, we'll see you up there." For a second I think she is considering a trip to North Carolina, but I quickly realize that she means heaven: that great reunion of Christ's sisters and brothers, gathered around the banquet table where earthly life is transformed into heavenly life.

** An edited version of this reflection appeared in the May 9, 2011 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review as "Earthly life, heavenly life."*

The World of God: Lancaster, PA

A crowd assembles along the sidewalk in front of East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church (ECSMC) on Monday evening. At 5:30pm pastor Ron Adams blesses the food, after which hungry people begin to file through the entryway and into the fellowship hall. The line passes by the kitchen where a group from the church piles baked spaghetti, salad and bread on each plate. For the past ten years, this community meal has been a weekly rhythm in the life of the church. Tonight 150 people — including members of the church, homeless from the streets, and hungry neighbors — will enjoy food and fellowship.

I follow the crowd through the food line, and with plate in hand I find a seat at one of the tables. They welcome me and a woman tells me that she hasn't seen me around before. After I explain that I'm visiting from North Carolina, she graciously lets me know where and when to find free evening meals for the rest of the week. Then she and a few other people at the table talk about which church prepares the most delicious food; it's a tie between the Catholics and the Mennonites.

I look up from my spaghetti and see pastor Ron wander among the tables. "Pastor," I hear a man greet him as Ron turns towards him for a short conversation.

Through this ministry of the church, Ron has become a pastor to the people who wander the city. Members of ECSMC also have found themselves drawn into the lives of the people with whom they eat. Marilou Adams, a member of the congregation, says to me after the meal: "This is not social work. This is just what it means to be the church." Pastor Ron continues Marilou's thought: "At this meal we sit down with sisters and brothers one day a week and become part of the same body."

For the Mennonites of Lancaster County, the city was not always a place to extend the church's table fellowship. There was a time when, according to the faithful, the line between the sanctified church and the irredeemable world passed between the farm and the city. While many within the conference did not approve, some Mennonites began meeting for worship in a house on East Chestnut Street in the late nineteenth century. As Martin G. Weaver records in *Mennonites of Lancaster Conference*, "when the first house [of worship] was built in 1879... many were the adverse criticisms made, doubts and fears expressed."¹³ While Mennonites worried about their sisters and brothers who ventured into the city, the Lancaster newspaper gladly welcomed the new congregation at East Chestnut Street: "The locality for the new church is a very favorable one, and it is hoped that the congregation will be successful in accomplishing their object."¹⁴

Urban expressions of Anabaptism are nothing new. For the past 130 years, the city has not been foreign territory for the Mennonites of Lancaster Conference.

While waiting for Sunday morning worship to begin, I read a brochure in the foyer that describes the purpose for the church's life in the city: "East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church, planting life and peace in our neighborhood." The church exists as a place for God's seed of new life to grow into peace-filled communion for all. In a world where some people are treated as less than human, the church invites everyone to find the preciousness of their life in Christ's body. Through word and deed, this Mennonite body in the city of Lancaster declares the infinite beauty of Jesus' sisters and brothers. The church has become a site where a new world is breaking through the cracks of the old.

"Use us to create a new world on earth," pastor Sue Conrad prays at the beginning of the worship service. As she speaks from the pulpit, the sounds of the world outside sneak through the open windows: the sound of traffic speeding

through the city, the piercing rhythm of a car alarm, fragments of conversations along the sidewalk on the other side of the church wall. The church in this city worships with open windows and doors, welcoming the bustling flow of life on the streets, receiving the world of God.

** An edited version of this reflection appeared in the August 9, 2010 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review as "Door open to the city, world."*

Creation and Mission: Freeman, SD

As I walked the gravel road alongside Tim and Carol Graber's farm, a line from pastor Eric Deckert's sermon bounced around in my head: "God is already speaking," Deckert preached that morning at Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, "God speaks through the beauty of creation." I saw the beauty of golden waves of tassels flowing across a sea of corn stalks and I heard the lovely voices of birds talking to each other, I assume, and perhaps talking to me. If they were messengers of God's Word, I was at a loss since I did not know their language. But God could not fault them for lacking in persistence; for, despite my ignorance, they followed me down the road, filling my thoughts with their songs, speaking the beauty of creation.

For the people of Salem-Zion, the life of the church is woven into the life of the land, into the crops and the animals. The health of the church and the wider community depend on the health of the earth. Christians call this dependency "grace." As the agrarian theologian Norman Wirzba writes, "Those who work closely with the earth...know in clear and unmistakable terms that their lives are maintained by a beneficence and grace that they neither understand nor control."¹⁵ God has endowed the earth with the mysterious power of fertility, which the people of Salem-Zion recognize as God's movement of grace that sustains life — their lives and ours, for all of us depend on the soil for food. As Tim Graber said to me while hauling a load of corn, "All of this belongs to God; we just take care of it."

God's creation is cultivated not only to provide for the members of Salem-Zion, but also for the sake of the world. In the fall, after the harvest, the congregation expresses its gratitude with a celebration of missions. Receiving the gifts of the earth, according to the church calendar, is commemorated with a festival of giving. Worship and work grow into one another, and the fruit is a congregation that lives for the sake of sharing with the world the good news. As the people of

Salem-Zion give from the produce of the land, they make visible the words of Menno Simons: "We are prepared," he wrote in the sixteenth century, "to share our possessions... however little [they] may be; and to sweat and labor to meet the need of the poor, as the Spirit and Word of the Lord, and true brotherly love teach and imply."¹⁶

Concerns about God's mission of healing and hope also sparked a conversation during Sunday school about local issues. In the class I heard a wide-ranging discussion of what it meant to live as Anabaptists. The leader for the day, Larry Eisenbeis, read from an article in the *Mennonite Weekly Review*: "Anna of Rotterdam," wrote Joanna Shenk, "an Anabaptist martyr, advised: 'Where you hear of a poor, simple, cast-off little flock, which is despised and rejected by the world, join them.'"¹⁷ The group thought together about this call for solidarity with the poor in their rural community. Polly Waltner, who works as a local R.N., noted the irony of living among fields of crops while some go hungry: "It's an injustice," said Waltner, "that some people don't have the means for healthy food."

In Freeman I found an Anabaptism that works with the grace of creation, as a Mennonite congregation shares the beneficence of the land in order to provide for those who are still waiting for a people to embody God's good news to the poor. May the Anabaptism of Salem-Zion Mennonite Church be our Anabaptism as well: "to sweat and labor to meet the need of the poor," Menno wrote, "as the Spirit and Word of the Lord...teach and imply."

** An edited version of this reflection appeared in the May 7, 2011 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review as "Creation and God's mission."*

The Pueblo of God: Dallas, TX

The Bible study before the Sunday morning worship service of Iglesia Menonita Luz del Evangelio turns into a passionate sermon. A discussion of the story of Esther becomes a call to live as the “pueblo de Dios” amidst forces that seek to destroy the church. Haman, the villain in Esther’s story, becomes a name for political leaders and immigration enforcement agents who sever the body of Christ by taking away “los hermanos y hermanas del pueblo que no tienen papeles” — *brothers and sisters who are undocumented residents*. But, like the Jews in the story of Esther, “tenemos que orar.” We need to pray because some demons require prayer and fasting. Yet no matter what happens, the *pueblo* of God can have faith “porque tenemos un abogado en el cielo, a la diestra del Padre” — we trust in Jesus Christ, our heavenly immigration attorney, arguing on our behalf, defending our citizenship in the *pueblo* of God. Among the various metaphors for describing the salvific work of Jesus, we can add another: our Lord the immigration attorney, *el Abogado en el cielo*.

This good news from the book of Esther echoes through the room and the people can no longer remain in their seats. Like a flood, they rush to the front of the sanctuary. With hands reaching up into heaven, they pray aloud — a multitude of voices, prayers rising up into the throne room of God like the incense described in the book of Revelation: worshipful prayers incensing God to set the world ablaze with lightening bolts of merciful justice. “Fuego, fuego, fuego,” pastor Juan Limones calls into heaven, “el fuego del Espíritu Santo” — *the fire of the Holy Spirit*. “Santo, Santo, Santo,” he prays from the stage with his head turned upward, “llénanos con tu presencia” — *fill us with your presence*. The worship leader joins pastor Juan on the stage and turns Juan’s prayer into an announcement of grace: “El Señor quiere un pueblo liberado” — *the Lord desires a liberated pueblo*. She then prays for freedom through Christ: “Libre, libre, libre en ti, Jesucristo. Aleluya! Libre en tu presencia.”

In the midst of all the prayers and praises, the worship team inconspicuously takes the stage. The voices of the congregation unite to sing the words of the worship leader: “Levanto mi corazón, levanto mi vida!” Some remain up front, others kneel at their chairs, and the rest of us stand with raised hands, offering our hearts and lives to God. The power of God thumps through our bodies with the beat of the drum. “Dios es poderoso!” shouts the worship leader — *God is almighty!* Yet the all-powerful God is also a gentle presence among the gathered. “En esta reunión Cristo está,” the leader whispers into her microphone — *Christ is here in our gathering.* “La presencia de Dios está aquí,” she continues in the same quiet voice — *God’s presence is here.* There, in God’s gentle presence, children play on the ground and in the rows of chairs and under the chairs while their parents sing praises to God — and all of it is worship.

Worship even spills into the kitchen at the back of the sanctuary through a door that opens and closes as worshipers pass back and forth. I see worshipers kneading *masa* for tortillas and crushing large watermelons to make juice — liturgical food and drink, the work of worshipers preparing our communal meal. After pastor Juan’s sermon, all of us sit and stand around tables outside and eat together — *tacos, tamales, y jugo de sandía.*

During the week of my visit, the worship services on Friday and Sunday ended with feasts — what I can only describe as anticipations of the food and drink of our promised heavenly *fiesta* in *el pueblo de Dios.*

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come and buy and eat” (Isaiah 55:1).

** An edited version of this reflection appeared in the June 21, 2010 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review as “Worship with God’s pueblo.”*

With the Jews: San Francisco, CA

My wife and I walk down Dolores Street to the address listed for First Mennonite Church of San Francisco. Once we reach the place for Sunday morning worship, we find ourselves outside a Jewish synagogue: Congregation Sha'ar Zahav. Near the door a sidewalk sign lets us know that the Mennonite service begins at 9:30am.

We walk up the stairs into the synagogue and wait for the church service to begin. The song leader asks us to open the Mennonite songbook *Sing the Story* to a traditional Passover song, "Dayeinu." "Had God brought us out of Egypt and not fed us in the desert, then it would have satisfied us." For over a millennium, Jews have been singing these words during Passover as a way of celebrating God's gracious gifts and powerful acts of redemption. "Had God given us the Torah and not led us into Israel, then it would have satisfied us." For those who worship at First Mennonite, God has indeed "led us into Israel," as the song says. The church rents space inside a Jewish community in exile among the gentiles of California. The people of Sha'ar Zahav have made room within their synagogue for a Mennonite worship service.

This Jewish community incarnates God's invitation that we read in the Psalms later in the service: "through the abundance of your steadfast love, I will enter your house" (Ps 5:7). In San Francisco the Mennonites assemble as Christ's body within the house of Israel. Gentiles have become children of God, wrote Karl Barth in 1949, "only as those chosen with [the Jews]; as guests in their house."¹⁸ For First Mennonite of San Francisco, Barth's theology becomes flesh: the church is learning how to be a physical guest within a material house of Israel in diaspora.

After six years of worshiping in the same building, several Jews now return on Sunday mornings for worship with the Mennonites. Bart Shulman describes how he belongs with both

communities: “I feel a sense of home at the synagogue, and at First Mennonite I feel at home in a different way: I’m family, even though I’m a little different.” But Shulman’s difference as a Jew among a mostly gentile church has not prevented him from participating in the life of the Mennonite community. He serves on church committees and has taught Sunday school for two years. Shulman comments, “I consider myself a better Jew than I’ve ever been precisely because I’m so involved with First Mennonite.”

“Worshiping in a synagogue has made possible close relationships with our Jewish brothers and sisters,” observes pastor Sheri Hostetler. “It’s impossible for our church to forget that Jesus was a Jew, which seems to be easy for some Christians to do.”

Even though they are not Jews, the Mennonites have followed Jesus the Jew into one of Israel’s houses of worship. They show all of us that gentile Christians can’t help but be linked to the Jews because we build our lives around Jesus, who was born of a Jewish mother and was circumcised on the eighth day. As Karl Barth put it in his *Church Dogmatics*, “The Word did not simply become any ‘flesh,’ any man humbled and suffering. It became Jewish flesh.”¹⁹

While pastors and theologians discuss the important connections between Judaism and Christianity, not many communities in the United States have let God mingle together their Jewish and Christian bodies of faith. The union of these distinct yet overlapping congregations enables mutual guidance as they discern the voice of God. Recently a member of the synagogue taught a Sunday school class for the Mennonites on how he understands the Jewishness of Jesus; and a few months ago pastor Hostetler preached during Sha’ar Zahav’s worship service.

As these two bodies of faith worship in the same space on different days, the Word of God echoes from one congregation to the other, inviting each community to create ligaments that bind their bodies together into the people of God. The life of

these two intermingled communities returns us to the very beginning of the church when, as John H. Yoder noted, Jewish and Christian “mutual compatibility was lived out Sabbath by Sabbath by hundreds, perhaps thousands of people.”²⁰

** An edited version of this reflection appeared in the September 6, 2010 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review as “Guests in a Jewish house.”*

Your People Will Be My People: Goessel, KS

As I drove north on K-15 highway to Goessel with miles of cornfields in every direction, I remembered the picture of Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church I had seen a month before on a dining room wall in San Francisco, California. The 1886 photograph shows hundreds of men dressed in suits and hats pouring out of the front doors of a large white church. “Neu Alexanderwohler Kirche in Kan” is the caption that appears above the church: *New Alexanderwohl Church in Kansas*. Although Russ Schmidt is now a member of First Mennonite of San Francisco, the picture in his apartment is a sign of the continuing presence in his life of Alexanderwohler Kirche, a Russian Mennonite immigrant community that settled on the Kansas prairie in 1874. Mennonite existence in Goessel and San Francisco bear witness to how the old ways are constantly re-imagined in new contexts.

Mennonite faith and life are formed within the flux of movement and settlement. “The story of the Alexanderwohl congregation is a story wanderings, explorations, experimentations, hopes, and dreams,” writes David C. Wedel at the beginning of his history of the church. “It is a story of ventures of faith.”²¹ Wedel’s narrative follows this Mennonite community as it roams the earth: from the Netherlands to West Prussia to South Russia to Kansas. And all along the way, people from different religious and geographic origins immigrate into the Mennonite family: Swedish Lutherans, German Hutterites, and Dutch Catholics, among others. The Anabaptist identity of the Alexanderwohl community flows from the intermingling of multiple traditions, peoples, and landscapes.

Currently, the Alexanderwohl Mennonites are undergoing another intermingling of identities and traditions. During my visit in Goessel, I saw familiar faces from a church I visited this past May. Youth and young adults from Iglesia Menonita Luz del Evangelio in Dallas, Texas, had driven seven hours to join

the Alexanderwohl Mennonites for worship. Throughout the year the two churches take turns sending members to worship with their sister congregation. As they gather together for worship, God is at work transforming both churches into a new people. “In one another,” pastor Linda Ewert prayed during the worship service, “we find the love of the Holy Spirit, the God who binds us together.”

As these two sister congregations cross borders in order to commune with one another, they find themselves in communion with Christ. To use the words of Augustine of Hippo from the fourth century, the Holy Spirit is the presence of love that “holds them together in a knot of unity, ...infusing souls and almost mixing them together.”²² The Mennonites of Alexanderwohl and Luz del Evangelio are being mixed together in the love of the Holy Spirit, and refashioned into a body of Christ that crosses over worship styles and geographic borderlines. The love of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit have drawn them into one another, mingling their bodies, and creating a new form for God’s presence.

The Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is not a static identity in the past that we can reincarnate in the present. Instead, our tradition is a style of radical reformation, as theologian Chris K. Huebner argues in his book, *A Precarious Peace*.²³ We are a people who are always being re-formed through the movement of the Holy Spirit. And for Luz del Evangelio and Alexanderwohl, the Spirit of God is a movement that is mixing up their stories and identities. The two distinct bodies, each with important cultural distinctions and formative stories of migration, are being re-formed through sharing the life of Christ with one another. As Pastor Steve Schmidt said in his sermon, “The stories of Luz del Evangelio will become our stories. They will become our people.” Schmidt’s words echo Ruth’s commitment to Naomi as the two women wandered together, homeless in an inhospitable land: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

Anabaptism is a style of adoption in the way of Ruth, where your people become my people and my people become your people as we worship in Goessel, Dallas, San Francisco, or wherever the Spirit leads us into each other's presence.

** An edited version of this reflection appeared in the October 18, 2010 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review as "Your people are mine too."*

Reflections from Home: Durham, NC

At Iglesia Menonita Luz del Evangelio in Dallas, Texas, during a church-wide meal after the worship service, a woman and I talked about how we became Mennonite. “I knew I belonged with the Mennonites,” she told me, “when I went to a Western District Conference meeting in Newton [Kan.] and they called me ‘sister’ — people I’ve never met before.” She went on to describe how life-long Mennonites in Kansas and elsewhere have treated her as an equal and welcomed her perspective on the gospel, even though she was not a pastor. She found herself being drawn into a living tradition with a simple gesture of welcome, of belonging. What was true of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists is still true of the Mennonites in Kansas: as the historian Hans-Jürgen Goertz writes in *The Anabaptists*, “simple religious worship and a renewed sense of community (for example, by calling each other brothers and sisters) were enough to mobilise a following.”²⁴

Traditions come to us with hands; the Latin root, *traditio*, means “handing down” over time. To find ourselves within a tradition, like Anabaptism, is to be part of a community that is bound together in giving and receiving, a community that holds hands as the past and present — as stories — flow through our bodies. There’s a materiality to our convictions; faith is fleshy. As the Mennonite sister at Luz del Evangelio experienced, Anabaptism happens to us when we receive one another with a hand of fellowship, opening ourselves to pass around the stories of God’s faithfulness, sustaining the witness of the martyrs who in turn sustain us.

Anabaptism is not a possession we can defend with our tight-fisted hands; instead, it’s a hand-me-down, a gift, flowing through us, drawing us together as sisters and brothers, as we are being adopted by the dead into the Mennonite family. A living Anabaptist tradition, if it is not going to be reduced to an intellectual project, returns again and again to the legacies of the dead handed down to us in actual places, through

particular congregations, and with specific people. As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has put it, “A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied, argument...”²⁵ Traditions have everything to do with bodies; they are socially embodied, flowing through our cultures of faith.

Eight years ago I also found myself being drawn into a living Anabaptism through a small Mennonite congregation in North Carolina: Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship. As I returned again and again for worship, I felt my life growing into theirs, and their lives growing into mine. Their rituals and culture became a home for my faith to mature in devotion to Christ as they welcomed me into the Mennonite family as a brother.

As I learned from books and conversations about the varieties of Anabaptism among Mennonite churches, I wanted to experience the congregational diversity for myself, in flesh and blood. I was, and continue to be, uninterested in “Anabaptism stripped down to the bare essentials,” as one author recently put it.²⁶ Instead of dismissing the rituals and cultures that flow through Mennonite bodies as merely husks within which are hidden the kernels of Anabaptist principles, I believe our convictions are displayed through our life and worship. Thus all we can do is describe the movements of our bodies as we gather and are sent out, as we preach and pray, as we baptize and eat together, as we sing and share the good news — and to let these movements draw us into a living tradition, where we open ourselves for unseen moments of the past to sneak up on us and guide us onto unmarked paths into a future. To locate ourselves within the rituals and cultures of a people, of a church, is to let history come alive for us in unexpected ways. Stories we may not have noticed before all of us sudden take hold of us, reaching into our lives through the cultural residues of the faithful, the ritualized accretions of a bygone generation. Once we let these stories insinuate themselves into our lives through the witness of a community, we find ourselves being invited into adaptations within our tradition, being nudged into new yet faithful trajectories.

To articulate an Anabaptist vision that is simply an essence distilled from various histories is to turn our tradition into a corpse. Anabaptism as a system of principles ends up killing the past; because once we have a system, we no longer need to let the twists and turns of our present life give us new ears to hear what we may have missed before. Within a living tradition, old voices are made new as we let our ever-changing world open us to displays of faithfulness from different times and places. Anabaptism comes alive when we locate ourselves within cultures of worship that become spaces where stories can echo back and forth through the ages. The congregation, with its irreducible personality, becomes a body of old and new knowledge, articulating a tradition with every movement, with rituals and practices.

I am grateful for all the Mennonite congregations across the United States that welcomed me into their midst. Instead of trying to come up with a list of essentials for an Anabaptist future, I would rather describe an atmosphere, an aura, which enveloped me — the same spirit that washed over me when I entered different Mennonite communities. I experienced a culture of faith where, although a stranger, I was welcomed as a brother, as a member of the family. To be welcomed, without hostility, as someone who already belongs, is the gift of communion in the body of Christ. For the Mennonite communities I visited, the gospel of peace cannot be reduced to a conviction about war; instead, the peace of God is a way of being, open to the flow of divine love from the Holy Spirit, drawing us — strangers and neighbors, friends and enemies — into one another, without violence, without the threat of death as a last resort to end our differences, to solve our conflicts. Anabaptism is a living tradition where cultures of faith, like the Mennonite Church, are invitations into an identity that happens to us as we retell the old stories and write new stories with our lives together.

** An edited version of this reflection appeared in the October 17, 2011 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review as "Anabaptism, a living tradition."*

Conclusion

“God is here among us,” we sing as we assemble for worship, “let us all adore him, and with awe appear before him.”²⁷ Gerhard Tersteegen’s hymn gathers our scattered lives and forms us into the body of Christ. God’s triune life becomes interior to our own: “God is here within us,” we proclaim with Tersteegen’s words from eighteenth-century Germany.

In our communities of worship, God is present, moving through us and with us. As John H. Yoder put it in *Body Politics*, “The community’s action is God’s action.”²⁸ Or, as he wrote in *The Royal Priesthood*: “God does not merely authorize or command” the activities of the church; rather, “*God is doing* them in, with, and under the human practice.”²⁹ God is really present through the ordinary life of our congregations. The life of God pulses through the body of Christ, flowing through us and with us. Congregational life ushers us into the presence of God’s eternal love for the world.

As I visited Mennonite congregations in 2010, I found myself among communities of believers who invited me into God’s presence. I glimpsed the face of God in a diversity of locations, heard God’s voice among the words of worship offered in different gatherings, and felt the life-giving Spirit breathe through various congregational bodies.

In this booklet I hope you have found a series of snapshots of God’s presence among rural and urban congregations, wealthy and poor, young and old, recent church plants and historic congregations. While there is so much more to meditate on in these congregations, I hope my reflections have invited you to see something of Christ’s love made flesh in the diversity of his many members, to see features of God’s face in our sisters and brothers of the Mennonite family. Every congregation offers one more path into the presence of God’s life among us: “God is here within us,” we declare with Tersteegen’s hymn, “soul, in silence fear him, humbly, fervently draw near him.”

If we believe what we sing, then we are invited into the humble posture of adoration as we talk about sister congregations within our denominational family. “God is here among us,” we confess, “let us all adore him.” To adore is to inhabit a position of open-eyed wonder, to let suppositions fade away as we sit in the presence of the holy. The body of Christ is holy, thus adoration is necessary for any true knowledge of our congregational bodies. For us, knowledge comes through patient meditation on the Christ who dwells among us. “‘He who beholds the Church,’ says Gregory of Nyssa, ‘really beholds Christ.’”³⁰

The apostle Paul frequently opens and closes his letters with confessions of his longing for communion with others in God’s presence: “I long to see you,” he says at the beginning of Romans (1:11). And, again, towards the end of the letter, “I have been longing for many years to see you” (15:23). Finally, he invites others into his desire for communion: “Pray...that I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed” (15:32). What if we made Paul’s longing — “I long for all of you,” he writes in Philippians, “with the affection of Christ Jesus” (1:8) — fundamental to our faithful discipleship in the way of Jesus? In a world where people judge each other from afar, where we admonish sister congregations without ever sharing the intimacy of a worship service, I offer these reflections as an invitation into the longing for communion that Paul describes, the longing for union in the affection of Christ.

~ Isaac S. Villegas
Easter, 2011

** This conclusion is adapted from a reflection I wrote before I began my visits: “Road trip to seek God’s face,” Mennonite Weekly Review, May 10, 2010.*

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Notes

¹ Menno Simons, “Brief Confession on the Incarnation” (1544), in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. by Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 448.

² Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 98.

³ See Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2003): “The third-century Christian writer Lactantius relates ‘religion’ to *religare*, ‘to bind up’ or ‘to bind together’, and so religion becomes inseparable from liturgy, community and the practice of faith” (2).

⁴ Those who seek to articulate essences and essentials hidden inside so-called cultural wrappings stand in the tradition of Adolf von Harnack, who encouraged Christians to pierce through the transient externals of Jesus and his followers in order to grasp the spiritual universals at the core of Christianity: “[the] highest duty...is to determine what is of permanent value,...to find out what is essential” (13)—“to grasp what is essential in the phenomena, and to distinguish kernel from husk” (12). Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. by Thomas Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986).

Stuart Murray’s recent book on Anabaptism echoes with von Harnack’s methodology: “it is legitimate, and often helpful, to strip back the historical and cultural accretions from traditions that have persisted through the centuries” (*The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* [Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010], 44). His work is an “attempt to distill the essence of Anabaptism” (44). Because Stuart thinks he can strip away the husks of contemporary Mennonite communities and get to the Anabaptist kernel, he finds no reason to be in institutional communion with flesh and blood Anabaptists: “I will not become Hutterite, Amish, or Mennonite, but I am grateful that the principles of ‘naked Anabaptism’ are sometimes clothed in Hutterite, Amish, and Mennonite dress” (158-159).

⁵ Due to weariness from traveling, I failed to spend eight days with the congregation in Louisiana, which was my last trip.

⁶ Please email me at isaac.villegas@gmail.com, or send a letter to Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, 1314 Carroll Street, Durham, NC 27707.

⁷ Hans Hut, "On the Mystery of Baptism" (1526), in *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. by Daniel Liechty (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 67.

⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁹ Ibid., 76.

¹⁰ Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), xi.

¹¹ Mary K. Oyer, "A Philosophy of the Use of Music in Mennonite Meetings," in *Nurturing Spirit Through Song: The Life of Mary K. Oyer*, eds. Rebecca Slough and Shirley Sprunger King (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2007), 159.

¹² Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. by Trevor Johnson (London, UK: Routledge, 1996), 116.

¹³ Martin G. Weaver, *Mennonites of Lancaster Conference* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1931), 118: "The congregation numbered forty, when the first house was built in 1879 and many were the adverse criticisms made, doubts and fears expressed, but sixteen years later the congregation numbered over three hundred."

¹⁴ "New Church Contemplated," *The New Era* (Lancaster, PA), 5/19/1879, p. 4.

¹⁵ Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31.

¹⁶ Menno Simons quoted in Peter James Klassen, *The Economics of Anabaptism 1525-1560* (The Hague: Morton and Co., 1964), 48.

¹⁷ Joanna Shenk, "Connections at the margins," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, 8/2/2010.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Against the Stream* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1954), 200; quoted in Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 220.

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 166.

²⁰ John H. Yoder, "It Did Not Have to Be," in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, eds. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 54.

²¹ David C. Wedel, *The Story of Alexanderwohl*, 2nd ed. (Goessel, KS: Goessel Centennial Committee, 1999 [1974]), 1.

²² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, prologue 6.

²³ Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006). "At its best, the Mennonite church exists as a kind of ongoing political experiment... [I]t is important to recognize that the Mennonite church has always existed in the midst of dual pressures toward closure and openness" (37). "I want to suggest that it is equally important to understand Radical Reformation as naming a hermeneutic or style rather than a distinct entity or thing" (43).

²⁴ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, 114.

²⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984 [1981]), 222.

²⁶ Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith*, 15.

²⁷ Gerhard Tersteegen, "God is here among us," in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992), #16.

²⁸ John H. Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 3.

²⁹ John H. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. by Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 369.

³⁰ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), 73; Gregory of Nyssa, *In Cant.*, hom. 13.