

REPORT TO OHIO CONFERENCE OF MENNONITE CHURCH USA

SUMMER 2015

RANDY KEELER e-mail: keelerr@bluffton.edu cell phone: 419-302-4666

During the 2014-2015 academic year I had the privilege of spending my sabbatical year as youth ministry resource person for the Ohio Conference of Mennonite Church USA. Besides serving as a resource to congregations in specific situations when called upon, I also planned six workshops for youth workers in different locations around the state in an attempt to make them accessible to all the constituent churches. An especially valuable experience for me was meeting with 49 pastors and sometimes other youth leaders of the 73 churches in the Conference to hear more about their respective youth ministries and to gain information as to how they were attempting to live out an Anabaptist youth ministry approach in their specific locations. This report will summarize the workshop experiences as well as offer insight gained from the congregational visits.

At the beginning of my work, Tom Kauffman and I agreed that it would be helpful to pull together an advisory group from the Conference to help me focus my work in areas that might be most helpful. The group consisted of Heather Miller from Orrville Mennonite, Andrew Michaels from Camp Luz, Craig Strasbaugh from Kidron Mennonite, and Alex Dye from Oak Grove Mennonite (West Liberty). It was agreed that an area of resourcing missing in the Conference was some basic youth ministry training for lay workers. This agreement spawned the planning of six area workshops geared specifically for these lay workers. The basic theme of these workshops was an attempt to help the participants think through why they do what they do in youth ministry, and to consider whether what they do is consistent with an Anabaptist approach to youth ministry, making them unique to other ministries in their communities. A question that also was addressed was, "Is what you are doing programmatically reaching the youth in their context as to where they are at spiritually?" Workshops were held in Wayne County (Orrville), West Liberty (Oak Grove), Archbold (Central), Spartansburg, Pa. (Valley View),

Columbiana (Midway), and Holmes County (Berlin). Twenty-four of the Conference churches participated in these workshops with 54 youth workers present. In addition to these workshops, I also did two workshops at ACA, one on “baptism” and the other on “joint youth groups.” The workshop on baptism was an outgrowth of my conversations with pastors and focused on how baptism was practiced in congregational life, from the point of invitation to the actual baptismal service, and then even follow-up after the event. The workshop on joint youth groups shared insights I had gained from observing and analyzing the two joint youth groups which exist within the Conference (one in Wayne County and the other in Columbiana County) and also through conversations with conference ministers from other conferences where joint youth groups exist or may have existed at one time. These last two workshops were reasonably well-attended with around 12-15 participants at each one.

One of the greatest joys in my work was meeting with pastors and hearing about their respective youth ministries. In some places youth ministry appears to be thriving. In other locations, a decreasing demographic of youth has caused the necessity to rethink how youth ministry should be carried out in their specific context. The goal of my conversations was to obtain information as to how churches in the Ohio Conference have lived out an approach to youth ministry that would reflect an Anabaptist perspective. Specifics as to what constitutes an Anabaptist approach to youth ministry can be seen in the May-June issue of the *Ohio Mennonite Evangel* and also in the document linked on the conference website titled “Anabaptist Youth Ministry Revisited.” In short, an Anabaptist approach to youth ministry involves a three-fold foci of discipleship, community, and peace and nonviolence that is nuanced to distinctive understandings within the Anabaptist tradition. From this point forward, my report will summarize the information garnered from constituent churches. After each focus summarized, I will attempt to add some reflections on my findings concerning how current practice trends may affect the youth in the church.

Discipleship

The “believer’s church tradition” is another way of thinking about “Anabaptism.” The very nature of that term implies the existence of a church where its members have made a deliberate, individual decision to be involved in the church that Jesus established. A person in this tradition is not compelled to be a follower of Christ, but freely chooses to do so on their own accord. Based on one’s family of birth, an individual may be raised to function within a given religious tradition, but the Anabaptist tradition assumes a conscious individual choice to join the church based on a faith conviction regarding their relationship with Jesus. The biblical description of this event is called “born again,” or “new creation” (John 3:3; I Peter 1:23; II Corinthians 5:17). The early Anabaptists of the 16th century would often use the term “new birth,” as evidenced by the treatise of that title written by Menno Simons in 1537.

Two of the questions I asked of pastors related to this idea of a conscious decision to follow Christ were “How are young people invited to faith in Jesus Christ in your congregation?” and “To what extent is the term ‘new birth’ (or something similar) used in your congregation?” It was a bit surprising to me that this question was often met with silence as the pastor took some time to think about how they wanted to respond. Many of the pastors mentioned that the invitation to baptism class is when youth are asked about their commitment to Christ. The Sunday morning message was offered as a time when invitations to commitment were given but only a few mentioned that actual response time was ever given. One congregation plans every fourth Sunday of the month for the sermon to contain an evangelistic focus. Some suggested that the invitations to faith should happen in the home, while others focused on the Christian education program and/or the camp experience as where it most often happens. The church’s mentoring program was a context mentioned where invitations to faith were given, while convention was a setting for others when many of their youth made commitments to Christ. Many pastors were in agreement by stating that faith in Christ often comes about through interpersonal relationships with members of the congregation in some form.

Commitments to Christ do not happen in one particular way, but the expectation for it to happen in congregational life varied from every Sunday to never. Some pastors lamented their admission that it doesn't happen often enough in congregational life. Other pastors wanted to talk about discipleship in congregational life assuming that young people were already Christian.

The language surrounding "new birth" happens in varying ways in congregational life throughout the Conference. Many congregations indicated that the terms "new birth," "born again," and "new creation" were used frequently. Some pastors preferred the term "transformation" to refer to the change that occurs in one's life when a decision is made for Christ. Others typically used the phrase, "following Christ," as the descriptor of a person who pursues a relationship with Jesus. Some pastors choose to focus solely on discipleship and admit that "new birth" language is infrequently used, if at all.

An Anabaptist understanding of discipleship assumes a suffering faith reflecting the scriptural evidence and also the 16th century experience. Various places in Scripture communicate with followers of Christ the expectation of suffering as a direct result of one's commitment to Christ. In Mark 8:34-38, anyone who would follow Christ is encouraged to "take up their cross" in order to follow in the way that Christ lived. Matthew 5:10-12 states that those who live a righteous life in following Jesus can expect persecution, and in fact, they should welcome it by rejoicing. The type of persecution and suffering that the gospels warn the believer of is not the suffering of everyday life like illness, death, loss of loved ones, and disappointments. The suffering that the New Testament warns of is a direct result of one's faith in Christ. For certain Christian practices to be illegal, such as prayer in public schools, does not constitute suffering. Suffering occurs when one chooses to pray in spite of the consequences and then suffers as a result through fines or arrest. So when I asked pastors the question, "How is the understanding of a 'suffering faith' shared with the youth of your congregation," it was not easy for

them to think of ways that it is able to be communicated in our particular geographic and societal context.

Some pastors have tried to be creative in communicating with youth the connection of suffering with discipleship. *Martyrs Mirror* stories make great sermon illustrations, and pastors have used these to communicate suffering for one's faith. One church has a display of pictures in a showcase in the lobby chronicling a member's trip to Europe visiting many early Anabaptist sites of meetings and persecutions. Some pastors' journeys have brought them experiences in other cultures through missions and service, so stories of believers in those contexts communicates the cost for many Christians throughout the world. The same learnings are experienced when youth are taken to other global contexts through mission trips to expose them to the economic, social, and political contexts that make following Jesus difficult. A couple of churches require baptismal candidates to do research on early Anabaptist martyrs, and another church has artwork painted on the walls of their church building depicting both early and modern martyr stories. Taking baptismal candidates to Behalt in Berlin and Mennohof in Indiana are ways churches have incorporated the reality of suffering as a disciple of Jesus. A number of congregations have exposed their young people to the work of Christian Peacemaker Teams through guest speakers and table displays as a way of teaching them the need to love one's neighbor, pursue peace, and at the same time being willing to suffer for one's beliefs and for the sake of others.

"Servanthood" as a characteristic of a disciple of Jesus is also communicated in a variety of ways in Ohio Conference congregations. Most churches plan mission trips for the youth groups or even of a more intergenerational nature to give young people the opportunity to live a life of service. I discovered that the churches in northwest Ohio have a relationship with mission work in Guatemala and send groups regularly there from the area churches. Eastern Ohio has a connection as far away as Mongolia and as close as the Lighthouse Ministries in Canton where area youth regularly commit their summers to

a time of service. Just as Jesus encouraged his followers to wash one another's feet in John 13, many of the Conference congregations have footwashing services, whether it be yearly or more often, where the symbolic act of service is re-enacted.

An encouraging number of congregations organize or participate in local outreaches which meet certain social, emotional, and economic needs in the community. Those churches in more urban areas do regular outreaches to the homeless through shelter provision and meal distribution. Meals are served either through partnering with existing ministries, providing the availability of a food pantry, or delivering meals to random homeless people on the streets. In all of these outreaches, the youth of the congregation are often involved. Many churches also provide volunteer support for thrift stores in the area.

Reflections on the area of "discipleship"

Although the Anabaptist tradition is founded on the conscious decision of individuals to follow Christ and join the community of faith, it was interesting that opportunities to do so within the life of the congregation are not always readily identified. Are youth in the church being challenged to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior at times other than when baptisms are about to be performed? Decision for Christ precedes baptism and then the act of baptism is a symbol of what has already transpired inwardly in the life of the believer. Large group gatherings like camp, convention, and other youth events have traditionally been places where decisions for Christ have been made, but fewer and fewer congregations have been investing in these venues as places of spiritual decision. Without the inner transformation, does baptism simply become a symbol of cultural accommodation rather than spiritual transformation? By the apparent minimal use of "new birth" rhetoric in many of our churches, are our young people even aware of the spiritual transformation that is available to them in Christ?

In the western culture in which we live and breathe, extra effort will need to be taken in order for young people to understand the "suffering" dimension of an Anabaptist faith in Christ. Creativity

and intentionality will be necessary to help young people understand the potential consequences of following Jesus in life.

Community

The Christian life lived within the context of a community of faith is paramount to an Anabaptist Christian experience. As stated in other places previously mentioned, practices of faith which allow young people to experience intimate Christian community involve becoming a member of that community through baptism, contributing to the life of the community through time and financial resources, sharing their gifts generously, sharing their talents in the ministry of congregational life, sharing of intimate concerns to others for prayer and accountability, and allowing their voice to be heard in decision-making. Congregations in the Conference have a number of methods of instilling this dynamic of community within the experience of its young people.

Observance of baptism across the Conference is diverse and creative. Of course, the one main common feature among all the congregations is the practice of believer's baptism, but how baptism discussion is initiated, if and how instruction preceding baptism happens, how the actual baptism is practiced in congregational life, and any follow-up that happens is very diverse. Because of the breadth of the response to this question, I have issued a separate document on this available on the Conference website.

Financial accountability or stewardship is an area that a few congregations have begun to address with its young people. Most pastors assume that the issue of tithing and giving of financial gifts is encouraged by the parents in the family unit. Some churches have very little anxiety that its financial obligations will be met by its members so they do not even address the issue even with its adult members. A couple of congregations have used Dave Ramsey's materials titled "Creating a Culture of Generosity," which evidently has a youth version, in its youth Sunday School class. "Generation Change"

is another curriculum used and suggested by one congregation. Everence has stewardship material for youth and at least one congregation was currently using it in their youth Sunday school class when I visited them. Most pastors preach on stewardship at least once a year, although in those congregations where the majority of its budget goes toward paying staff, the pastor tends to shy away from or at least experience some anxiety about preaching on this subject. Some youth groups sponsor a child through Compassion and take a regular offering from the youth to help pay the monthly responsibility. The stewardship of the young person's time is also encouraged through various work projects at the church like cleaning of the building, working in the flower beds, helping with blood drives, etc.

Involving youth in the life of the church through their talents and abilities is very alive and well. During the Sunday morning service youth are involved on the worship team, serve as worship leaders, read Scripture, perform dramas, share special music, do interpretive dance, collect the offering, serve as ushers, help with technology, and occasionally even deliver the morning message. In some churches the youth are involved in teaching Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, and mid-week programs for younger ages. The fifth Sunday of the month in some churches is designated as "Youth Sunday" where the youth plan and lead the morning worship service, and youth are often called on to plan and lead special services like the Easter Sunrise Service. Youth have served on care ministry teams and also pastoral search committees. Some pastors shared their frustration in trying to include youth on boards, commissions, and committees of the church serving alongside adults. Consistency in involvement or even the availability of youth for this purpose is sometimes scarce.

An important practice for youth to feel a connection to the community of faith is during times of confession. Hearing the day-to-day struggle of living a life of discipleship through the confession of sin from those in the congregation willing to make themselves vulnerable sets a positive example for youth to do the same in confessing their own struggle and sin. Of course, all of this in the hope of experiencing forgiveness and restoration in the body of Christ.

The experience of confession is varied throughout the Conference. Some congregations admit there is very little transparency or vulnerability experienced in congregational life, with most sin dealt with in private consultation among the elder team. During baptism instruction, youth are often encouraged to allow themselves to be held accountable to others to help them in their spiritual journey, and this is often a question that is asked at the actual baptism for confirmation by the one being baptized. Some congregations practice vulnerability during open sharing times in the morning worship service where occasionally members will confess sin in their lives and ask for prayer. Special anointing services for believers going through a difficult time has demonstrated this vulnerability. When sin is addressed, it seems to be mostly when something happens in a big way to either one of the youth or one of the leaders where the youth are then given an opportunity to respond by extending grace and forgiveness towards the guilty party. In this process they also are demonstrated the consequence of sin in the life of the one who is dealing with it personally. Some pastors incorporate members' testimonies into their worship service inviting them to be vulnerable in their struggles in their sharing as a way to model transparency with the youth and other members of the congregation.

Youth in the congregations have been given a voice in a variety of ways. One obvious way has been their ability to vote on congregational issues after they become members. Youth have been invited to be involved on commissions or committees of the congregation, but the success of that endeavor depended on the number of youth in the congregation and their availability outside of all their school activities. Involvement on pastoral search committees appears to have been a successful way of involving youth and keeping them engaged in a specific task in congregational discernment. This past year (2014-2015) many congregations processed the homosexuality issue as suggested by the Conference and involved the youth in table discussions and small groups around the issue.

Reflections on the area of "community"

It became apparent in my pastoral interviews that the youth in the congregations are actively involved in congregational life, and usually in the context of the morning worship service. Most congregations appear to realize the importance of youth involvement and make it a regular practice to have youth up front during the worship service in some capacity. Particularly in the smaller congregations, the youth of the church contributed extensively to the dynamic and vitality of congregational life. Creating a context for integrating youth into congregational life appeared a bit more difficult in larger congregations making communication and connections between the “youth ministry” and the ministry of the rest of the church difficult. A significant task of youth pastors and youth sponsors should be finding natural and creative ways for the youth of the church to contribute to and participate in congregational life so that the youth feel needed and nurtured by the adults in the congregation.

Peace and Nonviolence

Perhaps nothing sets apart Anabaptism as a particular expression of the Christian faith more than the focus of peace and nonviolence. Nonresistance and the refusal to serve in the military has been a long tradition within Anabaptist fellowship groups. The acculturation of Mennonite churches into the American experience has made it very difficult for them to stay strong in their pacifist worldview. Questions pastors were asked during my interviews focused around training in conflict resolution, participation in service and mission trips, exposure to cultures other than one’s own, the use of peace curriculum, and ways that military service may be discouraged. This was a focus of Anabaptism that appeared to have the most intentionality within congregational life for youth exposure and understanding.

The question regarding conflict resolution training was asked in an attempt to see if there was any intentionality among congregations to live out the concept of peace and nonviolence in its life together. It turned out that in many of my interviews this was a question that was never even asked

because of time constraints. In most of the conversations where I was able to ask the question, very little had been done in this regard. In those contexts where instruction was given, the situation usually involved congregation-wide training done by an interim pastor to help the congregation in a time of pastoral transition. In addition, a program called “Can We Talk?” and an exercise called “the circle process,” have been used with the youth in a couple of congregations.

One way that one’s love for the enemy is exemplified and put into practice is often through missions and service where one is required to do acts of kindness and mercy to those who may be in a culture different than one’s own. Many churches have sent their youth on the various Mennonite programs available to youth groups such as DOOR, SWAP, and youth convention service projects. Internationally, churches have sent their youth to Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Puerto Rico. Local Mennonite-connected destinations have been the Lighthouse in Canton, Agora in Columbus, and Adriel School in West Liberty. Other mission agencies that have been used include Group Workcamps and Youthworks. Intergenerational experiences using Mennonite Disaster Service and targeting more local ministries are also done often. Some churches are very active in their local communities doing various forms of outreach, and in most cases that youth of the church are involved right alongside the adults in the congregation doing the work needed. Very few churches indicated not having done a missions or service trip in recent years.

Exposing youth to cultures other than their own was done mostly through mission and service trips. However, churches in more urban setting indicated that their daily lives are surrounded by diversity and multi-cultural awareness. Even some of the rural churches have constant exposure and interaction with other cultures, particularly the Hispanic culture, through the presence of migrant workers. Other ways that youth are exposed to cultures different than their own is through the presence of exchange students and missionaries and church members sharing about their cross-cultural

experiences as they have traveled and lived abroad. In general, cross-cultural exposure does not to be a high priority in our Conference churches.

Regarding peace education curriculum, many pastors indicated that the attempt is made to incorporate Jesus' teachings on peace in the teaching and preaching ministry of the church. Using the denominational Christian education curriculum is one way that the churches have included peace education. Instruction on peace and nonviolence typically happens during catechetical or membership class instruction. One church indicated that it still does a conscientious objector/drafting night each year for its youth, often using the personal testimony from members of the congregation as part of the input. Those congregations with a mentoring program mention that peace education is included in this curriculum. Interviewing individuals who have been conscientious objectors and/or participants in past wars has also been a method of getting the discussion started about peace and nonviolence in congregational life. One church mentioned using the *Thermostat* materials put out by Mennonite Central Committee as helpful, and another pointed to an intergenerational class on Anabaptist history that covered the topic of peace which some youth attended. In general, a number of the congregations indicated that there was not much done intentionally, but they see it as an overall component of the theology preached and taught from the pulpit. A few churches indicated that their peace witness is on the decline, with as many as half of the church not considering themselves in such terms.

Apparently the prospect of youth enlisting in the military is not a high concern for most congregations because very few youth actually do so. Those youth who do enlist tend to be those involved in the youth group but whose families are not members of the congregation. Most congregations report a culture in their fellowship of non-participation in the military. Churches in urban settings tend to have more youth over the years who have served in the military in order to see a way out of their economic situation or to "gain discipline," as one pastor put it. Interestingly enough, the biggest advocates of military non-participation have been veterans who are part of the congregation

and regret their experience of serving and desire for the youth of the congregation to not make the same mistake.

Reflections on the area of “peace and nonviolence”

Although I mentioned at the outset of this section that it appears that more intentionality has been given to the area of “peace and nonviolence” than any of the others, it was also apparent that pastors felt they were not doing enough. There appears to be a desire for more curriculum resources in this area. Even though many of the pastors claim to incorporate the peace teachings of Jesus in their sermon messages, they admit that is not enough and would like to hear of other creative and engaging ways of addressing the issue with not the only the youth of the congregation but all age groups as well. An effective way of doing peace education has been the testimony of congregational members who have served in the military and have later claimed conscientious objection as their stance. The way of doing peace education through the filing of conscientious objector forms, although perhaps helpful years ago during the time of a draft or the threat thereof, today there is little driving impetus to make it a worthwhile venture for the youth in the congregation who do not anticipate being drafted in the near future.

Summary Comments

There are many more specifics I could have given above in all of the three foci, but I wanted to keep this document to be as readable as possible, knowing that if it were too long very few would be willing to work through it. If there are specifics that you would like to know about, please do not hesitate to seek me out. My contact information appears at the beginning of this document.

Entering into this work as a resource for youth ministry within the Ohio Conference, I was hoping to have more interaction with congregations in the Conference who were looking for help in their youth ministries. I believe the one-on-one consultations with the pastors were helpful in two ways: I was able to ascertain the status of youth ministry in the Ohio Conference, and the discussions

encouraged pastors to be thinking about specific areas of their youth ministry as it relates to an Anabaptist approach making it distinctive from other churches in their area. The workshops held in the various regions of the Conference allowed me the opportunity to interact with youth sponsors and hear some of their joys and struggles in working with youth. However, I was expecting to be called on more to assist with individual congregations needing help in re-thinking their approach to youth ministry. This area of work never developed to the level which I had hoped. I was involved in some individual consultation with congregations, but I anticipated being much busier in this area. Since I am continuing as a youth ministry advocate for the Conference, I am still available to congregations who may have specific questions or would like help in being led through a process to determine a new or revised approach to their youth ministry. The end of this sabbatical year does not signal an end to my availability for resourcing for congregations. My work at the university allows for this kind of involvement and actually helps to enrich my teaching as I continue to interact with those who are on the ground doing the day in and day out of ministry with youth.

Thank you for the opportunity to be involved with you this past year in a more intentional and deliberate way. I have been enriched and am better for it having occurred and hope that the feeling is reciprocal.