

WHERE TO?

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN  
CONSERVATIVE ANABAPTISM



# WHERE TO?

A COMPILATION OF ESSAYS WRITTEN BY

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# FOREWORD

When a movement like the radical reformation is in its infancy, vision is bright. We use words like “passionate, compelling, positive, forward-looking” to describe the vision of fresh movements. When a group has been around for a while, however, whether 50 years or 500, it is easy to slide into maintenance mode. The vision dims. It is can be difficult for succeeding generations to buy into merely keeping things the way they are.

This booklet contains five essays written by five different men. Their assignment was to explore the positive dimensions of what God may want to do in, for, and through conservative Anabaptist churches over the next fifty years. Each writer addressed a different facet of community life: the church, the school, the home, the workplace, and the world.

These essays and the questions that follow are designed to encourage dialogue within churches. They are intended to seed discussion, not end it. The writers do not intend, in other words, to provide all the answers. Some churches use Wednesday or Sunday evening services to discuss books or topics. Perhaps this booklet could be used in this way.

May the Lord give us the ability to discover and align with His vision for His people.





# 1

## A VISION FOR HOMES

### Foreword

My father's most quoted verse from the Old Testament was, "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people!" (Proverbs 14:34) The power of this verse rests in the contrast between two words, righteousness and sin. Humans have a peculiar habit of seeing and lamenting everything that is wrong or that possibly may go wrong and failing to see the good and the beautiful that is all around them. I am human, so I too find it easy to talk about the decadence of western civilization. But in this essay I hope to highlight the good, the true, and the beautiful, that was handed to me by my heavenly father and specifically by my parents and the culture in which I grew up. I have not ignored the sin of this generation and the reproach that has been brought upon us. But it is not a lament that will change the world; it is righteousness in Christ Jesus that marks the true revolutionary. I pray that you, the reader, will seize upon the place of family living in the Kingdom of God as you read and that you will be inspired to lay your hand to the plow as a follower of Jesus. Specifically, I pray that you will contribute to "the righteousness of the nation" by being faithful in your family, wherever you find yourself in its construct.

As you read, remember, family living is not an end in itself. It is embedded in a much deeper reality, The Kingdom of God as described in the Bible. But then too, let none of us forget that Kingdom living is composed of the moment to moment decisions that we make for good or ill. The Lord's Prayer ends with the words: "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven." Family living dominates the times and places of our short lives. The

real *me* is known best by my wife and children. If the “will of God is to be done on earth” in any credible way, it follows that family life is likely the primary place where this will happen. This is the vision and burden that makes me passionate about family living for Christ and his Kingdom. This essay attempts to get at or at least introduce the core issues of such a vision.

*Melvin Lehman*

## Introduction

The Old Testament closes in a startling way. Malachi says:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” (Malachi 4:5-6)

With these few words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we are given the strong indication that when the “day of the Lord” came something very powerful was going to happen within the family; there would be a turning toward each other—especially a turning of the father’s heart toward the hearts of the children. Perhaps it follows that where fathers are consistently distancing themselves from their families, the presence of the Lord wanes. There is an indication here that when fathers do not do well, the earth is subject to a curse. Maybe, the curse of “fatherlessness” is upon us in this generation.

When Jesus came, he was not silent about family relationships. On several occasions we hear him speaking in affirming ways about family life and even offering clarifying points.

And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death: But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest

be profited by me; he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother; Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye. (Mark 7:9-13)

And again as recorded by John:

When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home. After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst. (John 19:26-28)

But Jesus is careful to clarify where one's first loyalties lie; Kingdom loyalties are first, family loyalties are second. Again we hear him speak: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

And He tells us how this relates to family growth:

And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

The purpose of this paper is to explore how we as Anabaptists are doing within the construct that Jesus sets forth. To do this, I will identify some strengths and some weaknesses, and then offer some ideas for carrying the vision forward.

## Strengths

### Strength #1

*A firm commitment to life-long marriage promises.*

The conservative Anabaptist commitment to zero-tolerance in respect to breaking marriage vows has served us well in a number of ways. First, it has given us a firm foundation to build joyful, trusting man/woman relationships that create a basis for invigorating love to flourish. It has also provided space for addressing troubled marriages. While much of our world is in the divorce courts at the first sign of trouble, we typically have a window of time to find solutions to our problems. This capacity to take vows seriously bleeds over into many areas of life. Anabaptists are known to keep their word. Such a discipline is not accidental; it is rooted deeply in the commitment to keep some of the most sacred vows that we will make in life.

Assuming that Paul is correct when he says that a husband and wife are models of Christ and the Church, the importance of keeping our promises becomes clear. When Christian couples cannot keep their promises, perhaps a watching world has reason to wonder about the validity of the claims of Christ.

### Strength #2

*A father with masculine presence and a mother with feminine presence.*

In one generation we have witnessed an astonishing cultural shift from clearly defined gender qualities and roles to a massive confusion about what is male and what is female. Traditionally, we have been very clear on this point, even insisting on a clear difference in the clothing we wear. It may be worth noting that general culture did not arrive at their current position overnight. It happened one step at a time. Some of us remember the days when very few ladies wore slacks of any kind in public. There was little if any talk of trans-gender operations in those days. But times have changed. We have steadfastly resisted those changes and again I believe this has done us good.

How has it done us good? Well, such distinctions have insisted that men assume authority and leadership in the home. When a young man understands this assumed expectation and begins to train himself toward it, he has taken some of his first steps toward

becoming a man. (I note here that becoming a man in the world we live in has become increasingly rare; the structures and models are fast disappearing that once produced real men.) Similarly, married woman extends a powerful influence in the formation of her daughters. When a little girl sees her mother in feminine clothing prepared to bake the week's bread, cuddle the baby, and clean the house—all in a joyful state of mind—that little girl is well on her way to understanding what it means to be a woman with a powerful feminine influence.

Undoubtedly, we are far less than perfect in these things, but I will defend the idea in the town square that one of the best places to learn how to be a man of honor and a woman of influence is to live in a home where the theology, the practice, and the culture support and model a clearly defined masculinity and a clearly defined femininity. It is quite likely you will find such homes among seriously committed Anabaptist people.

### Strength #3

#### *A commitment to serious child-training*

Recently we were talking around the supper table about certain behaviors that we observed while shopping. One of my sons commented that he thinks a few children need to have a “wood-shed meeting” with Dad. It later occurred to me that his words would be quite unpopular, out of sync, and even deemed subversive or dangerous in general culture today. At the same time, it also occurred to me that his Mennonite peers would likely consider such a comment a bit outdated or maybe call it “old-style discipline.” And perhaps it is “old-style” enough to need some adjustments. But again, if contrasted with the results I am seeing today in general culture and even in some of our homes, old-style discipline coupled with love, presence, and belonging has served us well in producing some of the finest young people in the world today.

What are the components behind successful child-training?

In my opinion, **first** is the insistence on simple obedience. Sometimes this insistence can be mishandled by parents and is counter-productive, but still I will defend the idea that a child is handed a priceless gift when he learns to subject his will to his parents even when he doesn't feel like it. This approach has been

historically present in our culture. I hope and pray that it remains a part of our child-training rubric.

**Second** is the persistent effort to create sustaining personal disciplines and habits. Here are five categories where we have done reasonably well:

1. **Worship:** The habit of church-going is a discipline in our world that relatively few families have cultured and maintained. Observing Dad praying, singing, preaching, etc. is a blessing to any child. In contrast to mainstream Western Christianity, significantly fewer mothers in Anabaptist culture are going to church alone with their children. Again, we are well aware that not all of our men take worship seriously, but just the habit of attending church services regularly is a positive thing in family life.

2. **Music:** Perhaps this category should be a subset of worship, but I think it deserves special notice. A relatively high percentage of men in the congregation sing and enjoy doing so on Sunday morning. Many have developed their skills adequately to sing in choirs and even to conduct choirs. This is a phenomenon that is rare among the men in the evangelical world. When Mom sings, it is inspiring and a beautiful thing. When Dad joins her and loves it, it is a tonic to the soul of a family and a powerful culture builder. Our conservative families have done fairly well here. Let's build on it to draw in the generations to come.

3. **Work:** Once upon a time we were mostly farming communities. Demanding physical labor was a given and most children gained a strong work ethic by osmosis. Fortunately, this capacity has persisted even as we have transitioned away from agriculture. But one does wonder if this cultural characteristic will continue into the 3rd and 4th generation on the other side of the dairy farm. We do well to guard against the loss of cultural momentum in this area.

4. **Economics:** A ready willingness to work and frugal living have traditionally kept a very high percentage of Anabaptists off the welfare rolls. These are personal disciplines that need to continue. They could be tweaked a bit to reduce our notoriety for being shrewd or stingy to a fault; but the tweaking should not push us away from a strong work ethic, frugality, and capacity to handle finances well.

5. **Play/Pleasure:** Yes, I mean that! The capacity to truly be refreshed in play and/or pleasure is a discipline of life. Between

making hay, milking cows, and forking manure, my brothers and I found time to play basketball, baseball, or hockey. I spent many hours doing creative things in and by the stream that ran through our meadow. My life was rich with play or recreation if you prefer to think of it that way. But, there was nothing professional about any of it. Our movement toward, and even involvement with, professional sports has reduced our capacity to play. Perhaps digital games and entertainment have an even greater capacity to diminish wholesome recreation. The exercise of the fingers running a Nintendo game doesn't hold a candle to what is gained in a one-on-one basketball match with little brother in some spare time. No doubt this is simply an opinion of mine, but sometimes our opinions are correct. So, yes, I believe that knowing how to enjoy life is actually a discipline rather than a default mode when we don't know what else to do.

#### **Strength #4**

##### *A Capacity to Network*

What do you do when your automobile begins to shudder, shake, bang, clatter, and then quit entirely? Likely you do as I do; you deal with the immediate crisis and then likely ask yourself the question, "Are there Mennonites nearby; if so, how can I contact them?" Why do we ask such questions so soon when we are stranded in a strange place? First, it speaks well of the character of the Anabaptist people. They are trustworthy; almost all of them can be counted on to do us good! Do we understand the magnitude of the blessing it is to belong to a network of people who can be trusted to do us good and not harm most of the time? What is at the core of this strength?

First, we are followers of Christ, and seriously so! This is primary.

Second, we have always highly valued family and community and most of the time have been willing to make the hard decisions in the daily grind of life to support one another unconditionally. It almost feels like this attitude is in our DNA, but I know it is rooted in our commitment to follow Christ in life. One of the unique aspects of this phenomenon is the value we place on maintaining extended family relationships, sometimes as broadly as our 2nd or 3rd cousins. This can be a problem, but most of the time it is a strength. This way of seeing things translates into a capacity to

network significantly across a broad geography. What other group are you aware of who can travel across the United States, meet a total stranger except that they share our Anabaptist heritage and/or orthopraxy, and almost immediately trust them? I am sure there are others, but I am more certain that a vast majority of the world's population does not have access to this kind of network.

Finally, I observe that this networking is a safety net that transcends Nationwide Insurance or Obamacare. What foolishness would it be to abandon these roots in favor of insurance systems that almost nobody can really trust?

### **Strength #5**

#### *A strong identity and sense of belonging*

Sociologists tell us that two very important questions that must be answered for healthy socialization among human beings are, "Who am I?" and, "Where do I belong?" (Or, "who do I belong to?") Split personality disorders are often related to the inability to answer one or both of these questions adequately.

Several things have contributed to a generally healthy self-identity among Anabaptists.

First is a unique history. It is a 500 year narrative following a story line that is truly different from mainstream Christianity. Even a casual historian today would acknowledge that the Anabaptists of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation were unusual in that their influence on the post-Reformation era is out of proportion to their numbers and resources. In recent years, respect among non-Anabaptist scholars has grown for this influence. From what I can tell, that unique history was forgotten among our own people for about a century while we gave our children over to public education. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw us open the doors of our own schools. A renaissance has occurred among us so that today a clearer understanding of our roots is more wide-spread than a generation ago. This is almost certain to cause a certain recovery of our identity.

Second is our insistence that Christians will live and act differently from a world that does not know Christ. We have a unique culture that is carried along in a stream of unique traditions. Of course there are many flaws in the models of separation that have appeared among us, but still it remains that just from a sociological



perspective, the insistence on separation in lifestyle and practice has helped us answer the question, “Who am I?”

This strong identity is then the platform for a strong sense of belonging. We should know by now that you cannot just decide to belong. Belonging is not a primary cause; it is the net result of a convergence of a common identity, common traditions, common practices, common passion, and common goals. Such commonality does not happen overnight. It must be cultured over a lifetime and over generations. Yes, we have staggered about trying to do well with such things to be sure, but arguably, the Anabaptists have developed a few building blocks that have created an uncommonly strong sense of belonging, at least at times!

My observation is that in most cases where there is committed buy-in to the identity and belonging phenomena, it is mostly because a Mom and Dad promoted such in their walk and talk. Where this is not the case, young folks often question who they are and to whom they belong.

## Weaknesses

### Weakness #1

*Not accessible to outsiders or general culture*

One of the more disturbing moments in my journey as a local missionary happened when an apparently sincere man told me something like this: “You have no idea how much my wife and I want to be like you and Shelia [my wife] but we can’t; we just simply cannot! I am giving up.” His words have haunted me in the middle of the night more than once. What about Shelia and me made our lifestyle seem inaccessible? What were/are we projecting? Was my friend correct?

Very likely, all of us have wrestled with this weakness. Why do seekers so often move our direction with a desire to belong but finally throw up their hands in exasperation at the supposed impossibility and then walk away? This seems to be especially true when non-Mennonite singles approach the doors of our families. More than one person has told me that our families are too tight to penetrate. We won’t let them in! Is this our problem, or theirs? Likely, the answer is, “Both”!

But how should we think about our part of the problem of accessibility? First, we should acknowledge that there is a problem. Perhaps we are too proud and too arrogant to be self-critical. But sometimes we are too self-effacing. Inaccessibility is not unique to Mennonites and their families. Any group that seriously seeks to walk according to the rule of Christ in all things will surely seem to be so different that their way of life will also seem to be inaccessible. In Western culture, the gap between the church and the un-church widens everywhere. We should not forget the words of Christ himself:

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Ok, already I hear the objections. And I agree; such verses as these cannot be used as an excuse to disengage and not wrestle with the questions of accessibility. For a long time now, I have wondered as a pastor about what to do with messed up families. Are we powerless to minister to broken families and broken people? Do we have no ability to lead the un-church to Jesus and his church? Can we build a pathway for those on the margins of society to become productive/serving members of society and the body of Christ?

### **Weakness #2**

*An over-protection of family privacy that provides cover for evil-doers*

“A man’s home is his castle!” So goes the old saying. And a happy castle it will be if that man is a good “king.” But what if he is not? Is he such a king that he cannot be called to account by another? If he is such a king, then the door is open for him to become a tyrant.

Mennonites have traditionally accepted a man’s home to be his domain. The assumption is that as a brother in the Lord, surely no husband and father among us would become an oppressor within his domain. It was a rude awakening for me when I began to realize that too many Mennonite homes were not like the home I grew

up in. In short I have become aware of what I have come to call the dark shadows of an impenetrable patriarchy.

I am in full agreement with our obedience to the Scriptural injunction that men have the oversight in their homes. In the face of a popular feministic movement and emphasis on equal rights, I make no apology for male leadership. But I am deeply ashamed of an unrestrained masculinity that has created havoc in too many Mennonite homes. And I am also ashamed that we have not created accountability structures to protect the innocent and the vulnerable in our circles. Hidden sexual abuse, including physical violence at times, is inexcusable at any level. Do we have a theological or cultural construct that actually gives an evil man a place to hide? If so, this must change.

### **Weakness #3**

#### *An inadequate view of the role of the ladies among us*

Personally, I have become increasingly wary of our tendency toward political correctness. As the feminist movement has matured, it has dramatically reshaped the private and public places of America and the world at large. As so often happens, the church has followed in the trails blazed by such movements. And so, I observe us experimenting with the traditional boundaries that we have placed on the role of our ladies, especially in the church, but in the home and the workplace as well. Perhaps it is good for us to examine our ways, but I for one am very reluctant to ignore Paul's directives in the Epistles.

In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety. (I Timothy 2:9-15)

Pastors have often wrestled with what to do with the implications of these instructions from Paul. Arguments aside, the direction Paul

points is obvious; women should take a secondary/helper role to men in leadership and teaching. We are foolish to ignore this teaching.

Having made this disclaimer which I felt necessary in order to be properly understood, I will say that we have not been very creative in maximizing the capacity of our ladies to touch our world where it counts with their God-ordained femininity. Too often they have no credible voice, and so are left to become whiners and complainers and gossipers whom people learn to detest and resist. This is an outrageous thing! Again, I ask the question, "Is there a flaw in our theology or our culture that needs to change?" I will explore some possibilities in the Vision section of this paper. Surely there must be a way to be true to Scriptures without demeaning the ladies among us. We need to find that way.

#### **Weakness #4**

##### *Deficiency in close, intimate relationships*

As I have already intimated, I grew up in a happy home never doubting that I was loved. It was also a stoical home. There are strengths in stoicism to be sure. For example, we were taught not to be complainers, but to "take it on the chin" and get on with life, even if things were not going well or if we were mistreated. For the most part, I see this as a strength, even today. But often this translated into silence when we should have been talking. We found it easy to live with somewhat distant relationships rather than doing the hard work of dealing with misunderstandings that could have moved us toward rewarding intimate relationships. I do not point the finger at my parents both because I perceive this phenomenon to be deeply imbedded in the culture and because I struggle moving beyond this paradigm myself. Perhaps the greatest misfortune is that this cultural tendency carries over into church life as well, sometimes contributing significantly to the painful separations we observe.

This problem is most apparent when looking at our generally poor record of interacting with adolescents as they mature and struggle with their emerging sexuality. From what I can tell, significant discussion about sexuality between parents and children is too rare. This failure then bleeds over into other areas and tends to shut us down with respect to the refreshing relationships that

could be. Personally, I believe we have lots of space to improve in these areas.

### **Weakness #5**

#### *Biological family loyalty trumps Church commitment*

This weakness may be observed in how some families have done homeschooling. Personally, I have no bone to pick with families who choose to home school; after all, Shelia and I are no strangers to the home school scene. We did some ourselves. However, I have seen too often that spirit of independence in the name of “the family comes first” that can undermine community goals and end with children growing up and leaving the Anabaptist tradition. My intention here is not to focus on homeschooling; it is rather to illustrate the tendency to put an important thing and even a good thing ahead of the more important thing and ending up confusing both participant and observer. Homeschooling is just one example among others of the bloodline coming before and between the born-again line.

## **Vision**

### **Snapshot #1**

#### *Strengthening what remains*

In some respects, a significant portion of our forward-looking vision should focus on strengthening that which remains. Healthy family life has been a significant strength among us. Undoubtedly, at least some of that strength is related to generational family farming. Perhaps at the core of that strength is the simple truth that family farming meant that a daily adult masculine presence was much stronger than the norm. Again, assuming a God-fearing, loving father with the amount of Dad presence that the family farm made possible, this created a powerful platform for training children that has been difficult to duplicate outside of the farm setting. For some time now I have been pondering the cultural shift that we are presently experiencing as the majority of our families leave the farm for other forms of employment. My point here is not to literally point us back to the farm so much as provoke thoughtfulness among us—and positive action, specifically on the

point that it likely does mean less Dad presence in our families than what previous generations experienced. In the introduction to this essay, I referenced the curse of fatherlessness that has descended upon Western culture (see Malachi 4:5-6).

Another strong tradition among us that needs to be strengthened has been stay-at-home mothering. As a young boy growing up, I had no idea what a blessing it was to come home from school (public schools) with the confident assumption that Mom would be there peeling potatoes for supper and keeping the house orderly, clean, and inviting. In general our families have persisted in this tradition, but times have changed and continue to change at break-neck speed. Smaller families and modern conveniences have in many cases generated the possibility for mothers to work outside of the home, and growing numbers have gravitated toward at least part-time jobs. A blanket statement of condemnation for outside of the home work would surely be unfair. However, in many, if not most, cases, this has created more problems than it has solved. But what should a mother do if she has significant down time at her disposal? Can we re-envision the part that stay-at-home Moms play in our family and cultural life?

I am the ninth child of thirteen. My mother was busy with the wringer washer and more. There was little thought of a second job. The bigger thought was, "How do I get this all done?" The answer was that we all pitched in and helped! In spite of the fact that my parents did a remarkable job with living and caring for me and my siblings, I am not prepared to argue for a family size of 13, or even 10. But I am prepared to argue against pets replacing children as the chief object of our affections and for selfishly small family size. Of course we may disagree about what is selfishly small, but shouldn't we at least have the discussion and push toward a community consensus that our young people can understand and build their families within that community consensus when they become adults?

And so, it seems to me that certainly we need to receive the challenge to strengthen that which remains. But we need more. We need to:

## Snapshot #2

*Model the joy of life-long marriage to mirror Christ and the Church*

If we understand Paul correctly, the unsaved could learn something about Christ and the Church in an indirect fashion through the Christian husband/wife relationships that they observe. This is powerful and underscores yet another “Bible” that is being read by a watching, skeptical world.

Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:24-31)

Perhaps the best indicator of a healthy married relationship is the presence of joy at every level. What is more beautiful than to see a grandma and grandpa hand in hand, gazing affectionately at each other with joyfulness while their children and grandchildren (and maybe great-grandchildren) are gathered around them? We all enjoy such a picture of life. But such scenes do not just happen. Somebody cultured joyful family living over decades. Somebody enjoyed the blush of first love and went through the joy and pain of bringing a child into this world. And somebody rolled up their sleeves when the going was tough, paid the bills somehow, and did the hard work of training up children in the fear of God. Somebody sat down with their teenager and struggled with the difficulty of

what it means to become an adult. All this and more; but all done with joyfulness, knowing that the Lord gives the reward.

I have publicly stated on different occasions that my wife, Shelia, has contributed at least 51% to whatever success I have experienced both in our family and in my public ministry. Of course she is not perfect and needs to be sanctified every day like the rest of us. Nevertheless, I stand by my statement. These things became abundantly clear to me in the prison ministry that our family was involved in when we lived in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. We were married less than ten years, had four children, and lived in an old farm house that needed remodeling. Yet, Shelia gladly partnered with me in having various men whom I had met in prison, come and live with us, sometimes for months at a time. I shall never forget walking into the kitchen one Saturday morning. Shelia was at the kitchen sink washing the breakfast dishes, our children were around and about her feet, and, Bobby, a young handsome cocaine addict was there as well in casual conversation with Shelia as she washed the dishes. I stopped and reflected a moment or so in my heart. What a priceless treasure! Here was my wife, young and comely, talking with a young man who needed our help, but certainly had the capacity to cause great disruption in our relationship and family. And yet, I had full confidence that all was well. And not only that, but more than one of those men told me that what they heard me say in the prison Bible studies was confirmed in their minds by the conduct of my wife and family. I am reminded of Peter's words in I Peter 3.

Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. (I Peter 3:1-4)



I am aware that I am pulling the passage a bit out of context, but the underlined passage makes the case. A Godly woman dressed modestly, subject to her husband, and committed to the Lord in every way, “preaches” every day without needing to say one word. I contend based on experience that some of the best missionaries in the world are traditional stay-at-home moms who are there because they love to serve God in that way.

### Snapshot #3

*Create wholesome child-rearing structures by incorporating relational strategies with the older emphasis on the authority of parents*

My father was not a highly relational papa. He was not distant. He was present, but would not have passed the modern test for being relational. Yet, I knew he loved me. In fact it surprised me when I discovered that some were really quite uncertain of their parents’ love. My mother was more relational, but still maintained a clear sense of appropriate feminine authority and influence that included some distance. I knew that she loved me, too! They possessed an old-style child training rubric that was simple: “We love you (though they never said so) and we are in charge here; we expect cooperation.” It worked, for the most part!

By the time I reached my later teen years I was confident that I had in place a model that was superior to my parents’ model. The foundation of my model would be relational. My wife and I would be so relational that we would not need to use any authoritarian methods to raise our children. Our peers felt the same way. We were quite sure that we would do much better with our teenagers when they came along than the former generation was able to do. But we were misinformed, misguided, and just simply wrong. The truth was (and is) that we needed to answer the question of “Who is in charge here?” early in our married lives as children came into our home. Parent/child/teenager relationships are on a good footing when that question is answered early on in wholesome ways.

But our longing to move forward beyond my parents’ generation on the relational front was not unfounded. There is much ground to be gained yet in this arena, especially with adolescents and older teenagers. I long for the day when we will, as parents within our culture, know how to lead our young men from childhood into a

wholesome, productive manhood and likewise our young ladies through adolescence to the beauty of womanhood with influence in her generation. I do not think we will get there by abandoning my Dad's model. I do not think we will get there by abandoning the hard work of learning what it means to "turn the hearts of the fathers toward the children" and "the hearts of the children toward the fathers."

#### **Snapshot #4**

*Create accountability structures that help men be men and women be women*

It is clear by now that the crisis in the Western family centers on the failure of men to be men. Many of our men have done quite well in the face of this cultural failure. But we can do better; we have work to do! I urge us to attack this problem with men head on. I have a few suggestions for a way forward here. With pleasure I can say that a number of these suggestions are already in place in some of our communities. Praise the Lord!

First, I suggest that mentoring become the norm rather than the exception and that such mentoring be community-based rather than seminar-based. There is a time to go away from home to receive instruction and input. But the core of our mentoring program ought to be community-centered. I will quickly agree that most of our communities lack the infrastructure and mindset to make sure every young man or woman in the community has adequate guidance and someone walking with them on the journey of life. But let's roll up our sleeves and get to work so that the next generation has a head start on this thing. I have watched my wife with much satisfaction as she fills the role of a grandmother and mentor in our community. She cannot serve everybody, but she is perfectly fit to mentor some. As her husband I would strongly prefer that she does what she is doing rather than get a job to support a lavish lifestyle now that our children are grown and most of them have homes of their own. I believe that we have the internal resources to create one of the finest mentoring programs in the world—if we are willing to shift some priorities in the right direction. Let's get at it!

Second, I have a deep appreciation for the small men's and women's groups that have sprung up among us. We need more of

it; men with men and women with women. I would dare to say that we could greatly reduce the need for counseling centers if we could get serious small groups working together to mentor and disciple each other. The Pietists of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries introduced us to “ecclesiolae en ecclesia,” or little church within the church. No doubt there were flaws in this way of doing things but it seems to me that this is our best shot at vigorous discipleship in large congregations where it is easy for folks to hide from their brothers and sisters. This approach may also provide a healthy buffer against the exclusiveness that some families engage in.

Third, I urge us to adopt a “No blackout area permitted” approach. This means that every person (especially every man) has somebody that they talk with about every area of life, including money, sex, and power. No exceptions allowed! Cultural and personal transparency is our best defense against hidden sexual sin, abusive parenting, spousal domination, or simply neglect.

There is already some momentum in some communities along these lines. The plowing and planting needs to continue.

### Snapshot #5

*Blaze new trails, plow new ground*

This is where things get exciting. My interactions with jail ministry and missions, both international and national, has shown that the perception of others is that our families are for the most part structurally strong and sound, and thus able to be a platform for ministering Christ to a broken world.

I have been much encouraged and even excited about the vision of some of our young couples. At the church where I am a pastor, the young families are deeply engaged in Kid’s Club activities, foster care, and even adoptions. These kinds of mission activities can be successful only if we have a reservoir of disciplined personnel from disciplined families. By the grace of God and committed parents, we have such. I see open fields! I see opportunity! I see work! I see sacrifice! In a broken world with broken families (or no family at all) I see an opportunity for our stable families to offer a haven and healing to the broken-hearted, the outcasts, the unwanted babies, and more. Let us share the blessing!

I have begun to wonder if we should develop legal adoption

agencies to facilitate this kind of family ministry. Maybe we need to clear away the legal obstacles by sending some to be trained as lawyers and social workers for this purpose. I'm dreaming, I know, but surely we can move in these directions given the resources that are among us.

### Snapshot #6

#### *Spread the message around the world*

My friend and brother in the Lord, Jan Wierzlowoski, from Poland, has told me repeatedly that the Christians of Eastern Europe are in deep need of instruction about how to be a Christian family. I have heard this same appeal from different places at different times. It does seem that the last Bible a decadent world is reading is the example of a Godly family. Such families still have strong appeal in spite of the decadence. It seems to be that this attractiveness could be leveraged for the cause of the Kingdom. We should explore the possibilities that exist within this context.

This is an area where I think our ladies shine. Listen to the Holy Spirit speaking through Peter:

Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear.  
(I Peter 3:1-2)

I know I referenced this passage previously when lauding the role of a stay-at-home mom (see Snapshot #2) but I repeat it a second time because I am astounded at the silent witness to the unsaved (and saved) by a modest, veiled, lady who knows the Lord and honors male leadership with gladness. In addition it has become clear that Muslim culture will more quickly hear the message of the Gospel when it is accompanied by modest and veiled ladies who are living it out. And so, cheers for the ladies among us who embody what I speak of here.

One prominent contemporary writer has said that perhaps the most radical thing a man can do in the modern world is to marry a woman and live with her the rest of his life, no matter what! This

writer is simply giving credence to the powerful witness that is left by a godly family. It seems to me that carrying what we have learned to a world that has gotten itself into a huge mess at a family level may be the next mission frontier.

In summary I urge us to:

1. Build on the structures that others laid for us; refuse to tear down.
2. Increase Dad presence in the family.
3. Maximize the potential of the ladies among us while refusing to violate Biblical directives.
4. Refuse to budge on complete recognition and practice of gender differences and the permanence of marriage.
5. Become fathers and mothers to a homeless and neglected generation.
6. Teach others how to train up a family for the Lord.
7. Turn the world's natural affinity for family wholeness into mission opportunities.

## Conclusion

Imagine with me an exaggerated example to underscore the place of the family in the Kingdom of God. Imagine a Swiss-German Anabaptist couple who married in 1550 and during the course of their reproductive years, they had four children. And then let's assume that they are good parents and their children turn their hearts to the Lord and serve him faithfully; they in turn each have four children who also follow after Christ, and so on generation after generation until the year 2000 AD. A further assumption of 30 years per generation yields 15 generations between 1550 and 2000. Mathematically, that means that in the 15<sup>th</sup> generation alone there would be 1,073,700,000 children. Now since their spouses all come from converts outside of the family, that means there are over 2 billion people on the face of the earth in the 15<sup>th</sup> generation who are followers of Christ. Without counting the percentage of the previous two generations that are still living, that would be well over 25% of the current world's estimated population. If you increase the average number per couple to 5 children, the number of people in the 15<sup>th</sup> generation is off the charts: 30,518,000,000. Perhaps we should rethink our mission strategy.

## Questions for Discussion

*Six additional considerations when evaluating the families in your community*

1. Who are the heroes in your community?
2. Who, in the family structure, holds the purse-strings, and what happens to excess funds?
3. Do the ladies in your community feel like they are living a fulfilled life?
4. What is the family/community definition of beauty?
5. What music is loved by your youth?
6. Where do your young men and women get their information about sex?

# 2

## A VISION FOR CHURCH COMMUNITIES

### Foreword

Writing about vision for the church is incredibly humbling for me. I care deeply about the church, but I know that the church is far dearer to the heart of the Triune God. I am nearly overwhelmed when I think of what went on in the heart of the Father to see His Son serve and suffer in faithful love and then return to the eternal glory. I am amazed to read how the divine seal of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the early gathered believers. This is a great work of God! His gracious work in Jesus transcends all time and draws believing men and women from every tribe and tongue. And we have the inexpressible privilege of being part of this huge and glorious work of God! I am humbled to be included.

What is offered here does not ask all the necessary questions, and falls even shorter in providing answers. My hope is that it draws the reader into grateful devotion to the Lord of church and a heartfelt commitment to do all that we can to live out His intentions for us in our time.

*John Coblenz*

I begin this paper with a few reflections on the words of Jesus after Peter's confession of faith,

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16.17-19)

Among the many things that could be said and should be said about Jesus' words here, I want to consider two thoughts to set the stage for my reflections on conservative Anabaptism.

First, the church is His church. "I will build My church," Jesus said. We are not our own. Belonging to Jesus anchors us firmly in an identity that supersedes any earthly or temporary identity we may have. We have been called Anabaptists for our practice of baptizing adult believers who had been previously baptized as babies. And we have developed into a stream of believers with a number of distinct emphases in belief and practice. But we must see ourselves as belonging to Jesus. We are His, not our own, and our vision must be shaped by who we are in Him, not by what others have called us or by what we may have evolved into through the centuries. Ultimately, there will be no such entity as the Baptist Church or the Methodist Church or the Mennonite Church. There is only the church of Jesus Christ. We have no authority or freedom to make the church other than His church.

The second observation is that Jesus has purposed to build His church and has committed to doing that against all opposition. To talk about vision for the church is to enter His work and His intentions. Where we develop our own plan, our own work, or our own vision, we will fail. Concerning the church of Jesus Christ, we have the commitment of Jesus to do the impossible—to carry forward God's plan for a people of faith in Jesus against anything the "gates of hell" devise against us. Consequently, any consideration of vision



for the church must first fully embrace God's plan for a people in Jesus, and then, when we enter that plan, we must place all hope of fulfillment in the power and person of Jesus, Lord of heaven and earth. Our hope for the church is in Jesus, not in ourselves.

Today we are facing huge and varied challenges which change even as we attempt to address them. If we were on our own, we would easily lose hope. But because of Jesus, each of the challenges we face likewise has opportunities. In this paper I will identify six current challenges and their corresponding opportunities with the full realization that only the presence of Jesus will be adequate for us in these times.

## Challenge #1

*To build strong, committed church communities in an age of individualism and reluctance to commit.*

Major cultural shifts typically take place as correctives to good ideas and practices gone wrong. The "Age of Enlightenment" was a reaction to many abuses of institutional authority both in society and in the church. Enlightenment thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries argued against long-standing class distinctions that gave nobility great privileges and kept the masses of common folks in poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance. The equality of man became one of the new doctrines, and nowhere was it embodied more boldly than in the New World. The Declaration of Independence asserted, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Of course, as we know looking back, for most of our nation's history (in the words of George Orwell) some people apparently were "more equal than others."<sup>1</sup>

The resultant cultural shifts, however, have been in favor of the individual—rights, freedoms, beliefs, choices, gifts, and potential are primarily about oneself. In the West, we simply can't imagine anyone but me being the ultimate determiner of major choices in life, of what beliefs and values I hold deeply, and nowadays even of what I think is right and wrong. Any group of which I am a

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1. George Orwell, *Animal Farm*.

member that attempts to dictate (or even strongly urge) what I ought to do or not do with my life, or what I ought to believe or not believe, or what is right or wrong for me is seriously out of place at best and abusive at worst.

Many cultural correctives that happened with the Enlightenment were understandable and right—correctives such as casting off oppression of the lower classes, doing away with torturous punishments, bringing in just laws, freeing slaves, offering education to all, and reining in corporate highhandedness. But the pendulum has swung to such an opposite degree that today every person easily considers himself as the greatest good and the highest authority. This shift has resulted in a significant reduction of legitimate authority (whether that of parents or church leaders or policemen) and has weakened, and in some cases wrecked, legitimate and necessary social structures.

Adding to the shift toward individualism, recent access to information via the Internet has contributed to what various sociologists have termed a “flattened society.” New York columnist Thomas Friedman wrote, “Never before in the history of the planet have so many people – on their own – had the ability to find so much information about so many things and about so many other people. ... There is no bigger flattener than the idea of making all the world’s knowledge, or even just a big chunk of it, available to anyone and everyone, anytime, anywhere.”<sup>2</sup>

If information is power, then every person with access to the Internet has power, and this has been a huge contributor to individualism. We no longer rely so heavily on the authority of a doctor, for example. We do the research ourselves. More and more we make decisions on our own. And while it feels liberating to be able to make independent decisions, it contributes to the desire to be unhinged from any group or community that threatens this independence.

So the upside is that we feel more informed about important matters, but the downside is that we easily assume we are better informed than we actually are. In spiritual understanding, particularly, it makes us susceptible to the danger of trusting our own

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2. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat* (New York, Strauss and Giroux, 2006).

understanding. The Scriptures in both covenants warn us that it is not safe to trust our judgment alone.<sup>3</sup> Our selfish desires and immature attitudes easily influence these decisions, and we easily forget our limited understanding. The New Testament model for understanding the mind of God is through the Christian community. No one member has all the wisdom necessary for the functioning of the body.

Specifically, concerning church, authority has been so undermined that if a congregation decides to require something of its members, it is commonly labeled legalistic or uncaring; and if it attempts to enforce what its members have agreed to require, it can even be labeled abusive.<sup>4</sup> (As an aside, we need to acknowledge here that we have contributed to this erosion of authority by our splintering as well. An errant member can simply move down the road to another church that permits or ignores his error.)

The consequences of overcorrection in this matter are huge. A culture overemphasizing individual rights and choices at the expense of group strength and solidarity limits its ability to meet basic human needs both personal and social. Our individualistic culture is destroying family structures, marring thousands of children and teenagers for life, as husbands and wives move on when the marriage no longer serves their personal interests. Our individualistic culture kills well over a million babies each year in the U.S. because individuals pursue sex for their own interests and decide they don't want the

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3. See, for example, Proverbs 3:5, 6 and Romans 12:16.

4. Probably all of us can recall examples of individual members promoting their own understanding above that of the group and feeling hurt when asked to submit to the understanding or decision of their local church. We have record of this happening even in the early days of the church (see, for example, 2 Timothy 2:16-18). The point here is that a culture of individualism lends legitimacy to a person standing up for himself and his own ideas against a church and its leaders, even championing such individualism as necessary for being "true to oneself."

resulting baby.<sup>5</sup> Young people are encouraged to plan and dream and pursue what will make them happy, only to find that their self-interests destroy the very character and lifestyle habits necessary for community. Then, they wonder why they don't belong anywhere, why they have no one to listen to them, why no one cares for them, and why life is such a waste. It only gets worse as they grow older. Our individualistic culture is a culture of loneliness, rejection, and relational disaster.

With the breakdown in community and relationships, people today not only value their own opinions, plans, and desires, but they also have become increasingly reluctant to commit themselves to anything beyond immediate and foreseeable ends. They are willing to go to college, for example, or take a job or do close and intimate activities with their friends, or as Christians go on short-term mission trips. But they hesitate to get married and will more readily attend a church than join (or if they join, they want the understanding that it will not interfere with their personal pursuits). People today value mobility and freedom, and want the option of getting out or moving on if things don't work out or if they wish to follow future urges. Ours is a restless age, looking for quick and easy satisfaction. Consequently, fewer people are experiencing the deeper and richer rewards of roots, of long-term commitments, or of growing old surrounded by family and friends and church communities that care.

It is easy to place all the burden of this restlessness and reluctance to commit upon the shoulders of young people. They are the ones we observe living in the footloose zones of delayed adolescence or emerging adulthood. But Kendra Deans, who has been involved in extensive youth studies in the last decade, says Christian young people's reticence to commit has largely to do with the tepid faith of their fathers. It is the outgrowth of what she and others have identified as "moralistic therapeutic deism," the dominant Christianity

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5. The Guttmacher Institute reports that half of the pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended and that four in ten of these unwanted pregnancies are aborted. Since 1973 when abortions were legalized in the U.S. more than 57,000,000 babies have been aborted. That is more than 50 dead babies for every one soldier killed in all the wars in U.S. history put together. [http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb\\_induced\\_abortion.html](http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html).

of North America. In this view, the “central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.”<sup>6</sup> The God of this worldview is kind and caring and available when I have a problem, a kind of benevolent counselor who says only positive things about me, or perhaps a personal crisis manager, on call for getting me out of scrapes and helping me in desperate times.

Building strong communities in an individualistic age can feel overwhelming. But Jesus said He would build His church, and we must trust that He is with us for such a time as this. In an individualistic age we have many opportunities. To name a few, we have the opportunity:

- To demonstrate the wholesome goodness of submitting to one another
- To show love for others above ourselves
- To humbly dedicate personal talents toward the good of the kingdom of God rather than using them to pursue personal fame and fortune
- To forgo marriage in some situations to be more free to serve Jesus and His people
- To run a business in ways that support kingdom goals and projects rather than simply to accumulate profits
- To abstain at times from personal liberties that may cause offense in younger or weaker believers
- To demonstrate servant leadership as a model of church authority that is distinct from the prevailing understanding

Older Christians face the challenge and the responsibility to understand the times, to pay attention to the influences shaping young people, to evaluate honestly the authenticity of our faith, and to engage heartily in the mission of Jesus. Young people need to experience the robust call to live like Jesus and to place one’s life and resources at His disposal in an age when the pull is strong to live for oneself.

We can expect our world, with its individualistic values and ideals, to misunderstand our communities. They may at times even refer to us as a cult. Certainly, we must avoid the errors of dictatorial authority or of resorting to harsh or coercive tactics, but we must embrace the teachings of Jesus and His Apostles that

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6. Kendra Deans, *Almost Christian* (Oxford, University Press), 14.

the church is a community functioning under authority. We must teach and practice strong community values like love, humility, submission, sacrifice, and commitment as taught clearly in passages like Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 & 13; for it is only in such communities that individuals can thrive and become all that God intended.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore it takes strong communities to receive, support, and nurture the social casualties of an individualistic culture.

## Challenge #2

*To maintain healthy families where children grow up in the security of love and commitment.*

This is a subject in itself and is addressed in a separate paper, so I refer to it only briefly here. A huge challenge facing the church is that of nurturing families in a culture where families are disintegrating. This includes holding an unyielding commitment to lifelong marriage, calling children to obey their parents and honor their elders, teaching parents to love and train their children, training children in the ways of God, and not fearing to exercise loving discipline.

What we need to note here is that families must not be left on their own. The church can support strong family values by teaching biblical family structure, promoting healthy relationships, organizing support groups, promoting Christian education, and practicing discipleship.

Without healthy families, the church will struggle to be what Jesus intended, which means that one of the first priorities of churches in family-defunct cultures is to work at restoring strong-family ways of living.

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7. For an excellent call to strong Christian community written by a non-Anabaptist, see Joseph Heller, *When the Church was a Family* (Nashville, B&H Publishing Group, 2009).

## Challenge #3

*To minister to people around us whose lives have been broken by sin and adverse cultural circumstances.*

I have already described some of the societal repercussions of individualism and selfishness. Two millennia ago, the Apostle Paul predicted the conditions of the last days with these words:

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away. (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

We are not to follow in their steps; rather, we are to turn from their ways of living. But we do live among them, and we are called by the example and teaching of Jesus to minister to broken people. The personal, relational, emotional, and psychological consequences of sin are many. Today we see hurting children, angry teenagers, single moms, addicts, homeless men and women, hardened prisoners, and many people who have learned to rely on government assistance for housing and basic necessities.

The moral and relational breakdown in our culture results in crisis needs, chronic needs, emotional needs, and multiplied unhealthy and sinful behaviors. People struggle with depression, suicidal tendencies, neglect, abuse, hyperactivity, eating disorders, self-mutilation, anxiety, panic attacks, and many other personality and behavioral disorders.

Conservative Anabaptists, generally coming from strong home structures that offer love, relational stability, a sense of personal responsibility, moral absolutes, a healthy work ethic, and respect for authority, although not immune to emotional and relational needs, find themselves mercifully shielded from many of the sorrows and troubles rampant in general society. We find it tempting to isolate ourselves, to focus on maintaining what we have, and to avoid the messy work of engaging with broken people in society around us. When we are willing to engage, we face the challenges of relationally

empty people latching on to us like leeches, undisciplined people wanting the benefits of our more disciplined lives but resenting the necessary disciplines themselves, and people who have gotten themselves into impossibly tangled relationships wanting us to help them make their mess work.

We are easily overwhelmed.

But Jesus said He will build His church. As we look at Jesus' own ministry, we find encouragement that He didn't try to change broken systems or create perfect social circumstances. He ministered to people one at a time. He engaged with them, spoke words of truth and healing, refused to let people simply use Him for their selfish purposes, called them from their selfishness into the good ways of God, and walked with those who were willing. We have countless opportunities to do the same. The church is the body of Jesus, and where the body is willing to follow the Head, Jesus has promised to be in our midst, doing what we cannot do, bringing His life and light to situations beyond hope. We don't have to solve all our neighbors' problems. We don't have to reconcile all estranged relationships. But we can love. We can listen. We can care with words and actions charged with the presence of Jesus. The possibilities of showing Christ's love to a broken world are endless.

I want to note several things about reaching out to people in our culture. First, we must be willing to love them as they are and extend grace in the process of change. Our minds easily go to where needy people ought to be. God's love starts with us when we are yet sinners. Our love to others must do the same. It is rare that we can help people toward better ways of living if we do not love and accept them where they are. Accepting people does not mean we approve of all they do. Sometimes we are afraid to associate with, smile at, or show goodwill toward needy people unless or until we know they want to change. I think we fear that being open-hearted toward them will mean we are giving our stamp of approval on their lives, and so we feel compelled to point out where they are wrong.

Second, we must not compromise who Jesus is or what He calls His followers to, even as we exercise grace and forbearance. This point balances the first. Accepting people and being kind toward them does not mean we accommodate their sin or join them in it. We would not help drug addicts by giving them money. Jesus was



a master at engaging with sinners in ways that drew them to Him but also drew them away from their sin. Showing respect for them as persons and seeing their deeper needs seemed to open the way for their own consciences to work and to prepare them to hear His call to better ways of living.

A third consideration in reaching out to people in our culture is that we must be okay with what can appear to us as wasted time and resources. As I mentioned above, we ought not simply to give handouts. Our genuine love for them (our sacrificial commitment to their good) would forbid indiscriminate giving. But sometimes they will take advantage of us. Sometimes what we give will seem wasted. Sometimes we will pour countless hours into their lives only to have them turn away from us. At such times, we will be tempted to think our time or our resources have been wasted. And certainly we sometimes make mistakes that we should learn from. But we must trust that nothing we do in the name of Jesus is wasted.<sup>8</sup>

## Challenge #4

*To engage with technological innovations, taking advantage of the potential without succumbing to the dangers of sinful uses.*

In 1970, Alvin Toffler wrote his international best-seller *Future Shock*, describing the stress and disorientation that comes from rapid societal changes. Technology continues to change our lives, far beyond what Toffler wrote about in 1970. What brought us the telephone eventually brought us the cordless phone and now has produced cell phones and smart phones, rendering much of our former phone equipment obsolete. An ad in a 1949 issue of *Popular Mechanics* boldly declared, “Computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons.” Fifty years later, computer companies were advertising laptops that weighed less than five pounds. Today, handheld smart phones do far more than either of these former computers and do it faster. These changes in products correspond to and often cause significant changes in job opportunities. It is impossible to keep up with all that is changing in

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8. For a helpful discussion on giving without harming, see Glenn Schwartz, *When Charity Destroys Dignity* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, World Mission Associates, 2007).

the technological revolution—changes in medicine, research, education, production, communication, and transportation. We can communicate with people around the globe. We have instant access to information that formerly took researchers hours, days, even years, to find. Toffler, by the way, was the first to describe “information overload.” The reality of “information at our fingertips” has increased exponentially since his time. People can browse the web, skipping from news to weather to maps to music to blogs to pricing on products, and then on to games all in a matter of minutes.

For years conservative Anabaptists simply avoided much of the new technology, together agreeing not to listen to the radio or watch television, for example. But as computers have been harnessed to enable efficiency across all sectors of society, it has become increasingly difficult simply to abstain from technology. We use the Internet now not only to access information, but also to make purchases, find parts, communicate with friends and family, enable Bible translation, and spread the Gospel in hard-to-reach areas of the world. Instead of relying only on printed texts of the Bible, for example, some missionaries are distributing flash drives or specially designed mini computers or Bible apps that people can download onto their phones.

The dark side, of course, is that Anabaptists using their smart phones to get information or connect with family and friends also get caught in the underbelly of the Internet. Pornography has never been easier to access. Texting and sexting have been the downfall of too many people, married and unmarried, in the Anabaptist community. Titillating movies are easily accessible. Electronic gaming holds young (and sometimes older ones) in hours of spellbound button-pushing.

Furthermore, the net effect of being able to do things faster, say things faster, and get things faster has been to speed up the pace of life. We run here and there (in our cars, of course). We hurry to get home so we can go away. And when we get home again, we fall into our beds numbed in mind and body by our frantic schedules. Neil Wiseman says one of the things in our culture that increases our emptiness and thus our “hunger for the holy” is what he simply calls ceaseless motion. He writes,

“Too many daily activities overload our emotional circuits. Most of the time, we feel as if the whole world is running a marathon race to who-knows-where.”<sup>9</sup> Stillness and silence become strangers to us in such a culture.

Future shock indeed!

One of the ironic consequences of electronic connections and activities is the toll on relationships. I recently was traveling with my wife and son, and as we sat down to eat in a restaurant, I looked around and noted how many of the occupants at the tables (sometimes whole families) sat silently, all of them looking at their cell phones and oblivious to each other. It is past time to teach both tech restraint and cell phone etiquette. Furthermore, we will need to plan activities that get us outdoors and off our sofas. Our vision for the future must be relationally proactive. Here are a few suggestions:

- We must not let email and texting keep us from the richness of face-to-face communication.
- We must spend time together as families in all dimensions of life—working, eating, laughing, relaxing, worshiping, playing, and serving; and we must resist the temptation to use tech to entertain our children while we are busy elsewhere.
- We must make opportunities to visit one another as families, and we must learn to incorporate those who have no families into our family interactions.
- We must intentionally slow down and take the time to think, talk, see, hear, and taste.

What are positive opportunities for electronic technology?

- Using Bible programs to enhance accuracy and efficiency in Bible study
- Projecting sermon notes, charts, and quotes to enable audiences to follow the presentation
- Projecting music and readings for congregational worship
- Reducing paperwork and office work for ministries through computerized record keeping
- Analyzing record keeping and other data to maximize ministry focus
- Offering biblical teaching and thought-provoking commentary

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9. Neil Wiseman, *Growing Your Soul* (Grand Rapids, Fleming H. Revell, 1996), 21.

- on current issues through blogs, websites, or forums
- Staying in touch with others serving in remote areas
- Speeding up translation projects
- Making Bibles and other Christian literature available in hard-to-reach areas
- Networking with other Christian ministries
- Offering services to relieve missionaries in remote areas.

Each of these opportunities, of course, has the potential to lead us off course. Too much reliance on Bible programs in Bible study or on electronic gadgetry in sermon delivery can actually divert us from the presence of God. Computer analysis of Christian ministry may move us toward marketing strategies which overlook less efficient but more Christ-like ministry opportunities. The challenge always is to make the tools serve us rather than us serving the tools, especially when the tools have a magnetic attractiveness themselves.

## Challenge #5

*To cultivate spiritual maturity so that weak and struggling members are nurtured.*

With the increase in relational dysfunction and the resultant increase in emotional, psychological, and spiritual problems, many people need soul care. Our culture's response has been to study human problems and to train experts to address these problems. I personally believe that there are people with psychological and emotional problems who need professional care, especially those whose problems are rooted in physiological malfunction—e.g., schizophrenia, manic episodes, dementia, Alzheimer's, learning disorders, and some forms of depression and anxiety. But having spent years in counseling, I also believe that many problems people face are the result of stress, selfish living, poor lifestyle choices, troubled or broken relationships, misplaced values, misplaced devotion, unresolved anger and bitterness, and faulty belief systems (about God, self, and life in general), all of which can result in burnout, depression, anxiety, and related emotional dysfunction. These emotional problems, when growing out of unwise or sinful lifestyles, are not resolved simply by medicating them or by periodic visits to professionals.<sup>10</sup>

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10. For a thoughtful differentiation between "chemical imbalances, brain disorders, and disobedience" see Edward Welch, *Blame It on the Brain?* (Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishers, 1998).

My belief is that the church is largely losing its way here, turning the care of souls over to people who, too often, are trained only to manage symptoms or who employ tactics that are suspect or outright damaging.

In the past twenty years, a host of counseling centers to care for troubled people have sprung up in conservative Anabaptist communities. Most of the counselors at these centers are not professionals, but neither have they been commissioned by the church as seasoned, mature teachers—disciplers in the ways of Jesus. Consequently, many counselors quickly face situations and problems they do not have ready answers for and they soon feel overwhelmed. Some then look to other Christian resources for background and training. This is not a bad thing in itself until one surveys the “biblical” approaches to dealing with these problems. The reality is that there is a wide range of approaches being used by Christians to address human problems. Some identify “idols of the heart” as the root problem. Some see personal sin as the universal reason for all problems, search the heart for sin, and call the sinner to repentance. Some look for “core lies” and seek encounters with Jesus to speak “God’s light” to the troubled person (the theophostic approach). Some use charts to get people to identify and confess specific sins. Some follow the deliverance model, commanding spirits of fear and lust and anger to leave. Some call people to identify and confess the sins of their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers in order to pull down strongholds of sin or to break generational sins and curses. And others follow modified forms of secular psychologists, addressing poor self-esteem or pain as the main human problems or using talk therapy or primal therapy (screaming out one’s anger) as a way to deal with those problems.

The challenge facing the church is to recover robust communities of faith where authentic soul care can take place. My opinion is that the approaches I mentioned above generally have some truth in them (which is what makes them believable) and therefore could have valid application in some form in given situations. But of major concern to me is that too often a counselor (or a counseling center) will largely focus on one method and try to force all human problems through the same mold.

As we observe Jesus caring for people around Him, we seldom see Him employing the same method. He simply understood the

problem, both in its surface manifestations and in its root causes, and He addressed the problem in life-giving, life-changing ways. Jesus did not ignore either the physical or the spiritual or the circumstantial contributors to human problems. With the woman at the well, He indicated she was driven by an inner emptiness (or thirst), and that this thirst, which had never been quenched by the men in her life, could be satisfied by what He had to offer. With the woman bent over by a spirit of infirmity, Jesus laid His hands on her and loosed her from eighteen years of being bound by Satan (Luke 13:10-17). But when the disciples assumed that a man's blindness was due to sin, either in his life or the lives of his parents, Jesus said the man's blindness was not because of sin but for the purposes of God, as a means of revealing God to those who were spiritually blind (John 9).

Inasmuch as Jesus commonly addressed physical needs along with spiritual needs (and often did link the two), we must avoid false assumptions on either side of human need. On the one hand, we must not assume, when people have a physiological problem, that they do not need soul care. And on the other hand, we must not assume, when people have an emotional or spiritual problem, that they do not need physiological care. Either assumption can keep us from ministering to the whole person.

To be more specific, recent advances in understanding the intricate workings of our bodies has shifted the professionals in our society to assess and treat emotional problems pharmaceutically, and it is easy for Christians to accede to the false assumption that drugs will take care of the problem. On the other hand, other Christians, observing the abuse of drugs, can falsely assume that drugs are always an attempt to replace or avoid the work of God in a person's life.

We need men and women who are willing to engage in the scientific discoveries of human physiology, who likewise are grounded in theology, and who are thus equipped to care for both body and soul. Whether people are sick in mind or body, the presence of Jesus is necessary. The same Jesus who called people to repentance and drove out demons also touched lepers and guided His disciples to use healing oil on the sick (Mark 6:13). Indeed, the presence of Jesus is more powerful than surgeries or drugs ever will be, even

when those are helpful and necessary ministrations. For this reason, even young Christians who know Jesus have something to offer those who are sick and suffering.

I believe the church community has a tremendous opportunity to minister the life of Jesus to a broken, hurting, and emotionally distressed world. I do not believe that the ministry of the church replaces all professional care, but that it ought to work along with it. Sometimes medication enables troubled people to lead normal lives. I think of a missionary friend of mine who, without medication, would have manic episodes that made him delusional, but with medication was able to function well. And as I said before, people who need medication still need the ministrations of Jesus-filled believers.

I believe there is a place for church-run counseling centers. Such centers can provide an intensity of discipleship that is difficult to provide in many churches. But I have a concern that these centers have the creeping tendency to take over soul care that very well could happen in the local church. Furthermore, I strongly believe that such centers should work in cooperation with local church and family members. It is my opinion that counselors are at times making little progress and at other times actually worsening the situation when they try to address problems in people's lives in a setting completely removed from the families and churches in which those problems developed. I fully understand the need for confidentiality and the benefit of fresh perspective in a tangled relational problem. Still, the truth remains that counselors simply aren't in a good position to advise wisely when they have only one-sided information.

We need men and women in the church who:

- Are committed to discipling others and are filled with the presence of Jesus
- Are knowledgeable in health care and current with medical discoveries
- Have a rich and biblical understanding of God and humans. That is, they are spiritually mature and theologically grounded.
- Are discerning: Along with the advances in understanding how humans function have come a host of theories from godless psychologists that have led many astray. And unfortunately, it

seems to me, many conservative Anabaptists both in our churches and in counseling ministries have tried to implement theories of human understanding and methods of addressing human dysfunction that are both foolish and unbiblical.

On the last point, I want to clarify that there is danger in either extreme. We can naively accept ideas and therapies with little evaluation, using methods that bypass the power and presence of Jesus. And we can also develop reactionary habits that automatically reject observations, ideas, or helpful pointers solely on the basis that they come from non-Christians. Neither approach is exercising the discernment we need in these times.

## Challenge #6

*To work toward better articulation of our understanding of theology.*

The teachings of Jesus and the Apostles (referred to as traditions and doctrine by New Testament writers) are relevant in any culture in every time. They constitute the standard of orthodoxy for all Christian thought and teaching. Of this we must be certain.

Jesus clearly intended for the church, however, to understand, articulate, and live out that truth in the nuances of different cultures and eras, and for that responsibility He promised His Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. We face situations, decisions, opportunities, and ideologies the Apostles did not face. Even in our time, the challenges in Western culture are not the same as what the church faces south of the Equator or what the house churches in China encounter. The teachings of Jesus are relevant everywhere, but followers of Jesus will have different emphases in different cultural situations, simply because the challenges they face are unique to their time and setting.

Furthermore, we see God and understand God and His ways from different vantage points. As conservative Anabaptists, we have traditionally focused more on living our faith than on articulating it. Ours is a theology worked out in life, what Robert Friedmann calls an “existential theology.”<sup>11</sup> In our lived theology, we have understandings of who God is, what His intentions are in Jesus,

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11. Robert Freidmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, 1973), especially part 1, 27-35.



how He saves us, and what it means to follow Jesus. Although Friedmann argues that attempting to systematize such a theology works against its very essence, Anabaptists from the outset recognized the need to articulate their faith. An articulated theology should never supersede or take the place of a lived theology, any more than a map should take the place of a journey. But without more thought and work given to theology, we are in danger of getting off the road, ruining the journey, and perhaps even missing our destination. Indeed, what we often do not realize is that we can live our way into error as easily as we can live our way into understanding.<sup>12</sup>

More emphasis on articulation is a great opportunity and would have a number of benefits.

- It would require more discipline in our thinking and preaching. We are far too sloppy both in our formal preaching and teaching<sup>13</sup> and in the informal answers we give to those who ask us about our life and faith. I'm thinking not only of questions that come to us from without but also of the questions that come from the thinking young people among us. Our young people need to know that the faith of their fathers can stand the test of hard scrutiny.
- Articulating our faith would provide us a base from which to work toward better unity. We must not assume, of course, that an articulated orthodoxy by itself would assure unity. But clearly

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12. James K. Smith's book *Desiring the Kingdom* shows clearly and biblically that who we love is more fundamental to being Christian than what we believe. This is the reason a true theology can never be reduced to a system. It is also the reason we can still be followers of Jesus in spite of a certain amount of immaturity and even misunderstanding in our theology. But it does not negate the need to articulate our faith, or as the Apostle Peter says, to "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

13. This assessment of preaching in conservative Anabaptist churches is not meant to be unkind and is certainly not universally true. We hear many good sermons. In my opinion, however, it has been too common to proclaim good thoughts and nicely structured talks that are only loosely connected to biblical texts. In such preaching we easily develop our own ideas rather than the rich truth of biblical text.

the New Testament writers (as well as the church leaders in the early centuries) worked from the premise that right doctrine was an essential part of their unity. Their understanding of heresy was not simply false teaching, but more doctrine that divides. They understood the integral connection between doctrine and living and thus between unified faith and a unified church. When they faced challenges to their faith, they got together and did the hard work of dividing the false from the true, articulating the true, and standing together by the creeds (faith statements) they hammered out. We continue to benefit from their labors on issues such as the Incarnation, the nature of Jesus, and the Trinity with little consideration of the hard work it took them or on how much we depend on them for our own understanding.<sup>14</sup>

- Working harder on articulating what we believe given the challenges of our time would also have the benefit of correcting where we stray. While there are good things to say for our emphasis on living, our neglect of theology brings snares as well. As I noted above, we can live our way into error as easily as living our way into understanding of truth. I will offer one example without attempting to resolve the issue. The New Testament writers clearly taught that there is one body, no doubt working from the passionate prayer of Jesus “that they all may be one” (John 17:21). We have lived our way into being okay with splitting and splintering (even feeling obligated to do so), creating factions between brothers in Jesus to such an extent that anyone coming into one of our groups soon gets confused with all the factions. This, I suggest, reflects a faulty ecclesiology, an ecclesiology that

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14. In his book *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism*, D. H. Williams documents the hard work that went into the creeds, and how much we depend on that work today. He asserts: “I am claiming the late patristic period functioned as a kind of doctrinal canon by which all subsequent developments of theology were measured up to the present day. The great creeds of the period, the development of Trinitarian and Christological theology, the finalization of the biblical canon, doctrines pertaining to the human soul and being made in the image of God, to the fall and redemption, to justification by faith, and so on, find their first and (in many cases) enduring foothold in this period. All theological steps later taken, in confirmation or denial, will begin on the trail marked by the early Fathers” (p.139).

needs to be corrected. We do not have the option of adjusting the truth of the New Testament to fit our ways. Our excuses will not justify our unhappy behaviors. I do not believe there is an easy way forward, but we will make no progress at correction until we align our understanding of church with what Jesus and the Apostles taught.

- With a corrected ecclesiology, I believe we could find better ways forward in working together. There are cultural and missional needs that call for significant resources from the church. In our splintered condition, we offer what we can. But with greater working together there is much more that we could do. I offer one example. The breakdown of marriage and family is creating incredibly tangled marital and family messes. If we continue to hold to lifelong marriage in a culture where people are in second, third, and fourth marriages with children in and out of those relationships, and if we have the courage to engage in these messes, we need far more resources than we are currently offering. I'm thinking of such potential resources as offering concentrated teaching to broken families, help with child care, financial support for single parents, or counseling for teens and adults caught in personal and relational turmoil. The needs are immense. They call for pooled resources, but we will need to work together.
- Articulating our theology would, I believe, make a contribution to the larger body of Christ. As I have indicated above, different vantage points have the potential to increase our understanding. I believe the larger body needs the perspective of Anabaptists, particularly on what it means to follow Jesus. In recent years a number of evangelical writers have begun to explore this subject and have had the courage to stand up and call for change in their own ranks. And they have drawn heat from their own people for daring to speak out. Ironically, some Anabaptists have joined in the criticism of these writers instead of noting the good theological and lifestyle shifts they are calling for. While an articulation of our perspective may likewise generate criticism from those with a different theological view, I can't help but believe that it would be a welcome voice to others.
- Articulating our theology would bring greater consistency to our

own study. We typically borrow from the hard theological work of others (even while critiquing some of their doctrinal positions) for such crucial functions as sermon preparation, teaching assignments, writing, and other studies. Isn't there something inconsistent in this approach? It seems to me that if we were willing to do the hard work of theology, we would have a better premise for engaging in theological discussion and critique. And even as we would hopefully contribute to the understanding of others, we could better appreciate the contributions they make to our understanding.

I have discussed six challenges facing the conservative Anabaptist church community. In further discussion with students and fellow presenters after this paper was presented, I realized there are a number of additional challenges I did not address, two of which I will mention. Their brevity does not mean they are lesser challenges, only that they need more consideration.

## Challenge #7

*To develop a framework for change.*

As conservatives, obviously, we are concerned with preserving. Calling for a framework for change may seem at first to be contrary to our desire to preserve. But we must differentiate between the things that must be preserved and the things that can change and sometimes need to change.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever," says the writer to the Hebrews (13:8). And Jesus assured us, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away" (Matthew 24:35). The Apostle Paul, arguing passionately for the true Gospel against a "different gospel" said, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!" (Galatians 1:8). We must be clear, then, that some things cannot change. And certain changes that people try to make, we must resist.

But truth must always be lived out in a context, and when that context changes, former ways of doing things may not be the best for the new context. We can become so focused on avoiding change, that we miss opportunities for improvement. Or we may continue to promote answers to questions that are no longer being asked.

Here are a couple of considerations for change:

- We are obligated to change where we do not find ourselves honoring the teachings of Jesus or the Apostles (the Scriptural term here is repentance).
- We should not fear changes that make us more Christ-like (2 Corinthians 3:18).
- We should always be looking for ways to show Jesus more clearly and understandably to the world (1 Corinthians 9:20-23).
- We should embrace changes that make the church community stronger, more effective, and more like Jesus (Ephesians 4:11-16).

On the other side of the issue, we must observe cautions when considering changes. If we change in reaction to something we don't like, we easily overcorrect and embrace a position or a practice that is equally problematic long-term. Change invariably results in losses. We must be careful to weigh whether the benefits of new ways will offset losses of older ways.

When God's people do not find a way forward to make healthy changes, it seems to me it sets us up for a number of unfortunate potentialities: 1) We become so focused on preservation (even of good things) that we neglect more important things. 2) We are in danger of spiritual stagnation. 3) We become increasingly irrelevant and inaccessible in our culture. (And, ironically, we will readily point this out in groups that are more conservative in practice than we are.) 4) We offer the appearance of preservation, even while actual changes are happening by default with or without our awareness. 5) We lose sight of the value of current practices that actually are shaping us in good ways, making younger, idealistic members particularly susceptible to poor choices in change.

In a time of rapid cultural change, the truth of God does not change, but practices do. Practices have a shaping effect on us. We must give careful thought to practicing our faith in ways that glorify God, contribute to spiritual vitality, and enable the lost to find Jesus.

## Challenge #8

*To provide a way for individuals with an artistic nature to thrive.*

Conservative Anabaptists are known for being practical and down-to-earth. We want to be useful—do useful work, give useful advice, and make useful things. We love to make something work, and then improve it. We can spend a lot of time and energy on

something we can eat, or wear, or work with. We can even appreciate beauty to the extent that it serves a clear purpose—food, quilts, art (for storybooks), or music. But when there is no discernible usefulness to an activity or a product or idea, we struggle to see the value.

But some people thrive on beauty. It nourishes their soul to see and hear and articulate sounds and connections and thoughts on abstract levels where practical-minded people find it hard to follow, let alone appreciate. Artistic people in a down-to-earth culture can feel misunderstood and even smothered.<sup>15</sup>

The primary way artistic people in conservative Anabaptist churches have found an outlet is through music. In recent years particularly, excellent a cappella choral groups have emerged, providing opportunities for gifted musicians to develop and explore new music and more artistic forms. But this is one avenue only, and it is often more accessible to single people who are able to do extended tours away from home. Furthermore, it seems to have the blessing of the conservative community because of its direct tie to usefulness. Music is an avenue of worship. We don't have a clear way forward for people to develop art beyond useful, realistic scenes; or music other than sacred, a cappella choral music; or literature beyond realistic stories or straightforward exposition. In sculpture and architecture (beyond functional), we have neither eye nor heart, easily assuming it to be poor stewardship at best or idolatry at worst.

It seems to me that this calls for deeper discussion and discernment. First, we must recognize that to provide a way for artistic people to develop and thrive among us would change us. I think that change could have good dimensions, for true beauty is rooted in the nature of God, and any exploration of new dimensions of God should deepen and strengthen us. The danger of the fine arts, of course, is that they can become expressions of human pride rather than the glory of God. But it should encourage us that the most powerful expressions of art in the West are found in the Christian tradition.<sup>16</sup>

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15. Chaim Potok explores this struggle in a conservative Jewish setting in his book *My Name is Asher Lev* and its sequel *The Gift of Asher Lev*. Conservative Anabaptist youths with a strong sense of the arts have found these stories deeply moving.

16. For a discussion of the place of beauty in the realm of literature,

## Conclusion

The challenges facing the church are many. We have the pledge of Jesus to build His church. Consequently, we have the obligation to lay down anything in our understanding or our practice that runs counter to His intentions. And we have the opportunity to offer our lives and our resources to the cause that forever will bring glory to the Father through Jesus Christ.

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see Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1979).

Although I don't come out at the same place Ryken does on all points, he offers a biblical and thought-provoking case for the place of beauty as a Christian value.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Do you agree with the perception that young people today are more reluctant to commit to the church? And if so, what do you see as the contributing reasons?
2. Do young people still respond to strong challenges and high callings?
3. What opportunities do you observe for Anabaptists ministering to people in western culture who are in broken families and strained relationships?
4. How do you see technology being used in useful ways in the church to advance the Kingdom of God?
5. How do you see technology being a distraction to kingdom building?
6. What is your evaluation of the counseling movement in conservative Anabaptism? Overall is it helping or harming?
7. How would you envision equipping the church to care for her members with personal and interpersonal struggles?
8. Is conservative Anabaptism in doctrinal peril? If we had a clear articulation of conservative Anabaptist theology, what effect do you think it would have on the church?



# 3

## MENNONITE EDUCATION, WHAT COULD BE

### Foreword

It is not enough to know what we don't want for our children's education. We must thoughtfully and deliberately paint the picture of what we do want.

My intended vocational path did not include teaching until I turned 20. After accepting our church school's offer to teach for a year, I discovered the challenging and rewarding opportunity to invest in the church of Christ through education. Over the next 30 years I grew in conviction that our schools are an integral component of a strong church community. I am deeply grateful for the energy, creativity, time, and money that has been invested in Mennonite schools over the years. God has used this investment for the good of the church. Additionally, I am excited about the opportunity to build on this investment by exploring what God might want to do in and through our schools. This paper is a contribution to that opportunity.

*Steven Brubaker*

### Introduction

There are great cultural forces vying for our children's allegiances and loves. No tepid response will effectively counter the allure of video games, the internet, movies, and the prevailing value system. It is imperative that we collectively mobilize overwhelming resources to invest in the character and capability of our children.

We have the opportunity to offer a compelling contrast to a world that sacrifices its youth on the altars of convenience and the happiness of parents. This contrast may be illustrated in:

- Communities of church, home, and school concertedly bringing energy to nurturing children who love God, love His world, and love all that is true, good, and beautiful.
- Communities dedicating their best people, their greatest innovation, and their utmost intention to developing youth into compassionate, capable servants poised to do His “will on earth as it is in heaven.”
- Communities that are bringing an unyielding resistance to the trivial, the mind-numbing, and the merely amusing.
- God-loving, Jesus-following, vibrant, compelling, globally aware conservative Anabaptist communities equipped to fully participate in the creation mandate and the great commission.

The church is the focus of God’s kingdom activity. Godly training of our children is a shared responsibility of church and parents. Rather than each family working independently, the church takes responsibility to define a biblically congruent, shared vision of godly training and provides resources for parents to pursue that vision. Parents take responsibility to implement that vision with their children in ways that contribute to the success of all involved families. (The church pot-luck is analogous to this shared responsibility.)

The Christian school can be an integral ally of the home and church as we nurture children who are delightfully curious, creative, and productive; humbly capable, knowledgeable, and skilled; and passionately devoted to God, His church, and disciple-making.

How could our schools become an even more vital asset to the church and home in this effort?

- How can conservative Anabaptist day schools significantly contribute to the health of our communities?
- As we look to the next 50 years, what may God want to do in and through Mennonite schools?

It has been many years since the first visionaries insisted that Mennonites should have our own schools if we wanted to keep our children’s hearts. That initial vision and energy is waning and needs to be renewed by fresh vision. This vision must have more to do with what we do want for our children rather than what we don’t want.

This presentation is intended to fuel conversation and not to end it. It is intended to suggest some possibilities, and not to exhaust them, to describe what is and what could be rather than to prescribe exactly what should be. As we talk with each other, and as many take up the burden of these questions, perhaps God will move through our people to effect new life in Mennonite schools.

To add fuel to this conversation, I will attempt to:

- Frame some questions that will allow us to re-envision school from the perspective of Anabaptist beliefs and values.
- Consider several major biblical passages that should undergird and shape the answers to these questions.
- Offer an assessment of the educational needs and opportunities conservative Anabaptists are facing.
- Offer ten presuppositions that could guide the re-envisioning of schooling.
- Offer ten ways Mennonite schools could be reconfigured to more effectively strengthen the home and church.

## Questions to Ask

If Mennonite schools are to promote Mennonite values more ably, we will need to do the hard work of re-envisioning all aspects of schooling. To this end, Mennonite education should be shaped by Christ-centered, biblically congruent, situation-specific answers to the following questions:

- What attitudes, knowledge, skills, and commitments should we cultivate in children?
- What kind of environment is ideal for nurturing children?

The first question asks us to define the ends of training and schooling, while the second calls us to reconsider the means.

- The first question asks us to paint a picture of the ideal eighteen-year-old that has been shaped by our homes, churches, and schools. What are his values? What are his capabilities? What does she know? How does she live?
- The second question requires thoughtfulness about the kinds of environments that are life-giving, inspiring, and nutritious. These environments are so alive that the growth pressure is almost

unavoidable. How can we shape places to grow that actually nurture lush, healthy, fruitful growth?

- A farmer does well to ask how he can prepare the soil to maximize yield along with identifying the characteristics of a mature crop. The two questions are distinct but inextricably linked. If maximum yield is desired, the soil is prepared and cultivated differently than it is for a merely weed-free field.

The answers we seek are Christ-centered. The answers are sourced in a commitment to love God, love brother, love neighbor, love enemy, do the will of God, make disciples (Matthew 28), and nurture the earth (Genesis 1).

The answers we seek are biblically congruent; answers that originate in and align with the tenor and teaching of the Scriptures.

The answers we seek are situation specific; answers that honor and capitalize on the values, realities, and sensibilities of conservative Anabaptist communities (both as a larger movement and as local churches).

## The Biblical Imperative

There are many passages in the Bible that speak directly to the questions of shaping the next generation and many more that offer implied answers to these questions. I have come to see what I will call the Shema passages from the Old and New Testaments as foundational to a Christian framework for training children. We will begin with these. For each passage chosen one or more implications for godly training is offered.

### Deuteronomy

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you,  
 (A) that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it,  
 (B) that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son,  
 (A) by keeping all his statutes and his commandments,

## MENNONITE EDUCATION, WHAT COULD BE

which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long.

Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey. "Hear, O Israel:

(C) The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

(D) You shall love the Lord your God

(E) with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

And these words that I command you today

(F) shall be on your heart.

(G) You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall

(H) talk of them when you sit in your house, and

(I) when you walk by the way, and

(J) when you lie down, and

(K) when you rise.

(L) You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and

(M) they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

(N) You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. [...]

(O) When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. (Deuteronomy 6:1-21)

The primary purpose of the church and home (and by extension the school) is to nurture:

- **Obedience to God (A)**
- **Fear of God (B)**
- **Understanding of Reality centered in God (C)**
- **Love for God (D)**

There are two primary items to “hear” and “teach”

- **The Lord is One:** This is a God-sourced and sustained world (beliefs – thinking) (C)
- **Love the Lord:** God is the ultimate and perfect object of our love, of our values and desires. (D)

Loving God involves training our mental, physical, and emotional intelligence (knowledge & skills). (E)

Training our children to understand and love God in this way involves:

- **Being:** these words shall be on your heart – they must be imbedded in the teacher’s life and thinking (F)
- **Teaching:** teach them diligently (G)

Effective Teaching (teaching that forms and not merely informs; that trains the will, the body, the emotions, and the mind) includes:

- **Integrating the teaching into daily relational rhythms** (H, I, J, K)
- **Integrating the teaching into body practices** (L, M)
- **Integrating the teaching into the learning environment** (N)
- **Telling stories of God, including personal stories:** Telling or hearing stories produce effects similar to the experience itself. (O)

## Luke

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and

when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37).

- A secondary goal of the home and church (and by extension the school) is to nurture love for our neighbor. This includes equipping with skills that allow us to serve our neighbor and training the will to see our neighbor as more important than ourselves.
- Our neighbor includes anyone who is needy: the voiceless, the powerless, the poor, the hungry, the slave, the widows, the children, the rich, and the educated. Godly training equips people with the knowledge and skills necessary for pursuing the best interest of the needy.

## Proverbs

My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, who

forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways. So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words. (Proverbs 2:1-2:16)

- Godly training involves becoming thoroughly versed in God's revelation.
- Seeking, searching, struggling, and submitting are components of becoming wise. Godly training encourages and rewards inquiry, curiosity, seeking, and understanding.
- The goal of godly training is relationship with God. "The fear of the Lord" and "the knowledge of God" speak of relationship.
- Godly training results in the ability to avoid dishonest gain, evil paths, and sexual failure.
- Ultimately, wisdom is conferred by God. (See also James 1)

## I Corinthians

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. (1 Corinthians 8:1-3)

Godly training aims to shape the love of a person toward God. The accumulation of knowledge is submitted to this end.

## Genesis

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God



created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. (Genesis 1:26-31)

Godly training prepares children with the attitudes, skills, and knowledge to multiply in, care for, and enjoy the created world.

## The Psalms

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep. Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one's youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. (Psalm 127:1-5)

- Godly training continually returns to ultimate trust in God.
- Children are a gift, a reward, a legacy, and an opportunity for overcoming evil in the world with good.

## Ephesians

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:1-4)

- Godly training is the responsibility of the parents.
- Godly training involves discipline (body/will) and instruction (mind).

## Matthew

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

- Godly training prepares people to obey, and to value, the great commission to develop the knowledge, skills, and commitments of a disciplemaker.
- Godly training assumes (requires) the presence of teacher. God is present with us as we are present with those we are teaching.

## Proverbs

Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. (Proverbs 13:24)

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6)

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him. (Proverbs 22:15)

Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol. (Proverbs 23:13-14)

The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother. Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart. (Proverbs 29:15-17)

- Godly training is disciplined, fosters self-discipline, and disciplines.
- Godly teachers are disciplined, cultivate discipline, and discipline.

## 2 Peter

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:3-8)

- Godly training is training toward conversion, in conversion, and beyond conversion.<sup>1</sup>
- Godly training includes the intentional pursuit of moral virtue and knowledge, self-control, persistence, godliness, familial love, and agape love.
- Godly training results in fruitful service.

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1. Paul Zehr, *Mennonite Education – What is it?* Manuscript released March 15, 1982.

## Ephesians

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

The body of Christ (the church) is the context for training as servants, maturing as persons, and growing in submission to Christ.

## Colossians

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:1-3)

- Godly training continually points to Jesus.
- The sincere search for wisdom results in knowing Him.
- Knowing Him is vital to knowing anything else.

## James

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:13-18)

Godly training results in humble fruitfulness.

## 2 Timothy

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

Godly training is anchored in and aligned with the Bible.

## Opportunity & Need

The biblical vision for training and nurturing generations of people who love God and their neighbor is fleshed out in the context of real communities, each one with unique opportunities and needs. What are the current characteristics of conservative Anabaptist communities that should be considered when formulating pictures of what could be?

First, conservative Anabaptist families and churches have demonstrated a widespread ability to raise children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. This provides a platform of great potential. While there are many and troubling exceptions, there is reason to

be grateful for the grace of God that is evident among us. Any educational development should build on the existing grace.

Second, conservative Anabaptists need additional focused, effective training in a broad range of disciplines. This need arises from a number of factors.

- The increasing expectations for church leaders and church life require training (e.g., Bible study, theology, discipleship, and people care).
- As we become less agrarian, to function in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we need training in the use of technology and in specific vocational pursuits.
- In addition, obedience to Jesus' command to make disciples of all nations requires preparation. Preparation is not only needed to serve effectively (e.g., the desire to bring healing does not make one a doctor. Preparation does) but preparation is also needed to anchor servants in sound doctrine.

Third, conservative Anabaptists are at a defining moment (a crossroads, a reorientation) in the role and function of education. This claim arises from a consideration of the current challenges to traditional schooling as well as the potential for innovation.

We begin with the challenges that are often cited as making traditional Mennonite schools difficult in some settings and unsustainable in others.

- The high cost of traditional schooling: Tuition for single worker homes is difficult in the best of times. What will happen during a recession?
- The availability and acceptability of non-traditional schooling alternatives like home school or cyber school.
- Changing family culture: The breakdown of authority structures has serious implications for traditional approaches to schooling. It is increasingly difficult to maintain a healthy, disciplined, and inviting school culture (especially with teenage teachers).
- Technology: As our children become more accustomed to electronic experiences, traditional schooling will be harder to maintain.
- Lack of a positive vision for community based education: The original impetus for Mennonite schools arose from concern with the negative influences of the public school. The

resultant energy is in decline. More and more parents are asking why we are spending this kind of money and energy when there are cheaper alternatives.

- Dissatisfaction with the status quo of Mennonite schools: Conservative Mennonite schools have not always provided safe and healthy contexts for children to learn. We have not always done well in managing bullying, crude language, and disrespect. We have not always done well in providing rich, engaging, and motivating learning environments. It is difficult to build support for schools without a positive culture. (An important question to ask is: “Are these challenges which are fixable by fine tuning the existing approach to education?”)

Not only are there significant challenges facing traditional Mennonite schooling but the opportunities for innovation are abundant.

- Technology: The technological developments of the last thirty years are changing what is possible educationally. Online content along with tablet readers could eliminate textbook usage. Some learning tasks that take significant teacher time can be handled by computers (e.g., vocabulary and spelling review and testing). Collaborative learning situations involving homes and schools are enabled by software. Record keeping, testing, and review can be handled electronically.
- Range of materials: With the advent of the internet and home-schooling, there has been an explosion of new resources for teaching and learning. These resources open many new possibilities for how learning could take place. In addition, hundreds of years of older materials are once again available. This diversity is an opportunity to ask whether there are ways to do school that are in greater alignment with our intentions.
- Economic stability: While many Mennonite schools have struggled financially, it is also true that we live in a time of relative economic prosperity. We have the funds to do what we want. If we want, the opportunity is here to invest heavily in the curriculum and philosophy that can undergird an approach to training that fits who we are. This is not merely paying the teachers and buying the books for next year, but investing in the schools of the next twenty years.

- The proliferation of home-school and other non-traditional approaches to education (e.g., self-paced and online curriculums) have opened the doors to rethinking the how of education. For example, the home-school movement has reinforced the value and need for parental anchoring and involvement on education. The increased openness and flexibility gives a window for considering new directions or at least an altered path.

This convergence of opportunity and need may create the conditions that allow for shifts in our educational approach that are more in line with the beliefs, values, and desired outcomes of conservative Anabaptist churches and homes.

## Presuppositions

An intersection of the biblical directives and the characteristics of Mennonite communities suggest a number of foundational premises. These premises can undergird, guide, and protect any refocusing of our schools.

### The big two

- Godly training has as its primary purpose nurturing love for God. The primary purpose should not be to form smart people or successful people.
- Godly training will be anchored in the presence of godly, wise, and skilled persons. Godly training will never be fundamentally divorced from a teacher.

### Three more

- Godly training involves formation of the whole person. It is not merely or primarily the accumulation of information. Godly training includes:
  - Vocational Training: skills and understanding directed toward particular work
  - Biblical Training: a rich vocabulary about God
  - Personal Training: general life skills, knowledge, and understanding
  - Affective Training: forming the will and emotions to align with reality
- Godly training prepares people to work in the created world



for the glory of God. Godly training actively counters the tendency to divide life into sacred and secular categories.

- Godly training involves a cooperative effort of home, school, and church and not merely the home and school. Godly training is a community-affirming (rather than a fragmenting) function.
  - Parents have primary and final responsibility for the training of their children within the context of the church community.
  - The church provides corporate direction and support to families (shared purposes, methods, personnel, resources, and spaces).

#### **And several specific to Mennonites**

- Mennonite training should capitalize on the realities of conservative Anabaptist schools (e.g., average of thirty students, multi-grade rooms, students with a strong work ethic)
- Mennonite values and vision need to drive Mennonite approaches to training. Mennonite schooling does not need to look like traditional or contemporary American schools.
- Mennonite training should emphasize the practices that embody and inculcate Mennonite values. These may include stories, singing, Scripture, and service work.
- Mennonite education should maximize local contexts (home, workplace, church) and minimize the need for artificial learning environments (e.g., classroom, college).
- Mennonite schooling should follow the dictates of the state whenever it does not call for disobedience to God.

## **Ten Possibilities**

There are many ways to reconfigure Mennonite schools along the lines described here. In an effort to seed our imaginations and explore the range of possibilities, I offer ten proposals which could strengthen the home and church.

- **Business Curriculum:** A majority of graduates from Mennonite schools will likely be involved in business. We could develop and offer rigorous training in business knowledge and skills in grades 7-12. This curriculum would cultivate a kingdom context and Christocentric focus for work, money, and business. The curriculum would aim to form business people who love God in, with, and through their business.

- **Servant Curriculum:** James says that people with understanding will be recognizable by their humility and service. It is consistent with Mennonite values to make a concentrated effort to form graduates who have a global vision of needs, a local commitment to addressing needs, and the skills to make a useful difference. This course could span all twelve grades. Skills developed could include public speaking, discipleship, evangelism, carpentry, small engine repair, survival training, fasting, physical training, foreign language, organization, time management, CPR, first aid, and teaching Sunday school. It should explore creative ways to address genuine needs as part of the course. It could include training and experience in interacting with the poor and homeless as well as people who are of different race, age, IQ, culture, or profession from their own.
- **School/Homeschool Hybrid:** The debate between the traditional and home school approaches rarely considers a middle road. Perhaps it would be preferable for some communities to repurpose the school to serve as a facilitating body rather than sole provider of academic instruction. In this partnering approach, the home and school would both be significantly involved in K-12 instruction. However, the center of the educational process would be moved from the school to the home. The majority of the school week would be spent at home in reading, thinking, writing, research, and problem-solving. A school/homeschool hybrid increases the time a child spends at home compared to traditional schooling. This would allow maximizing teacher interaction in areas of import and minimizing the organizational demands that can best be home based. Home and school have vital roles in godly training. Schools can focus on the universal (breadth); Home can focus on the individual (depth). The school however is often needed to facilitate the home's efforts. If a hybrid model is to work, parents must be willing to invest significant time, energy, and money in the training of their children. Additionally, a wide range of curricular materials would need to be developed to enable this cooperative approach.
- **Conventional/Self-Paced Hybrid:** The self-paced approach

to curriculum and schooling unveiled in the 1970's gave hope to small Mennonite communities that they could have a Christian school. The demands of offering six or more classes for twelve grades simultaneously are seemingly beyond the capabilities of two or three teachers. And when you only have thirty students distributed across the twelve grades, you can only afford two teachers. However, over time the deficiencies of the self-paced model have become increasingly apparent. The most glaring is the minimization of the teacher in the process of learning. Some portions of subjects can be adequately learned in a self-paced approach while other portions rely heavily on teacher presence. A thoughtful, rigorous effort to develop a curriculum that attempts to capture the strengths of each approach may still enable the small school to operate, but now with greater academic integrity.

- **Formative Stories:** The stories we tell powerfully shape our beliefs, and values. It could have far-reaching implications if we make the effort to compile a canon of stories with embedded Anabaptist sensibilities told in ways that capture children's imaginations. These stories could then provide a consistent and unifying educational framework. James K. A. Smith writes, "It is crucial that the task of Christian education and formation is nested in a story—in the narrative arc of the biblical drama of God's faithfulness to creation and to his people. . . . All the work of the Christian school needs to be nested in this bigger story—and we need to constantly look for ways to tell that story, to teach in stories, because story is the first language of love. If hearts are going to be aimed toward God's kingdom, they'll be won over by good storytellers."<sup>2</sup>
- **Music Curriculum:** Mennonites value singing. We could, if we desired, graduate students who were not only prepared to sing well and skillfully lead others in worship, but able to compose new songs as well. Our schools can strengthen our ability to worship through church singing for another generation. Mennonite schools are uniquely positioned to develop students much further in the art of singing than schools from other traditions (and much further than we currently do). Perhaps this is a gift

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2. James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 160.

and responsibility that God wants us to develop.

- **Bible Curriculum:** While Mennonite curriculum providers have worked hard to produce Bible curriculums, there are still many areas of theology, Bible, church history, and Christian living where we have not produced materials from an Anabaptist perspective. For example, many of our schools use church history and worldviews materials from Reformed publishers. Additionally, there remains a deficit in substantive integration of an Anabaptist-Christian understanding of the Scriptures and the academic subjects.
- **Unbounded School:** Many of our communities have a school. The physical infrastructure to offer elementary and high school education is in place. Perhaps it would be a better use of the investment (land, building, equipment) if we were to extend the offerings of school for both older and younger people. The greater flexibility could also include educational opportunities from morning to night, all year long.
  - **Adult education:** This could be leveraged to offer additional training opportunities like night school, adult literacy, foreign language classes, music school, business classes, etc. Perhaps the school can partially replace the farm in the life of our communities. The church can be a place where the church comes together to work, to teach, to pass on life skills and values, to eat, to play. Additionally, it may provide non-threatening avenues for engagement with the unchurched.
  - **Family support and resources:** We could expand the purpose of the school to be a hub of learning that assists the home in offering compelling alternatives to the movie/gaming/surfing fixation by providing resources like a library of learning equipment (e.g., potter's wheel, telescope, microscope, loom), a read-aloud library for parents, and family field trips.
- **Christian Education Administrator:** A primary key to the success of any school is the person who is given the authority and responsibility to make it happen. Would it be helpful for churches to select carefully (and by careful I mean a process similar to that used to ordain a church leader) a godly, skilled, wise, trusted community statesman/educator to the full-time vocation of

implementing the church's educational priorities, including the school? It will be vital for this person to be a primary teacher in the school and not merely an administrator. There is probably no more effective way to pursue a positive vision for the school than to vest in a person a mandate, resources, and authority.

## Conclusion

If conservative Anabaptist schools are to be a valuable asset and ally of the church and home, it is imperative that we find sustainable solutions to the very real challenges of training our children. This will involve cultivating a vision that goes beyond not wanting our children in the public schools. I doubt that we will find these solutions without devoting large reservoirs of energy and resources to forming schools that are genuinely Christ-centered in methods and outcomes.

This pursuit is not without risk. While avoiding education altogether is an unbiblical and impractical option, ignoring the dangers of education is also unbiblical and destructive. These dangers can be minimized by:

- Anchoring education in the local church community and homes,
- Tying education to older, godly, wise, and capable people who are submitted to the church, and by
- Developing quality curricular resources that align with our beliefs and values.

This is a vision for training that starts with the church. It begins with churches that actively embrace their role to enable a wide range of training opportunities and expectations. It continues with those churches supporting the responsibility of the home while providing a community context for training. This is also a vision for training that places primary responsibility on the home to provide deeply nourishing relationships and environments for children to flourish in their God-shaped orientation. From this context, the school can take its appropriate place as a ministry of the church, acting as the hub of the church's equipping efforts, connecting homes and teachers and community resources. Together, the church, home, and school can make the needed effort to mobilize overwhelming resources to invest in the character and capability of our children.

## Questions for Discussion

1. As we look to the next 50 years, what may God want to do in and through our Christian school?
2. If you were designing our school from the ground up, from a thoughtfully Christian perspective and purpose, how would it look different from what is?
3. Do you agree with these statements:  

Godly training has as its primary purpose nurturing love for God. The primary purpose should not be to form smart people or successful people.

Godly training will be anchored in the presence of godly, wise, and skilled persons. Godly training will never be fundamentally divorced from a teacher.
4. What are the greatest challenges to operating our Christian School? How can we address those challenges?

# 4

## A VISION FOR BUSINESS

### Foreword

Many Anabaptist communities have difficulty knowing what to do with the successful businessman. We like his money when there is a need in the church or school, but we are often suspicious of his motives. Rather than having a primary goal of blessing the Kingdom of God, many financially successful men seem to be funding extravagant lifestyles.

Addressing this concern is difficult. There is danger in placing too much emphasis on business and the value of the man who has an obvious ability to make the material world work for him. If we only address the blessing his finances are to the Kingdom, we may inspire more men to seek after wealth. We may even provide unwarranted consolation to some whom the Lord is trying to convict regarding their focus on business.

But we also could do harm if we attempt to say that business ownership is wrong. That the potential for spiritual bankruptcy is so great that believers should avoid business ownership as much as possible. This focus could keep people from pursuing ministry in the marketplace that God has given them the gifts to do.

This balance was what I struggled with in preparing this paper. For many years I was a general contractor and enjoyed the interactions which business provides. Looking back there are things I would do differently. It is very easy for someone who enjoys business to forget that God has placed him in the marketplace for a greater purpose than just making money. He is to demonstrate what it looks like to follow Jesus while doing commerce. I know I failed this test many times.

Today I work for Christian Aid Ministries and direct the SALT Microfinance Solutions program. We work in developing countries

helping them start and expand small businesses which then enable them to provide for their families. We also use this as a vehicle to provide spiritual teaching and try to demonstrate how their occupations can be used to share the Gospel and be a blessing in their communities.

May the Lord bless your attempt to get a clearer vision for ministry in the marketplace!

*Gary Miller*

## Observations

A. Confusion exists about the role of business and the businessman within the church community. Occupations are not generally considered an important or viable part of ministry or missions.

B. The business arena offers tremendous and largely untapped opportunities to reach out to the lost. Our occupations are an excellent place to demonstrate the beauty of the Kingdom of God in daily life.

C. If we are to successfully use business in ministry while protecting the businessman from the snare of wealth, changes must occur. The local church must become much more involved, both in teaching and providing ongoing accountability.

## Current Confusion

*Confusion exists about the role of business and the businessman within the church community. Occupations are not generally considered an important or viable part of ministry or missions.*

The successful Anabaptist businessman is concurrently admired and viewed with suspicion, and we don't seem to agree on what to do with him. Recently I surveyed conservative Anabaptists of differing ages and income brackets, all of whom were serious about following Jesus. It didn't take long to find out that business, size of business, and business ownership are controversial topics. We have strong opinions on this subject. I found three basic viewpoints:



**Business Ownership: Stewardship of God's Gifts**

This group sees Christian business owners simply as men who are being good stewards of the unique abilities God has given them. These believers are perfectly comfortable with being part of the business world and commerce. They enjoy the challenge it presents, and see business as providing the needed funds to relieve the poor and further the Kingdom of God. This group frequently speaks of the blessing of employment that Christian businesses provide. "Of course we need Christian businessmen," they say. "It wouldn't be good if all of our men had to go work in an ungodly environment."

**Business Ownership: Acceptable if Small**

This group acknowledges there are godly businessmen who are utilizing their abilities and providing a financial blessing to the Kingdom. But they also are very concerned when they see businessmen start out with good intentions, yet over time become ensnared, either by debt when things don't go well, or by wealth when successful. This group of believers prefer the thought of home based businesses, where children can learn to work alongside their parents. One small businessman has even created parameters to determine when a business is too large. He told me, "When a business grows to where you have employees managing employees, that business is too big." Business, to this group, can be a blessing when small, but dangerous when large.

**Business Ownership: Avoid if Possible**

A third group of believers see business ownership as very dangerous and something to be avoided if at all possible. This group believes followers of Jesus should be servants, individuals who never aspire to achieving financial success by worldly standards. They cannot comprehend how someone could end up owning a large business if they are sincerely trying to imitate the life of Jesus, a man who didn't even have a place to lay His head (Luke 9:59). Big business, to this group, is incompatible with the character of Christ, and it is hard for them to fathom one of His followers ending up in a corporate corner office.

## Why the Confusion?

I believe there are several reasons for the current confusion.

**Reaction to our past.** While Anabaptist churches are known for attempting to take the Bible literally, in general there has been little emphasis on Jesus' warnings regarding wealth and possessions. However, this is changing. There is an increased awareness that more teaching is needed on this topic. Many youth have reacted to their parents' pursuit after accumulated wealth. They have concluded that involvement in the business world is not what Jesus had in mind and that a serious follower of Jesus will stay as far away as possible.

**Few good role models.** For the most part, spiritually minded parents encourage their children to become missionaries, not owners of large businesses. These two are perceived to be at opposite ends of a spiritual continuum. But possibly this is due to few good examples among us. Where are the large business owners who live at a comparable level to their employees? Why is it so difficult to find financially successful businessmen who refuse to be ensnared by the pursuit of accumulated material wealth, and who are using their resources primarily to further the Kingdom of God?

**Separating the Secular from the Spiritual.** There seems to be an assumption that being involved in business, especially a large business, makes one a second-class Christian. As a result, we sometimes hear that a person is leaving business to go into full-time ministry. But is that a Biblical concept? Did God really intend that full-time ministry apply only to those living in foreign countries or working for a non-profit organization? If everyone on the planet suddenly decided to follow Jesus, would we no longer need plumbers, architects, cooks, and garbage collectors? If everyone were sold out to following Jesus, would they suddenly walk away from their occupations? Admittedly there are some who would and should. But we need to understand that some would be honoring God by building roads, planting crops, and milking cows. In fact, it would be wrong for all of these people to neglect the work God has placed in their care. God has given different gifts to different people. When we separate the secular from the spiritual, several other misconceptions begin to grow.

## Resulting Misconceptions

**Spiritual Activities Have More Value** Several years ago a pastor in another country asked if I would go with him to visit a brother in his congregation. This brother couldn't seem to hold down a job and provide for his family, and the pastor was searching for answers. As we walked in the brother's home I noticed there was almost no furniture. There was one twin bed, one chair, and a set of bookshelves well stocked with books. An air of despondency and discouragement hung heavily in the house. This man had a wife and several children, but they would hardly look us in the eye. The brother told us to sit on the bed, he sat down in the only chair, and his wife and children stood along the wall. Looking around this desolate room, one couldn't help but feel sorry for the wife and children.

But as we began to discuss their situation the real problem became clear. This man spent his time reading his Bible, the *Martyr's Mirror*, and Bible commentaries instead of working so his children could eat. He had tried different occupations, but it seemed the jobs never suited him, so he would return home and once again immerse himself in Christian literature. He was neglecting his family, but viewed himself as more spiritual because he was involved daily in "spiritual" activity.

**Business Becomes a "Necessary Evil"** Most of us at one time or another have had problems with our septic system. Maybe the water backed up in the toilet and we were forced to uncover the septic tank and investigate the problem. Perhaps the tank needed to be pumped out or the leach field dug up, but whatever the remedy, it usually isn't pleasant. Yet when the water backs up in the toilet we usually do something quickly. As stinky and messy as it is, we know something must be done.

We refer to things we don't like, but are required to do, as necessary evils. Some believers regard business exactly the same way. Rather than seeing the potential blessing it could be to the Kingdom of God, business becomes little more than just a requirement for survival. A.W. Tozer, describing the difficulty believers have in navigating this sacred/secular struggle, said: "Most Christians are caught in a trap. They cannot get a satisfactory adjustment between

the claims of these two worlds. They try to walk the tightrope between two kingdoms and they find no peace in either.”<sup>1</sup>

**Constant Guilt** If a man concludes that “spiritual activities” have more value than taking care of the natural things of life, there are only two potential destinations: hunger or guilt.

Thus we shuffle off to work again, nagged by a sense of guilt that we should be spending more time in spiritual activities. But does God want a man to feel guilty when sleeping, eating, or working? God created us with natural needs, and He intends that we expend time and effort in addressing those needs. When we separate the spiritual and natural in our lives, we will struggle with an underlying sense of guilt that God didn’t intend.

**A Different Set of Rules** When we separate our business life from our spiritual, it also becomes easy to justify a different set of rules. Recently I overheard two businessmen discussing Mechanic’s Liens and whether or not a believer should use them. One of the men said, “Well, I don’t think Jesus intends for us to let people just run over us. If we didn’t use Mechanic’s Liens, a lot of our customers would just take advantage of us.” Where, in the teachings of Jesus, would one find support for this statement?

What interested me most was that the individual making this statement belonged to a fellowship which would teach a close adherence to the teachings of Jesus in church life. They would teach that it is wrong to use the courts to apply force, we should forgive an erring brother regardless of how he had taken advantage of the church, and we shouldn’t be involved in military force. Yet when it came to business, for some reason things looked different. A different set of rules were in play.

## Failure to be honest with Scripture

**Ignoring Difference between Proverbs and the Teachings of Jesus** There are some major differences between the Old Testament instructions regarding wealth and the teachings of Jesus. Yet I see most Anabaptist financial teachers ignoring these differences. We tend to do the same thing we accuse others of doing with divorce

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1. A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, (Horizon Books, Christian Publications Inc., Harrisburg, PA, 1948), 119.

and remarriage or non-resistance - just pick out a verse which says what we are wanting, regardless of the context or the situation it was addressing. But we need to be honest with the fact that the message of Jesus regarding wealth and possessions was radically different from what the Jewish people had previously been taught.

### **The Teachings of Proverbs**

**Teachings of Common Sense** Proverbs abound with statements of what we refer to as common sense. If you first do this and then that, the result will be this. “The Sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing (Proverbs 20:4).” This is simply a true statement of common sense. If you choose to stay in the warm house when you should be working in the field, you won’t have a harvest.

**Self-Preservation Encouraged** Throughout the book of Proverbs the reader is taught that he must be diligent lest he be taken advantage of or lose what he has. Notice the underlying message of these verses: “Be not one of them that strike hands or of them that are surety for debts. If thou hast nothing to pay, why should he take away thy bed from under thee (Proverbs 22:26-27)?” This is a verse which applies to what is called co-signing for a loan, but notice the message. “Why would you do that? Why take that kind of risk? If the fellow you are co-signing the note for goes belly up, you might lose your own bed!” This same underlying thought is found throughout Proverbs. Don’t make choices that cause you to be led into poverty. Poverty is something to be avoided.

**Prosperity: the Reward of Diligence and Frugality** “He that tilleth his land shall have plenty of bread: but he that followeth after vain persons shall have poverty enough (Proverbs 28:19).” If you work hard and are diligent, you will be prosperous. Proverbs also warns against seeking wealth by other means. “Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished: but he that gathereth by labor shall increase (Proverbs 13:11).” The path to prosperity is taught very clearly in the Proverbs. “He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich (Proverbs 21:17).” This verse says that the man who chooses to spend money on pleasure, living it up as he goes, will never accumulate very much wealth. The path to accumulated wealth is hard work and a frugal lifestyle.

**Poverty: The Reward of Slothfulness** “I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. Then I saw, and considered it well: I looked upon it, and received instruction. Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth; and thy want as an armed man (Proverbs 24:30-34).”

This is another reoccurring theme in the book of Proverbs. Material poverty is the result of poor choices, laziness, and slothfulness. If you are going to extract food and blessing out of this cursed earth, you will be required to fight to do it. It will not come easy, and the reward for slothfulness is poverty.

**Planning and Saving for the Future Encouraged** Twice in the Proverbs the lowly ant is held up as an example for us. “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest (Proverbs 6:6).” The ant isn’t only a diligent worker, but it also plans ahead. God has placed within the ant the knowledge that summer doesn’t last forever. So while there is plenty, the ant gathers and saves for the coming winter. The lesson here is evident. “The ant are a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in the summer (Proverbs 30:24).” A wise man plans ahead and saves for coming need. A wise man will observe this and take action. He knows if he is going to succeed materially, he will need to plan ahead and save during times of plenty.

**Material Wealth: Good and a Blessing from God Repeatedly** God told the children of Israel, be obedient to me and I will make sure you have plenty. “Wherefore it shall come to pass, if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the Lord thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the mercy which he sware unto thy fathers: And he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep, in the land which he sware unto thy fathers to give thee. Thou shalt be blessed above all people: there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle (Deuteronomy 7:12-14).”

This theme continues in the book of Proverbs, and there is an overtone throughout the book that having wealth obtained honestly by labor is a wonderful blessing. “The poor is hated even of his own neighbor: but the rich hath many friends (Proverbs 14:20 & 19:4).” This verse along with others says that a man who is wealthy will have more friends. Material wealth also provides some earthly security. “The rich man’s wealth is his strong city: the destruction of the poor is their poverty (Proverbs 10:15).”

Different characters in the Old Testament, whom we hold up today as righteous men, were very wealthy. I believe this is a fulfillment of God’s promise. One of the Proverbs says it like this; “The crown of the wise is their riches (Proverbs 14:24).” Wealth in the Old Testament seemed to provide some evidence that a man was approved of by God. We understand there were exceptions; there were poor widows who were very faithful to God and wealthy men who were ungodly. But in general, wealth and prosperity were seen as good things, and a sign of the blessing of God.

### The Teachings of Jesus

The teachings of Jesus provide an almost opposite view on wealth, and must have provided quite a shock to the listeners who had been taught from Proverbs and the Old Testament.

**Lacking Common Sense** “Give to him that asketh of thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away (Matthew 5:42).” This would never appear in a “How to Run a Successful Business” book or a business seminar. Another of Jesus’ teachings: “And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? For sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; (Luke 6:34, 35)” A bank couldn’t operate like that, and it is obvious these statements lack what we call common business sense.

**Self-Denial Encouraged** “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise (Luke 6:31 & Matthew 7:12).” The wealthy storeowner’s goal is to convince people they need his product. But instead of selfishly trying to increase sales so profits will increase, Jesus is saying the storeowner should look at transactions from the buyer’s point of view. That doesn’t sound like successful business advice.

**Prosperity: A Great Danger and Potential Snare** “Woe unto you that are rich!” Jesus said. “Ye have received your consolation (Luke 6:24).” Later in Jesus’ ministry He again warned against wealth. “How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24,25).” This saying was so radically different that even the disciples, who were mostly poor men, were shocked. The Bible says they were “exceedingly amazed (Matthew 19:25).” Jesus addressed prosperity repeatedly and His message was always consistent: earthly wealth is a great danger and a potential snare to a man.

**Material Poverty: A Place of Potential Blessing** “And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20).” And then, lest anyone be uncertain of what He was saying, Jesus continued. “Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled (Luke 6:21).” I think we can say with confidence that God doesn’t take pleasure in seeing people be hungry. Just a few chapters later we find Jesus so concerned about His hungry crowd of followers that He performed a miracle so they could eat (Luke 9:10-17). Rather, in speaking of the poor and hungry Jesus was exposing one of the snares of earthly wealth. Riches cause us to forget God and depend less on Him. Where a rich man depends on his wealth for deliverance in time of trouble, a poor man tends to turn to God. For this reason, material poverty is a place of potential spiritual blessing.

**Worrying About Future Discouraged** “Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they (Matthew 6:25,26)?” Businessmen are notorious for planning, plotting, and trying to peer into the future. Almost every financial seminar will devote some content to planning. Was Jesus really saying not to even think about the future? I don’t think so. Instead, I believe He was teaching the foolishness of worrying about the future. The English Standard Version of the Bible says: “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about what you will eat or



what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on (Matthew 6:25).”

### **Differences We Need To Honestly Address**

Part of the confusion with how to regard business and the Christian businessman is a result of not being honest about the differences between the Old Testament view of wealth and the message of Jesus. And not only Jesus. His warnings against desiring to be wealthy were substantiated in the Epistolary writings of His disciples as well. While perhaps not as succinct or forceful as the words of Jesus, men like Paul also warned against the pursuit after material wealth (1 Timothy 6:6-19). This view of earthly wealth, which differs from the Old Testament, needs to be addressed and reconciled.

## **Business: A Useful and Powerful Vehicle for the Kingdom**

*The business arena offers tremendous and largely untapped opportunities to reach out to the lost. Our occupations are an excellent place to demonstrate the beauty of the Kingdom of God in daily life.*

### **The Blessing of Industry**

God created Adam for labor. Not providing work for him would have been as foolish as creating fish to swim without providing the water in which to do it. The Bible says that God put Adam in “the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it (Genesis 2:15).” When Adam fell into sin, his punishment wasn’t that he suddenly needed to work and depend on the soil to produce his food. The result of the Fall was working with cursed soil. Thorns came up, insects devoured plants, and crops failed. The consequence of cursed soil was more labor and less production.

Sometimes in our affluent society we forget how important work and industry are to our physical and emotional health. Americans have a strange culture. I have seen people driving around in a YMCA parking lot, trying to get a spot close to the door so they don’t need to walk so far, only to go inside and exercise. What an amazing society! Where else on earth can you go and see people mowing their lawns with riding mowers, then going in the house to work out on the treadmill? Yet labor and exercise are important

to our physical and mental health, and business is the environment in which it happens.

Industry is a blessing, and followers of Jesus will be known for a good work ethic. The Apostle Paul, speaking to the church at Ephesus, used his example of working hard physically to defend his ministry. He told them, “These hands have ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. I have showed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how He said, it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:34,34).” We don’t usually talk about Paul’s work ethic, but he wasn’t ashamed of it. He provided, not only for himself, but also for others around him who had need.

### **Opportunities to Demonstrate Kingdom Business**

In our current materialist culture, there are few things more capable of getting the attention of the unbeliever than a non-materialistic attitude and lifestyle. I believe we have a tremendous opportunity to use our businesses as missions. In the past, observers watched faithful martyrs die for their faith, and it moved them to further investigate this thing called Christianity. In a very similar way, people who observe businessmen giving up potential financial gain because of a love for Jesus can’t help but have a desire to know more. Stories of businessmen who relinquish profits and demonstrate that the dollar isn’t king in their life are rarer than they should be. But when this occurs the story spreads quickly. Financial advisor and author Larry Burkett relates the following story.

“The owner of a large manufacturing company suddenly lost his plant manager. The manager met him at the door one morning and abruptly announced he was quitting. The owner was perplexed. For the past five years he had been grooming this plant manager to become president of the company. So he asked the manager his reasons for leaving, but the manager refused to discuss it. He asked the manager if he would at least stay long enough to train someone to take his place, but the manager refused. The owner was still confused, but since the manager had previously been a good friend, he held a going away party, thanked him for his faithfulness, and gave the manager a substantial severance bonus.

Several months later his reasons for leaving became evident, when the former manager opened his own company and copied his former boss's best-selling product. During the next few years this new business grew and became a fierce competitor of the first company. But nine years later something happened. The new business had some design problems with one of their products, and became involved in several lawsuits.

The owner of the original business was a Christian and had forgiven his former manager years before. When he heard his competitor was having difficulty, he felt God was calling him reach out to his former manager. So he bought one of the defective products that caused the lawsuits, and asked his engineers to find a solution to the problem. They found the problem and a solution, and then the owner called his former manager and shared what his engineers had discovered.”<sup>2</sup>

Does this account seem like occupational suicide, or does it speak to you of genuine Christianity? Business provides an opportunity for us to demonstrate the fact that the dollar isn't king in our life, and these kinds of stories should be more common in our churches. If we really desire to reach out in a materialistic society, then we shouldn't ignore the opportunity which business provides.

### **Business in Foreign Missions**

We underestimate the potential in business in foreign missions. Consider the country of Indonesia. Christians have sent traditional missionaries there for hundreds of years. Yet in spite of all the mission activity, that country has the largest concentration of Muslims anywhere in the world. So how did the Islamic faith gain such a foothold? Was it because Muslims have a vibrant mission plan? No, the country was converted to Islam years ago primarily through traveling traders and businessmen. One man who has lived in Indonesia said that when the Christians came, they isolated themselves in mission compounds, having little daily interaction with the local people. The Muslims, on the other hand, worked with the common people and became involved in their daily lives. As one researcher explains, “One important factor in the rapid spread

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2. Larry Burkett, *Business By The Book*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1998), pg. 3.

of Islam was its emergence at the hub of a series of important trade routes, including caravan trails leading from the Middle East through Central Asia to North China, and across the Sahara to the Sudan. Many Muslim traders were also effective missionaries, acting as multiple diffusion nuclei who travelled widely. Expansion diffusion accounts for the spread of Islam from its Arabian source area, and relocation diffusion accounts for its subsequent dispersal to Malaysia, Indonesia, South Africa and the New World.”<sup>3</sup> These men came to do business, and in the process told the people about Mohammed. Business allows people to interact with a culture in a unique way, and I believe it provides a much needed component to our foreign missions.

## Getting a Vision for Kingdom Focused Business

*If we are to successfully use business in ministry while protecting the businessman from the snare of wealth, changes must occur. The local church must become much more involved, both in teaching and providing ongoing accountability.*

What If?

God has always desired for His people to provide a public, corporate demonstration of what the entire world would be like if everyone were a follower of Him. This was what God had in mind for the nation of Israel, and it is the desire He has for His church. Our lives should demonstrate something so radically different and beautiful that the observer cannot help but ask, “What if everyone lived like that? What kind of world would this be if everyone followed Jesus?” Business provides a tremendous opportunity in our society to demonstrate something different. Customers, vendors, and everyone who interacts with a Kingdom focused business should walk away saying, “Wow, what would the world of commerce be like if everyone operated like that?” But if we are going to achieve this goal we must begin to view our occupations differently. Following are some areas where I believe we need focused teaching if we are to achieve this goal.

### Desire for Mutual Blessing in Each Transaction

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3. Chris Park, *Religion and Geography*, (Lancaster University), 2004.

Recently I heard about a man who was looking for a particular tool. He knew the tool could be purchased new for around \$500, but he only wanted to invest \$300, so he searched for a used one. He found one at a garage sale that looked like it had hardly been used, and the price tag said \$35. What a wonderful opportunity! But the man knew the woman selling it had no idea how much this tool was actually worth. He knew this woman's husband had died recently and she was obviously selling his tools.

Should he just pay what she was asking for the tool? After all, both would walk away from the transaction feeling good. Or should he pay her what the tool was really worth? This man was a follower of Jesus, so he told her this tool was exactly what he had been looking for and that he was willing to pay \$300 for it. As you can imagine, this shocked widow didn't keep this story to herself. What was it that caused the man to reveal the true value of the tool? It was an honest desire for mutual blessing in the transaction.

The importance of ensuring the other person is being blessed by every transaction is a concept which is lacking in our churches. Too often a good deal or a great opportunity really means that I got the best of someone else in a business deal. But is it possible we are losing many good opportunities for outreach, simply because we are seeing business only as a way to make money? The man who bought the tool at the garage sale lost \$265 by speaking up. But that story is still being told. I doubt that using that money to buy tracts would have had a greater impact for Christ.

### **Dealing with Proverbs and Jesus**

The Proverbs are a collection of general truths and observations about our world. They contain many powerful truths which were true when written and are still true today. But we need to understand what they are. They are statements of general truth. For example, we are told in Proverbs, "Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing... (Proverbs 18:22)" Is this always true? Most of us can think of men who have found a wife, but it wasn't a blessing to their lives at all. Yet there is an overriding truth in this verse. Wives can be a great blessing in our lives. This statement is a general observation about life.

Another verse says: "A soft answer turneth away wrath. (Proverbs

15:1)” Does it always? Jesus responded very kindly to His accusers, but they crucified Him anyway. Most of us have experienced situations where we received wrath in spite of our soft answer. Yet, again, we understand there is a general truth in this verse. Those who answer with kindness instead of harshness tend to defuse angry confrontations. Again, this is a wise and general observation about life. The book of Proverbs is full of these kinds of observations.

But as we have seen, there are major differences between the book of Proverbs and the teachings of Jesus regarding wealth. In the past many conservative Anabaptists have chosen to ignore these differences, and this has impacted our view of business. If we want to emphasize the importance of tithing or putting God first in our lives, then we might use a teaching of Jesus like, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you (Matthew 6:33).” But if we are wanting to teach how to accumulate wealth slowly, the importance of defending and protecting your possessions against loss, or even the many ways financial prosperity can be a blessing in our lives (as if we need to be taught), we go to the Proverbs. The Bible becomes a big pool of verses, and depending on what we are trying to substantiate at the time, we dip in and find the passage which says what we want.

**The Proverbs** Proverbs teaches us how to make this material world we live in work for us. It is the operating manual provided by the Manufacturer Himself. It is an invaluable book containing succinct and powerful business instruction regarding how to make the material world work. Men throughout the ages have applied its teachings to their lives, and many have become financially successful. Its principles still work and are still true thousands of years since the teachings were first penned. Because it the operating manual for the material world, the principles it teaches work regardless of your religion. Japan is a very wealthy yet godless country. How can this be? Because, unknowingly, they as a society have lived out much of the message of Proverbs. Japan has a strong work ethic, is known to be diligent in business, and historically has had one of the highest personal savings rates in the world. Though the average Japanese may not be aware of the source, these foundational values from Scripture have made the country very successful financially. Proverbs contains the formula for material prosperity.

**The Message of Jesus** If you go to Jesus' teachings hoping to find pointers on increasing business revenue you won't find much, because that wasn't His mission. He taught we should make every decision from an eternal perspective, and said that a man who had nothing but earthly possessions at the end of his life was a fool.

But although His focus and perspective on wealth was different, Jesus never proclaimed the truths in Proverbs no longer valid. He didn't say, "Ye have heard it hath been said, He that tilleth his land shall have plenty of bread. But I say unto you, don't get up so early to work in the field. Relax, God knows you need food and will bring it to you." Jesus didn't say you couldn't accumulate earthly wealth by heeding Proverbs. He just taught that earthly wealth wasn't worth accumulating.

Jesus wasn't saying that a good work ethic, saving for known expenses, or being diligent in our business decisions weren't good. But He was saying that a man can do all of this, and still be bankrupt at the end of life. Actually, even the author of Proverbs hinted at this truth. Addressing the foolishness of focusing only on material wealth the writer said; "There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches (Proverbs 13:7 & 23:4,5)." Even in the Old Testament there was a basic understanding that earthly wealth alone is insufficient, and Jesus persistently reemphasized the folly of having an earthbound foundational vision.

### **Reconciling Proverbs and Jesus**

So what are we to do with the different focus and message? More importantly, how are we to deal with these differences in our business? I propose that, although Proverbs and the teachings of Jesus have a different purpose and focus, they do not contradict each other. Both Proverbs and the teachings of Jesus have a powerful role to play in business.

**Proverbs provides the how; Jesus the why.** Proverbs tells us how to produce income, and the teachings of Jesus tell us why. Proverbs provides the needed tools to make the material world work for us. Within the New Testament we discover why God wants us to be involved in this activity. We find teaching on the importance of using money to provide for our families, (1 Timothy 5:8) assist

the fatherless and widows, (James 2:27) and instruction regarding sending aid to needy believers in other parts of the world (2 Corinthians 8:14). None of this is possible without industry, and nothing out there surpasses Proverbs in teaching how to make business profitable. But it is also essential that the Christian businessman keep going back to why he is in business. Proverbs teaches how, and Jesus taught us why.

**Money: Not to be served but useful in the Kingdom** In some ways it would have been easier if Jesus had just told us to stay away from money, and sometimes I see young people taking this position out of reaction. But Jesus didn't say this. In fact, we see Him teaching us that as dangerous as money is, it can be useful in the Kingdom. One of the most lengthy and yet difficult parables Jesus told was the story of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-12). Men have wrestled through the years to understand why Jesus would use the account of an unrighteous man to illustrate a godly concept. But the concluding message is clear. While we are not to serve money, it can be useful in furthering the Kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul picks up this theme in his letter to the church at Ephesus when he encourages them to earn money so they would "have to give to him that needeth (Ephesians 4:28)."

**Surrendering what is right and fair** Proverbs describes what is right and fair, and has many teachings regarding cause and effect. If you do certain things, you can expect certain results. It describes what is just and reasonable, and every business owner should be familiar with it. But the teachings of Jesus call us to lay down our personal rights. To not insist on receiving what may be fair and equitable, and to consider each business transaction from the other person's perspective. Jesus doesn't disagree with the teachings contained in the Proverbs describing fair treatment. He just taught us not to insist on it. To focus, not on getting what we deserve and building our own financial empire, but on furthering the Kingdom of God and blessing others in our interactions.

### **The Need for Ongoing Financial Accountability**

Most conservative churches have certain requirements, written or unwritten. We understand that if a fellowship is going to survive in our culture there must be accountability with those requirements. But sometimes we give little thought to accountability in business.



For some reason, even in fellowships where accountability is high, business seems to be off limits. But we must realize it wasn't this way in the early church. In the book of Acts we find very high accountability and financial transparency (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37, & Acts 5:1-11). There is much potential in business for blessing the Kingdom of God. But there is also possibility for great danger. The need of our day is for churches who are willing to look closely at how to utilize the blessing of business, while protecting our business owners from the temptations and danger inherent in wealth.

I know of congregations where each family is asked once a year to share an overview of their finances with their deacon. I have also heard of local brotherhoods which ask each head of household to submit their annual tax return. This document remains in a sealed envelope, but is available should the deacon decide further accountability is prudent. I know of communities where church leadership is consulted before investments over a certain dollar amount are pursued. Some congregations ask each member to reveal the debt they are carrying once a year. This enables leadership to keep their finger on the pulse of their congregation, and gives them the ability to work with a situation before it becomes a major concern. Living with an awareness that I am accountable to others for my financial actions can be a powerful way to maintain a Kingdom-business focus. Everything can look good on the outside, but debt might be increasing year after year.

Maybe this is outside your comfort zone, and you have grown up in a setting where the only time someone's finances are discussed is when there is a major problem. But is that really the best? Is this the picture we get from the early church in the book of Acts? I am not saying a congregation should immediately have everyone reveal all their financial information. There are situations where this might not be healthy. But I am saying, especially in our time of prosperity, the church needs more transparency. If we are going to use our business as a mission without jeopardizing the spiritual life of the businessman, we need leaders who are willing to take the risk.

## Conclusion

1. We have not taken seriously enough the danger posed by wealth and affluence. As a result many are more focused on building their own earthly empires than on using their resources to further the Kingdom of God. In reaction, others see business only as a snare with little potential for good.
2. Businessmen have not been held accountable for their use of wealth in many churches and are not sure what their role is within the church. We go to them when money is needed, but ignore the potential they have in ministry and outreach.
3. Business and the resulting wealth has inherent danger. One of the early Christian writers said many years ago, "They who are occupied with much business commit also many sins, being distracted about their affairs, and not serving their Lord."<sup>4</sup> It essential that we take note of the warning. With much business comes much temptation and potential for distraction.
4. Business also contains much potential for good and blessing within the Kingdom. We should not attempt to separate our work from our worship, but rather recognize that God intends for our occupations to be used in spreading the Gospel.
5. If churches are going to be blessed by the positive, without being overcome by the negative, we will need to wake up to our need for financial teaching and close accountability in business. We need to both bless and walk beside those who have been given the gift of business administration.
6. When we actually believe that one of the goals of business is to provide a public demonstration of the superiority of the Kingdom of God, many current questions regarding business practices will be resolved. We will have a desire to operate our businesses with different foundational goals. Instead of viewing profit as preeminent, we will want every person who comes in contact with us to walk away feeling like they have just met Jesus. The use of lawsuits, collection agencies, and questionable marketing techniques which stretch the truth will no longer be an issue.

## Questions for Discussion

4. The Pastor of Hermas, Book Third, Similitude Fourth, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Reprint 1989), Volume 2, pg. 33.

1. What are the dangers facing those who have a God-given gift for business administration?
2. How could our churches better both bless and hold the wealthy businessman accountable?
3. In the book of Acts, it is obvious they were very transparent with their finances. How could our churches be more transparent? What are some dangers of no transparency? What dangers might accompany too much transparency?
4. How can a young man know if he has the gift of business administration?

# 5

## A VISION FOR MISSIONS

### Foreword

I have been involved in church planting, pastoring and leadership training since 1978, first in Managua, Nicaragua, later in New York City. During that time we have lived outside established Anabaptist communities. Since 2000 I have given leadership to DestiNations International, the mission agency of the Biblical Mennonite Alliance and since 2008 have worked full time in that capacity.

My hope and prayer is that conservative Anabaptist churches will experience a re-awakening of vision for personal witnessing, faithful disciple-making, creative church planting and courageous sending/supporting/going as missionaries with a priority on unreached people groups of the world.

The question with which I wrestle is how to motivate and equip our churches for this vision when a set of hands-on skills are required that usually are not passed on by hearing and reading about them?

How can we help our people discover that cross-cultural missions is right next door, “over here” and not just “over there somewhere”?

How can we creatively identify and thoroughly equip those among us who are called of God to enter cross-cultural missions?

How can we help our people process issues of applying Biblical principles without burdening the churches with mere traditions nor carelessly neglecting to teach all of Christ's commands?

*Allen Roth*

## Introduction

“The Mennonite Church at the beginning was pre-eminently a missionary church. This was one of the reasons for its rapid spread. In that period there were no special mission organizations, yet the church was engaged in aggressive evangelistic work. In the earliest years of its history its congregations, like the primitive Christian congregations, consisted of men and women who were noted for their zeal for propagating the gospel”<sup>1</sup>. In 1527, two years after the beginning of the Anabaptist movement, over sixty Anabaptist leaders gathered at a meeting in which it was decided to send out missionaries two by two all over Europe to spread the Gospel. Within two years nearly all had been martyred; thus the name of the meeting was changed from the “Missionary Synod” to the “Martyrs’ Synod”. According to *Anabaptism and Mission*<sup>2</sup>, authorities at times would go into Anabaptist homes and literally chain the women in their own homes so they could not go out to share their message!

Why were first generation Anabaptists so fervent in missions? What drove them to risk their lives to share the Gospel in fresh, bold ways throughout Europe and beyond? What opportunities await us as their spiritual descendants? What challenges face us as we seek to walk creatively and courageously through the doors of opportunity open before us today?

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1. John Horsch, *Mennonites in Europe*, quoted by J. C. Wenger in *Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine*, 183.

2. Wilbert Shenk, *Anabaptism and Mission* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR, 2001), 80.

## Major Biblical Passages and Principles

### Two favorite Bible passages of early Anabaptists

Early Anabaptists were forbidden by law to spread their message outside State-recognized churches. Why did they defy the law? A favorite Bible passage they quoted as justification for their civil disobedience was Psalm 24:1: “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” Coupled with that conviction was the understanding that whenever man’s authority contradicted God’s authority, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

A second passage, found in the records of court trials of early Anabaptists, reveals that by far the Bible passage most oft repeated by those courageous believers was Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus’ Great Commission to go make disciples of all people groups and teach them to obey every command of the resurrected Christ. These two convictions propelled early Anabaptists, at great cost to life and property, to share their message far and wide: Jesus is the living Lord; the whole earth is His; He commands His disciples to make others His obedient followers; we must go do it. Do we share those same convictions today?

### Other Key Passages

A compelling vision for missions is not limited just to these two passages, however. The whole Bible is a missionary book from beginning to end. I will mention just a few key Scriptures by way of illustration.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray for God’s kingdom to come. Our praying, preaching, pursuing holiness and calling people to repentance are linked to the return of Christ and to hastening the arrival of the “coming of the day of God” (Matthew 6:10; Acts 3:19-21; II Peter 3:11-12).

Also, God’s Word informs us that He is sovereignly at work in the migration of the world’s peoples for one purpose: “That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him” (Acts 17:26-27). God directs the immigrants to our cities and towns so we will befriend and win them to the Master.

Furthermore, in Matthew 24:14 Christ predicted that the Gospel

must be announced to every people group *and then* the end will come. In this prophecy Jesus clearly linked our preaching of the Gospel among unreached people groups to the end of all things.

Not only must every people group hear the Gospel, but Jesus also intends every person to hear the Gospel. He clearly states that only those who believe His Gospel may be saved. There is absolutely no other way (Mark. 16:15-16).

Agreeing with Jesus' vision and mandate is necessary, but agreement is not enough. In an indifferent and often hostile world, we need power to invite people to surrender to Him. Sharing His good news frequently arouses opposition. However, we discover that suffering opens the way for increased fullness of the Holy Spirit who Himself is the Spirit of mission and who empowers God's people to spread the Gospel (I Peter 4:12-14; Acts 1:8). I am absolutely convinced that the rapid spread of early Anabaptism was due to an outpouring of the Holy Spirit given in response to the intense suffering they joyfully endured in their wholehearted obedience to Christ.

A final key passage is found in the last book of the Bible. Apostle John's inspired vision of the future included seeing redeemed ones from every tribe, tongue, people and nation worshiping God (Revelation 5:9-10; 7:9-10). This is God's great drama. And we have been given the privilege to share in this drama. This will be the dramatic and glorious culmination of all things!

### **Key Concepts of Anabaptism**

Far too many modern Anabaptists, I fear, have no clear understanding of what the Anabaptist vision is all about. We do not know who we are, whence we have come, nor where we are going. A typical understanding may be little more than that we are evangelicals with a covering for the ladies and a refusal to go to war. This truncated understanding of Anabaptism weakens our witness and confuses our ability to relate properly with other groups of God's people. A recovery, of clarity in our vision as Anabaptists is absolutely vital for our missionary vision.

Harold Bender's little book, *The Anabaptist Vision*, is a good place to start. He lays out three foundational components of the vision:

1. The essence of Christianity as **discipleship**. This understanding results in the transformation of life patterned after the teachings and example of Christ.
2. The church as a **brotherhood**. This conviction results in voluntary membership based upon conversion and believer's baptism, as well as a commitment to discipleship and holy living. This commitment includes separation from the world, nonconformity and the practice of loving brotherhood.
3. The ethic of **love and non-resistance** (suffering love). The result of suffering love is complete abandonment of war, strife, violence and taking of human life.

In addition to Bender's perspective I add two other key concepts, without which I believe the first three would not be possible.

4. **Biblicism**. Anabaptism was a "back-to-the-Bible" movement if it was anything. Early Anabaptists insisted that "he knows Christ truly who follows Him daily in life" (Hans Denck). Their insistence on obedience often resulted in accusations of legalism and righteousness by works. The Anabaptists vigorously rejected these accusations.

5. A **compelling vision for the Great Commission**. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the Great Commission given in Matthew 28:19-20 was the passage most often recorded in court records of the trials of early Anabaptists. The frequency with which this passage was quoted indicates that a compelling missionary vision was a conscious, core value of the movement.

If we, as conservative Anabaptists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, intend not only to survive, but to thrive and grow as a movement, we must work resolutely to recover and strengthen these convictions in our congregations.



## Challenges the Anabaptist Community Faces in Missions

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”<sup>3</sup> This quote seems very appropriate as we turn now to consider the challenges facing our conservative Anabaptist communities. What are some of those challenges?

The first challenge to consider is revising the **mindset** of our people from “missions is over there” to “missions begins right here.” While past generations grew up reading biographies of great missionaries in countries “over there,” the majority population of North America has experienced a major cultural shift. North Americans are now from everywhere. Perhaps this seismic change has not yet fully impacted us since a majority of conservative Anabaptists live in rural areas and small towns of America and Canada where the ethnic diversity is still rather minimal. The ethnic composition of the U.S. and Canada is changing radically, but our mission mindset has not kept pace with this new reality. Our blindness to and neglect of this vast mission opportunity is largely due to our aversion, as a whole, to living in cities. We have forgotten that both the New Testament and Anabaptist churches were birthed in cities!

A second challenge as conservative Anabaptists flows out of our **focus on discipleship**. Disproportionately fewer evangelistic gifts are being identified and encouraged. Discipleship is Biblical. But certainly it must reach far beyond our children and grandchildren. I frequently observe reluctance to verbalize the Gospel and to call for a decision. We excuse ourselves from proactive verbal witness by saying, “I will let my life be a witness.” This is true, but only part of the truth, for none of us is good enough that if people will just watch us, they will be saved! We should “study to be quiet, and do [our] own business” (I Thessalonians 4:11) but without becoming “the quiet in the land” about our faith. We need to be reminded of the axiom that “the potential of any movement to grow is in direct proportion to its ability to mobilize its members to share

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3. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

its message”<sup>4</sup>. In regard to boldly sharing a message, the Jehovah’s Witnesses have been more Anabaptist than modern Anabaptists!

Related to the second challenge is the fact that our North American Anabaptist movement is composed primarily of a large **second-generation Christian majority** (descendants of Anabaptist Christians) with unique traits. A Biblical example is the contrast between Paul and Timothy. Paul: first generation, changed from night to day, bold, pro-active, apostolic. Timothy: raised from childhood with a believing mother and grandmother, shy, hesitant, tendency toward embarrassment about open identification with the faith, reserved, pastoral. Perhaps more of the members of our churches would fall in the Timothy category than in the Paul category. The Pauls among us tend to stir up the pot and make us feel uncomfortable. Added to this is the lack of training and role models for evangelism in our churches, making it difficult for our members to be mentored in proactive outreach. As a result, because most of our people are second-generation Christians, we have strong family connections and extended family networks. We have few deep relationships outside our circles, little time or motivation to befriend the lost around us and are hesitant to leave home for a vocation in missions.

Anabaptism began as a counter-cultural movement. That was, and still is, a strength. Our strengths, however, are followed closely by our weaknesses. Here is our challenge: how do we fulfill the Scriptural injunction to **be separate from the world but actively evangelize the world**? We cannot effectively win the lost if we do not befriend them, but how do we do that without us and our children becoming like them in unbiblical lifestyle applications? This is the age-old challenge of incarnation versus confrontation: being “in the world” without becoming “of the world.” The liberal end of the Anabaptist movement gravitates toward incarnation; however, we have not seen them effectively win the world. We are critical and suspicious of where the incarnational movement has taken our Anabaptist brothers who have become like the world. Those of us on the conservative end of the spectrum gravitate toward the confrontation of culture. But if we are so separate that we do not befriend the lost, how can we win them to the Master?

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4. source unknown.

Another major challenge in our church communities, I believe, is **to sort out what is culture and what is Bible**; what is Biblical command and what is counsel; what are the first things (non-negotiables), and what are the second things (negotiables). This becomes exceedingly challenging as we try to integrate first-generation Anabaptists, retain youth who have grown up in our churches, and honor the older people whose formative years occurred in times very different from the present. Add to that mix the individualistic mindset and lifestyle of North American culture that have deeply influenced all of us and you have a brew of sufficient strength to challenge even the sturdiest pastor in our churches!

While our churches struggle to sort out those issues in creative, yet faithful ways, in the complex tangle of relationships and emotions, we are confronted also with a **growing tendency to minimize the importance of the local church and of commitment to responsible membership**. These struggles and realities decrease the motivation within many to plant new churches and specifically, conservative Anabaptist churches. If we are not certain what we believe and cannot articulate with clarity why we believe what we do, how can we muster sufficient zeal and endurance to embrace the challenge of missions in a pluralistic, skeptical, multicultural world?

Another challenge we face as conservative Anabaptists is our **homogeneity as a denomination**. By this I mean that in the U.S. and Canada, most of our churches are mono-cultural. Most of us are middle-class whites. Most of us trace our roots back to Swiss/Dutch/Germanic roots. This is not bad, but we walk with a limp when we speak of the Gospel being for all people and breaking down barriers between all people. Our Gospel becomes very suspect when the prospect of racially mixed marriages arises. Our homogeneity militates against us when we try to integrate people from other cultural, social and racial backgrounds. People in the receptor cultures where our missionaries work wonder at times why all the missionaries are white if the Gospel overcomes color barriers. And they have good reason to wonder and to ask those questions that make us squirm. This is a challenge we face.

Let us add to that our **ambivalence about higher education** which results in a scarcity of qualified personnel to enter restricted-access countries. Most of the remaining unreached people

groups live in nations that will not issue religious worker visas, so to enter, we need people with professional skills. But after students get their degrees, will they still be on our page, or will they have lost their conservative Anabaptist values and commitment in the process? And will they be saddled with debts that inhibit them from ever getting to a field of missionary service? So we find ourselves caught between a rock and a hard place. We need more workers with advanced degrees, but we suffer huge losses to our movement by the time they have gotten those degrees. Yet if our people do not get adequate training, they often cannot enter the fields of unreached people groups.

The next challenge we face illustrates that sometimes our blessings have a shadow side to them. As a movement, we are no longer poor, lower-class citizens. We have prospered. We are better educated. But I suspect that our **increasing prosperity** results in greater difficulty for us to climb down the ladder to serve with humility for the long haul among the poor in developing countries. In our prosperity, with many comforts and much technology to make life easier, do we have the same readiness to embrace suffering as did those first Anabaptists? Are we able to prosper and still sustain zeal for sharing the Gospel? Will we actually be willing, ready, and equipped to go to the hard places of the world, and to encourage our offspring to go there for the sake of Christ? When we do go, how can we make wise use of our many resources to help those in need without creating unhealthy dependencies? Will we be able to see those who are not materially needy as being truly spiritually needy and deserving of the Gospel as well? Do we know how to give the Gospel when a handout is not needed?

Closely related to the above is getting past the **short-term VS mentality** to embrace missions as a vocation. During World War II an agreement was made with the U.S. government to allow for short-term, conscientious objector service in lieu of participating in the armed forces. This was a good thing for our people, worthy of imitation in all countries of the world. However, now we have begun to think that the normal thing is to do your two years of VS work (sometimes it is even shorter), and then return home to normal life. How will we ever develop proficiency in language and deep understanding of the receptor cultures when we cycle our

workers in and out of their mission communities on a short-term basis? And how do we expect to get long-term results on the field with short-term commitment? We would never embrace such a model for leadership in our sending churches! And at times we even bring people with long-term commitment to missions back to their sending church to provide leadership at home! We need to raise up vision for long-term missionary service as a worthy vocation. Once we see the worth and challenge of missions as a career, we may be more willing to pay the necessary price to acquire sufficient training for effectively confronting the challenge of long-term, cross-cultural missionary work.

Anabaptism began in an atmosphere of suspicion, persecution and ridicule. The words *Anabaptist* and *Mennonite* were pejorative. Even today one frequently hears negative comments about someone becoming a Mennonite even though they may express respect for Mennonites being good people. Many times we conservative Mennonites grow up **feeling inferior about our heritage and our convictions**. Since many of us do not have formal higher education, we often feel intimidated by educated, wealthy, mainstream North Americans, including Christians of other denominations. On the other hand, we may develop attitudes of superiority because of our rich heritage. Both attitudes hinder us in effectively recruiting and sending out workers for fruitful ministry.

The **increased interfacing** of our people with Christians and missions of other denominations and more exposure through technology bring with them the blessing of access to broader information, experience and resources for missions. They enable us to serve as a challenge to other Christians as well, for we do have wonderful perspectives to share with them. Accompanying challenges, however, are heightened expectations for our churches and agencies to keep up with what other groups are doing and potential weakening of our convictions as Anabaptists. One option not available to us is to prohibit this exposure. We are no longer an island to ourselves, if we ever were.

In view of the many and varied challenges listed above, I believe it is vitally important to nurture networking with like-minded Anabaptists who are also active in missions in order to avoid competition, duplication, and waste of resources, to encourage one

another, to learn from one another, and to pray for each other. The challenge facing us is to **network while maintaining mutual respect and faithfulness** to our respective understandings and applications of Scripture.

I offer a few additional challenges. These are not at all new to conservative Anabaptists, but as we become more proactive in missions and as cultures move ever farther away from Judeo-Christian values, we will face them with greater frequency: implementing nonresistance in countries with required military service; resolving issues of divorce and remarriage; teaching true beauty without external adornment in cultures where lack of adornment is very shameful; teaching and maintaining gender distinction in clothing; and upholding Biblical roles of manhood and womanhood.

## Strengths and Resources in the Anabaptist Community for Missions

Growing up as a young person in a conservative Mennonite church with its struggles and yes, even failures at times, I often felt intimidated by the world around me and inferior to Christians of other denominations which seemed to me to have it all together. I was often frustrated by the faults and foibles of my church and its seeming impotence to make a difference in the world.

Today the prevailing mood seems to be one of downplaying the importance of the local church and of commitment to it. Our people often feel very apologetic about being Mennonite. However, God's preferred mechanism for reaching the world and glorifying Himself is, and has always been, the local church. What strengths and resources within the conservative Anabaptist movement can enable us to capitalize on the vast mission opportunities that surround us today?

At the top of the list I place our **Biblicism**. If the Bible says it, we should obey it. I place this quality first because all of the others flow out of it. Without this quality, all of the others sooner or later will necessarily dry up and disappear. In our churches we agree that Christ expects our obedience to His Word. Do we obey

it perfectly? We lament the fact that we do not. However, it is heartening to know that as a movement we agree that we should, and we earnestly want to obey God's Word better.

Next on the list I add our **conservative theology**. We still believe the fundamentals of the faith. This is critical for a movement because it is absolutely impossible, over the long haul, to raise up and to sustain a robust commitment to missions without a conservative, Christ-honoring and Bible-obeying theology. Mark my words: liberal theology kills missions.

Another strength of the Anabaptist movement is **our history of suffering, of martyrs, of advocating freedom of conscience in matters of religion and of refusal to participate in all war**. The stories of Anabaptist martyrs strengthen us for and in times of trouble. We can sympathize with others who are suffering. We can present the words of Christ to love our enemies without needing to apologize for participation in the Crusades or in the Holocaust. We refuse to take sides with one economic or political system over another. We are citizens of another Kingdom, one that is not of this world. Our position of nonresistance is very difficult, but is consistent with the words and example of Jesus as well as with the position of the Early Church.

Our commitment to following the teachings of the apostles and the pattern of the New Testament church, then, results in a **vision for local churches and missions**. The local church becomes a key component in our communities and serves as a base for rallying missionaries and generating support for them as they travel across the globe.

Conservative Anabaptist churches have never required their leaders to have formal training, but rather have focused on **servant leadership**. Leaders are raised up from within the ranks and are persons who have proven themselves by their character, gifts, service, and commitment within the local body of believers. They are known and produced from within, not imported from without. This approach to selecting leaders produces a mindset and lifestyle of humble, brotherly service that is invaluable in working with national brothers and sisters in missionary settings.

As a result of teaching the all things and having stable communities, we largely have **whole family units**. There are exceptions, of

course, but many families in our communities operate with stability. Our marriages and families are definitely not perfect, but on the whole we count on whole families. This provides a more stable support base for missionaries as extended families and churches maintain interest and involvement in workers' ministries and support needs.

The Anabaptist movement is noted for extended family networks and **inter-connectedness** (social glue). News about needs and workers flows through the grapevine resulting in more care, support and participation in missions.

**Hospitality** is valued. We ourselves are descendants of immigrants and find ourselves to be a minority somewhat out of step with the majority culture around us. This helps us to sympathize with immigrants, and to open our homes, both to each other and to neighbors whom we befriend in our communities. In our living rooms and back yards we play, work, and talk about Biblical values, as well as study the Bible together with our guests. We may be the quiet in the land, but that is Biblical, too—as long as we find ways by word and deed to share the Gospel. “But we urge you, brethren ... that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands ... that you may walk properly toward those who are outside.” (I Thessalonians 4:11-12).

Along with hospitality we **value equality, simplicity, and service**. We avoid titles and class distinctions, calling one another brother and sister. We aim for simplicity and loving, humble service as the way to greatness. These qualities serve us well as we travel around the world and find places and ways to serve as equals, not lording it over national brothers by virtue of being Americans.

In a culture that is heavily influenced by Hollywood and the media, **Biblical teachings on modesty, headship covering and traditional gender roles** are very counter-cultural. But Anabaptism has always viewed itself as being counter-cultural. We expect that. We read in the Bible that we are strangers and pilgrims; we are in the world but not of the world. At least for these applications, and many others that the larger Christian Church would say are merely Mennonite culture, we can point to a chapter and verse as well as to solid precedent in the Early Church.



Another value that serves us well is a **good work ethic**. Granted, many of us carry it too far. But being taught from little up to do our chores and to learn a trade positions us to be productive citizens who can acquire resources to share with missions or to help the needy, not to mention being able to get things done when we go abroad.

Last, but definitely not least, are the many **Christian schools and homeschools** across our Anabaptist communities. Some denominations produce very few schools and depend on public schools to educate their young. Mennonites often have church schools and many families now homeschool, using quality materials produced by Anabaptist ministries, because we have a deep desire to pass on Biblical values to our children and youth. We grieve when our youth do not accept Biblical values, so we go to great sacrifice to provide opportunities for them to be educated in the Way. We want and need our youth to catch the vision and to carry the baton into the next generation. It is a beautiful thing to see committed youth who are interested in missions, who pray for missions, and who offer themselves for service in missions.

These are just some of the strengths and resources within our Anabaptist communities that can contribute to developing a vision for missions in the next fifty years.

## Mission Opportunities Awaiting the Anabaptist Community

Unparalleled opportunities await the Anabaptist community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If Apostle Paul were alive today, I think he would envy us! What are some of these opportunities?

First there are the **growing communities of immigrants** in the U.S. and Canada. God is literally bringing the nations to our doorsteps! From Mandryk's *Operation World* we learn that 800,000 international students from 180 nations come to the U.S. to study each year. In New York City over 37% of the population is first generation immigrant, without counting their children born in the U.S. Minorities are a majority in fifty U.S. cities. Ethnic minorities

are a majority in 10% of the U.S. counties. Thirty-one ethnic groups have one million or more people living in our country. Thirteen percent of the U.S. population uses a language other than English in their homes. One million documented immigrants enter the U.S. every year while in Canada nearly one of five were born outside of the country.

In addition to opportunities within immigrant communities, opportunities arise from a culture in steep moral, spiritual, social, and relational decline. I detect across our churches a genuine desire to be more than the quiet in the land, yearnings to be faithful witnesses for Christ. These stirrings among us need to be encouraged by providing opportunities for equipping and mentoring in real life experience.

Second, a wealth of **information** is now available to our people about Unreached People Groups (UPG's), Un-engaged Unreached People Groups (those who have not yet been targeted by any mission or church), and Under-Reached People Groups (those once "Christianized" but are now secular; for example, Quebec). Books such as *Operation World* and websites such as the Joshua Project ([www.joshuaproject.net](http://www.joshuaproject.net)) are readily available to many of our people. Much work still needs to be done to educate our people about the concept of reached and unreached people groups, but progress is being made.

As conservative Anabaptists reach out around the world, we receive **invitations** from national churches and leaders requesting training, mentoring and partnership. Many church leaders in developing countries are disappointed with some of the values and lifestyles of North American Christians they encounter and express surprise when they discover that Christians who take New Testament commands seriously still exist in the West.

With growing awareness of mission opportunities, Anabaptists love to follow their **connections** around the world; friends and relatives who are working with a growing number of conservative Anabaptist agencies that are training and fielding workers among unreached people groups. We used to do Mennonite Your Way across the U.S. and Canada. Now we do it worldwide!

Growing **prosperity** within Anabaptist communities increases the potential for travel, short-term mission involvement, long-term

mission assignments, and international business with Kingdom purpose. Widespread use of, and demand for, the English language, relatively inexpensive, easy air travel, and the presence of U.S. influence worldwide, along with the explosion of **electronic communication**, opens many doors of opportunity. The Internet allows us to learn more about world needs and opportunities and at the same time it provides a way for people out there to discover Anabaptism.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the opportunities lying before the conservative Anabaptist movement have never been greater. The resources within the movement have never been more numerous. The tools for fulfilling the Great Commission have never been so advantageous. Yes, the challenges we face are formidable. But Christ is still seated on His throne. He is still at work fulfilling His promise to build His Church against which the gates of Hades cannot stand. The Spirit of God is still available to empower His people to move forward. The Gospel is still the power of God to save those who believe. The Word of God is still alive and powerful to convict, instruct, and transform. And what is more, we have read the last chapter and know how this titanic struggle is going to end—"a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Revelation 7:9-10)

## Questions for Discussion

1. How can we recapture the clarity of the Gospel and confidence in the Gospel so as a people we will be eager witnesses who boldly share the Gospel and call for a decision to follow Christ, both nearby and far away?
2. How can we bring greater clarity to the process of disciple-making and of incorporating first generation believers from a variety of backgrounds into our congregations?

3. How can we work to revive vision for and commitment to the local church as God's primary means to reach the world, thus resulting in renewed vision for church planting?
4. How may we proactively identify those among us who are called to missions and creatively work to equip them thoroughly for fruitful, persevering service?
5. How can we facilitate networking among Conservative Anabaptist mission agencies that respects our differences while learning from each other and cooperating with one another?
6. How can we provide the necessary information to Anabaptist groups so that human and financial resources will prioritize unreached and unengaged unreached people groups while continuing to nurture work established among the reached people groups?
7. How can we help our people revise their view of missions from being "over there" to see the great missionary opportunities right next door, including the towns and cities of our continent with their growing immigrant communities?
8. How shall we develop vision for missions as a vocation that goes beyond mere short-term involvement and that boldly grasps all sorts of creative approaches to reaching the people groups (business, students, travel, professions, full- and part-time work)?
9. How may we use our abundant financial resources in missions in ways that enhance both evangelistic outreach and care for the poor without creating unhealthy dependencies?
10. How do we creatively, proactively identify and train faithful national leaders to take leadership in mission churches and to mobilize their churches to participate in the vision to reach the unreached for Christ?
11. How do we equip our people to Biblically, creatively, courageously and faithfully evaluate the cultures we encounter so that we neither needlessly burden churches with mere traditions nor carelessly neglect to teach all of Christ's commands?

