Contents

The Conrad Grebel Review
Vol. 40 No. 3
Fall 2022

THE CONRAD GREBEL REVIEW

Volume 40
Number 3
Fall 2022

The Conrad Grebel Review

grebel.ca/cgreview

The Conrad Grebel Review is published three times a year in Winter, Spring, and Fall by Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

The Canadian subscription price (individuals) is $41 + HST per year, $121 + HST for three years. Back issues are available. Student subscriptions are $31 + HST per year. Subscriptions, change of address notices, and other circulation inquires should be sent to The Conrad Grebel Review, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G6. Phone 519-885-0220, ext. 24242; fax 519-885-0014; e-mail: cgreview@uwaterloo.ca. Remittances outside of Canada must be made in U.S. funds. Contact our office for subscription prices to the United States and overseas.

Manuscript submissions and other correspondence regarding the Review should be sent to the Editor: cgreview@uwaterloo.ca.

ISSN 0829-044X

The Conrad Grebel Review (CGR) is a multi-disciplinary peer-reviewed journal of Christian inquiry devoted to advancing thoughtful, sustained discussions of theology, peace, society, and culture from broadly-based Anabaptist/Mennonite perspectives. It is published three times a year in print and electronically.

Articles
Articles are original works of scholarship engaged with relevant disciplinary literature, written in a style appealing to the educated non-specialist, and properly referenced. Length limit: 7500 words, excluding notes, plus a 100-word abstract. Manuscripts are typically sent in blind copy to two peer-reviewers for assessment.

Reflections
Reflections are thoughtful and/or provocative pieces drawing on personal expertise and experience, and may take the form of homilies, speeches, or essays. While held to the same critical standard as articles, they are generally free of scholarly apparatus. Length limit: 3000 words.

Responses
Responses are replies to articles either recently published in CGR or appearing in the same issue by arrangement. Length is negotiable.

Book Reviews and Book Review Essays
Book reviews draw attention to current scholarly and other works that fall within CGR's mandate. Length limit: 900 words. Book review essays typically cover several publications on a common theme. For more information, contact CGR Book Review Editor Susanne Guenther Loewen (s3guenth@uwaterloo.ca).

SUBMISSION PROCEDURE

We welcome submissions of articles, reflections, and responses. Send your submission electronically as a WORD attachment to the Editor: cgreview@uwaterloo.ca. Include your full name, brief biographical information, and institutional affiliation in the covering e-mail. CGR will acknowledge receipt immediately, and will keep you informed throughout the assessment process. Accepted papers are subject to Chicago style and copy editing, and are submitted to authors for approval before publication.

For CGR's Style Guide, Citation Format Guide, and other useful information, please consult the submissions page on our website: grebel.ca/cgreview.

CGR is indexed in Religious & Theological Abstracts, EBSCOhost databases, in the Atla (American Theological Library Association) Religion Database, and in the full-text AtlaSerials® collection. CGR is also available online at grebel.ca/cgreview.

The Conrad Grebel Review

Volume 40, Number 3
Fall 2022

Book Review Essay

Book Reviews

Foreword

This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* (CGR) comprises two main articles, two reflections, a book review essay, and a handful of book reviews, each of which has the capacity to stimulate and contribute to the kinds of generative conversations that the CGR seeks to nurture. Both main articles seek to probe more deeply into dense and pressing theological terrain. The first does so by analyzing the extent to which the voluntarist underpinnings of Anabaptist/Mennonite practices of baptism may end up disqualifying for membership those people labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled despite genuine attempts at "inclusion" and provocatively suggests a potential new way forward while the second suggests that art and the artist are central figures for the ecclesial task of reconciliation and are vital as we re-imagine the importance of place in a post-pandemic church and world. The reflections, book review essay, and book reviews extend and deepen these themes in different ways and, taken together, make for a highly engaging issue.

I also want to take this opportunity to formally recognize and thank Christian Snyder for his skilled service over almost three decades. Christian has been quietly working in the background doing layout and typesetting since the mid-1990's, which makes him the longest continuously serving member of the CGR team. With this issue, the mantle is being passed to Maxwell Kennel, Director at Pandora Press, and I am grateful for the thoughtfulness, skill, and energy he will undoubtedly bring to his work on and for the journal.

As always, *The Conrad Grebel Review* invites submissions of articles or reflections on topics in keeping with our mandate to advance thoughtful discussion of theology, ethics, peace, society, history, and culture from broadly-based Anabaptist/Mennonite perspectives.

Kyle Gingerich Hiebert
Editor

Being Received: Anabaptist Baptism, Theological Anthropology, and Profound Cognitive Impairment*

jason reimer greig

Abstract

This essay argues that the strongly activist and subjectivist anthropology implicit in much of Anabaptist theologizing around baptism makes the capacities of rationality and will crucial for potential baptismal candidates. The requirement for these capacities disqualifies people labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled from baptism, contradicting ecclesial attempts to "include" these individuals in faith communities. Some theologians and Anabaptist communities have attempted to respond to this pervasive theological "voluntarism" regarding baptismal practice, yet cannot abandon the need for subjectivity, which continues to exclude those significantly limited in rational capacity. In the end, the author suggests that one way forward may exist in making baptism a "gift of reception," which potentially challenges Anabaptist communities to consider baptizing all those persons lacking in cognitive understanding of the practice.

A common element of baptism in the Anabaptist tradition involves testimony, the articulation and proclamation of the candidate's spiritual journey and reason for baptism. These testimonies illustrate not only an individual's desire to follow Jesus and join the church, but also reveal tacit understandings of "faith" and how one recognizes it. Take the following paraphrase of a testimony I recently heard at a Mennonite congregation:

* I wish to particularly thank Kyle Gingerich Hiebert for his encouragement and ever insightful reflections on the themes of this article.

> My decision to be baptized came after much thought. The choice was not an easy one to make. While I have grown up coming to this church, I knew that the choice to be baptized was mine to make, rather than my parent's decision. After a period of discernment, when I recognized the life I have received from this community, it seemed clear that the next step was to commit to belonging to this part of the body of Christ. I want to follow Jesus in life, and believe that this is the place to do that. Through choosing to be baptized, I wish to commit myself to working for God's justice in the world and in this community of faith.

This enthusiastic and sincere candidate understood faith as consisting in her choice to follow Jesus and to commit herself to being part of a faith community striving for a more just world. In this way, this candidate's baptism was consistent with the traditional Anabaptist belief in baptism as an outward "sign" of an individual's own belief.

Contrast this with a different testimony, this time from a parent of someone with a profound cognitive impairment. It comes from theologian Frances Young, speaking of the baptism of her son, Arthur.

> It has always meant a great deal to me that Arthur is baptized. He will never be able to make his own response of faith, but his baptism as an infant means that he is a member of the body of Christ, and no one can take that away from him or exclude him. In recent controversies about the comparative claims of infant baptism and believers' baptism, I have not hesitated to stress this. The idea of baptism in the New Testament is partly to do with the washing away of the old worldliness; but it is also about incorporation into the new humanity. In a missionary situation, of course this happened to believers; but in any event, it is not something we do ourselves, it is something done to us, just as ordination is not something we do ourselves—it is the act of the church in the name of God. [Arthur] belongs to Christ, not because he can profess his faith in him, but

because Christ has accepted him.[1]

Young's reflection on her son's baptism contrasts sharply with the Anabaptist one above where choosing and decision dominate. Incorporation defines this theology of baptism, with Arthur's lack of cognitive ability in no way disqualifying him from becoming a member of the church. Whereas individual agency stands as a demand in an Anabaptist baptismal practice, Arthur's impairments did not prevent him from baptism because reception grounded the rite in his tradition.

How might a Mennonite-Anabaptist congregation respond to a request for someone like Arthur to be baptized? Can a church so committed to individual decision and purposive agency baptize persons considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled? How hospitable is an Anabaptist theology of baptism for those with profound cognitive impairments? Unfortunately, these questions are rarely asked in Anabaptist theological circles[2] or concrete congregations.[3] With baptism being such an important ordinance historically in Mennonite church life, the lack of reflection on the place of profound disability in the tradition's theology appears somewhere between highly insufficient and scandalous.

In this article I will interrogate the Anabaptist tradition to see how its theology and practice of baptism accounts (or not) for someone like Arthur. I will begin by articulating concerns some contemporary Mennonite thinkers have expressed regarding a highly anthropocentric and subjectivist

1 Frances M. Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 94.

2 On reflection regarding baptism and cognitive impairment in Believer's Church contexts, see Jason D. Whitt, "Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability," *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* 45 (2012): 60-67; Melissa Florer-Bixler, "Baptism and Profound Disability," *Anabaptist Disabilities Network*, accessed August 10, 2020, https://www.anabaptistdisabilitiesnetwork.org/Resources/ADNotes/Pages/Baptism.aspx; Melissa Florer-Bixler, "Believers Baptism as Supported Decision," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 135-46; jason reimer greig, "Re-imaging Narratives: Anabaptist Baptismal Theology and Profound Cognitive Impairment," *Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 120-134.

3 For ecclesial reflection on cognitive impairment and baptism in Anabaptist congregations, see Karen Smucker, "Is Christianity about IQ?," *The Mennonite*, accessed August 10, 2020, https://themennonite.org/feature/3439-2/; Anna Groff, "Our Practice of Baptism," *The Mennonite*, accessed August 10, 2020, https://themennonite.org/feature/practice-baptism/.

trend in the church's practice of baptism. Then I will uncover examples of baptismal practice from contemporary accounts which confirm these worries. From these examples I will offer a diagnosis of a Mennonite-Anabaptist baptismal practice as being strongly activist and subjectivist, demanding a "common sense view" of the person as one endowed with the capacities of rationality and will. The strong need for these capacities inherent in the candidate eligible for baptism throws a heavy shadow on the lives of those with profound cognitive impairments, essentially disqualifying these persons from reception into the church. I will then look at ecclesial responses to baptism for people with impairments, finding them well-meaning but insufficient. In closing, I will invite Mennonite-Anabaptist theology and practice to ponder the implications of making baptism a "gift of reception" rather than one which demands "compulsory capacities" of agency and will.

A Dis-ease with Current Baptismal Practice

Some thinkers within the Mennonite tradition have begun to express a dis-ease with current ecclesial practice around baptism, particularly with regard to an increasing anthropocentric orientation. John Rempel sees in certain strands of contemporary Anabaptism a predominance of human response over any sense of God present in baptism. As a strong reaction to the "coercion" believed to exist in traditions baptizing infants, Mennonites can too easily react in the opposite direction, "making the candidate's sincerity the essence of baptism."[4] Irma Fast Dueck agrees with Rempel's assessment, finding a curious phenomenon in her theology students: a strong desire to follow Jesus and participate in church life, but no interest in baptism. A Believers' Church "one-sided emphasis" on baptism as human response prevents believers from understanding the "enabling grace" that comes from baptism and confirms an individualistic view on the practices of the church in general.

4 John D. Rempel, *Recapturing an Enchanted World: Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Church Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 92. [Editor's note: In October 2020, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada terminated the ministerial credential of Rempel following an investigation that found him guilty of ministerial sexual misconduct and ministerial misconduct. For more information see https://mcec.ca/article/10801-mcec-terminates-ministerial-credential].

> When my students reflect on their baptism, their imagination is frequently limited to baptism as something *I* do, *I* learn, *I* decide, *I* get baptized, *I* join the church. Accompanying this individualized emphasis on the decision and act of baptism has been a history of qualifications needed in order to be eligible to participate, a practice which has brought us dangerously close to conceiving that our salvation is indeed our own responsibility; that is, it is something *I* do, *I* achieve, *I* make myself eligible; a danger our early Anabaptist fore-parents never imagined as they were reacting to the practices of baptism in the time of the Reformation.[5]

An example of this individualistic orientation in baptism comes from the publication *Ask Third Way Café*, a collection of entries on questions regarding Anabaptism from the website of the same name. In response to the question, "What is accomplished by waiting to baptize members?" editor Jodi Hisly Hertzler says the following:

> [T]he benefit is that only people who have deliberately made the choice to be baptized are in fact baptized. The choice to live a Christ-centered life is not an easy one. It's a major commitment that a person makes to God and to the church family, and it's not to be taken lightly. When an infant is baptized, the [rite] seems to Mennonites to lose some power, as it reflects the parents' beliefs and not the child's…[W]e reserve baptism for people who can make the choice for themselves and can understand the meaning of what they are doing.[6]

Anabaptists believe in baptism as "a sign of…cleansing from sin," as well as "a pledge before the church of a person's covenant with God to walk in the

5 Irma Fast Dueck, "[Re]learning to Swim in Baptismal Waters: Contemporary Challenges in the Believers Church Tradition," in *New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology*, eds. Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, and Karl Koop (Winnipeg, CMU Press, 2010), 248.

6 Jodi Nisly Hertzler, *Ask Third Way Café: 50 Common and Quirky Questions about Mennonites* (Telford, PA.: Cascadia; copublished with Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 22–3.

way of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit." Yet baptism should be reserved "for those who confess their sins, repent, accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, and commit themselves to follow Jesus in obedience as members of his body. These are not things that infants can do. We believe the church is strengthened when made up of adults who have made the decision to follow Christ and be baptized and can remember the impact of that ceremony in their Christian walk."[7]

Other Mennonite scholars worry about the place (or not) of the church in theologizing around baptism. John Roth understands contemporary practice to be at risk of eclipsing any sense of God present and active in the ordinance. Late modern activism and an almost exclusive emphasis on "behavior" as marker of authentic faith risks leading congregations to a form of "self-worship" totally disconnected from a living God. According to Roth, contemporary churches live a very "modern problem": namely, that the "lived actions of the congregation are a substitute for the more formal practices of baptism and communion," which in turn forms congregations in making "an idol of their 'good deeds,' so that Christ's presence becomes reduced to a set of intentional behaviors or admirable social practices."[8] On the other hand, Anthony Siegrist worries that congregations underinvest the church's role in baptism. For Siegrist, "the working theology of baptism [in much Anabaptism] suffers from a deficient account of divine action, especially as mediated through the church."[9] After a review of denominational statements about baptism, Siegrist finds that 1) baptism is a practice central to the Anabaptist tradition yet presented as theologically non-essential to the Christian life, and 2) the church is seen as "second class" to an individual believer's relationship with God.[10]

The *Minister's Manual*, a practical text meant to assist pastors in congregational life and ecclesial practices, offers some theological grounds for baptism in Mennonite communities. While baptism is meant to also include the congregation's discernment of the candidate, and come from God's "in-

7 Ibid., 23. For a similar view, see Groff, "Our Practice of Baptism."

8 John D. Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness* (Scottdale, PA.: Herald Press, 2009), 200.

9 Anthony G. Siegrist, *Participating Witness: An Anabaptist Theology of Baptism and the Sacramental Character of the Church* (Eugene, OR.: Pickwick Publications, 2013), x.

10 Ibid., 23-24.

ward" calling, consistently adhering to the early church's practice requires "a mature commitment on the part of the recipient. Only believers aware of the import of their decision entered into it. Though there is some reference to the baptism of entire households (e.g., Acts 16:33), suggesting that young children may have received baptism, the overwhelming witness of the New Testament is that baptism was the result of mature commitments by believers conscious of their sin and having made commitments to Jesus Christ."[11] Or consider the ecclesial document *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Article 11 on baptism states that baptism is "a testimony to God's gift of the Holy Spirit and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers."[12] The Holy Spirit "enables" believers to walk in the way of Christ and witness to Christ through their lives, with baptism "incorporating" people into the ecclesial body.[13] Yet, who can receive baptism? "Christian baptism is for those who confess their sins, repent, accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and commit themselves to follow Christ in obedience as members of his body, both giving and receiving care and counsel of the church. Baptism is for those who are of the age of accountability and who freely request baptism on the basis of their response to Jesus Christ in faith."[14] The language of "pledge" and "commitment" emphasizes in clear terms the importance of the individual believer's choice and decision at the heart of Mennonite practice.

Some thinkers attempt to mitigate the high subjectivism of much contemporary Anabaptist practice by appealing to the 16th century radical reformers. These appeals either accentuate the more communal and theocentric anthropology inherent in late medieval notions of faith,[15] or evoke alternative theologies which have a greater place for God's initiative, such as the baptismal theology of Pilgram Marpeck.[16] Yet while it is important to keep in mind A. James Reimer's distinction between premodern and modern

11 *Minister's Manual*, ed. John Rempel (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 41.

12 General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 46.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 47.

15 A. James Reimer, "Christian Anthropology: The Perils of the Believers Church View of the *Humanum*," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 536.

16 Roth, *Practices*; Rempel, *Recapturing*; Siegrist, *Participating Witness*.

voluntarism in regard to an Anabaptist-Mennonite anthropology,[17] a closer look at many radical reformers' views on baptism illustrate an ambivalence at best in regard to baptism and profound cognitive impairment. Whether it concerns Menno Simons's insistent belief that baptism requires the capacity of rationality absent from children who "have less sense at birth than do irrational creatures";[18] or Conrad Grebel's stress upon the "walk in newness of life" as evidence of a true "inner baptism";[19] or Pilgram Marpeck's contention that children and the cognitively impaired are exempted from the demand of belief and remain in no need of baptism due to their "innocent" status,[20] large questions remain about how hospitable this turn to 16th century sources can be in regards to baptism and profound cognitive impairment.[21]

A Diagnosis: Baptism and a "Common Sense View" of Personhood

The tremendous weight placed upon individual agency and capacity inherent in much contemporary Anabaptist thought and practice makes it very difficult (if not impossible) to include persons with profound impairments in this baptismal imaginary. What do these accounts and practices reveal to us about an Anabaptist theological anthropology of baptism? How might

17 Reimer, "Christian Anthropology," 536. Timothy J. Reiss in *Mirages of the Selfe: Patterns of Personhood in Ancient and Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) continually warns of the temptation to project our late modern notions of the autonomous agent onto the people of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Yet he does admit that he finds in Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises "a growing sense of agency" (403).

18 Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons,* trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J.C. Wenger (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 240.

19 Quoted in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, eds. George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 80.

20 Pilgram Marpeck, "Confession," 1532, quoted from *Anabaptism in Outline*, 176–7. Marpeck is quoted here using the word "retarded," supposedly referring to the neutral categorization at the time of *Anabaptism in Outline*'s publication for those considered intellectually disabled. Cf. with the same text in Pilgram Marpeck, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, eds. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, Classics of the Radical Reformation 2 (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1978), 129, where "retarded" is translated as "the ignorant."

21 For more detail on the problematic perspective of the radical reformers on baptism in regards to profound cognitive impairment, see Jason Reimer Greig, "Re-Imagining Narratives: Anabaptist Baptismal Theology and Profound Cognitive Impairment," *Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 120-34.

one diagnose the dilemma which someone like Arthur exposes in the Anabaptist-Mennonite theological imagination?

Firstly, the heavy (and sometimes almost exclusive) emphasis placed on human response unequivocally illustrates a highly subjectivist Anabaptist anthropology, with a stress put on the active and conscious agency of the candidate. Even when it is acknowledged that some kind of grace exists in the rite, it is still highly contingent on the candidates to not only accept grace but to *understand* it as well. "The Mennonite practice of believer's baptism recognizes that humans are free to accept or reject God's gift of grace. Jesus consistently assumed that the person being baptized was capable of belief and instruction."[22] And for the Mennonite tradition, it is not enough just to understand baptism, but to be able to live it out in a consistent and visible way. Theologian Thomas Finger speaks to this explicitly when he notes how only a baptism based on "conscious decision" coheres with a belief in a high church ecclesiology. "When the kind of community into which it incorporates people is considered, it becomes even clearer that baptism involves conscious decision…[A]s baptism is inseparably intertwined with faith, so is it with ethics…Those who understand none of the choices involved cannot significantly undertake that journey, with its hazards. Considered from the individual side, then, baptism must be an expression of conscious belief and ethical determination."[23] Finger's conception of baptism shares similarities with a modern, Protestant view of ecclesial practices as placing the primary responsibility upon the individual and their commitment and understanding in order to be worthy of baptism.[24]

Directly linked to this anthropocentric orientation is a particular notion of faith and its relation to God's participation in the event. Even when Anabaptists seek to relativize human action and accentuate divine initiative, this often comes in the form of naming the "inner" working of the Holy Spirit

22 John D. Roth, *Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practice* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 77-8.

23 Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 2:346–7. See also Thomas Finger, "Initial Response," in *On Baptism: Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium, 2001-2002*, ed. Gerald W. Schlabach (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004).

24 For example, see William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979), 150.

in the candidate as a sign of faith and readiness to baptism. As theologian Kimberly Belcher notes, this understanding assumes faith as "an ephemeral disposition perceptible only by the subject. Faith can only be affirmed by that person himself or herself, and he or she may deceive others. Moreover, faith is defined within a cognitively centered definition of the self (along the lines of Descartes)."[25] This prioritizing of faith as "inwardness" makes the baptism of persons with profound cognitive impairments (consistently) impossible. For if one cannot express in language how exactly the Holy Spirit is working "within," and lacks the mobility and purposive agency to engage in activist forms of discipleship to express that overtly, how would one ever know the Holy Spirit is alive "within" the candidate? Attempts to use "inwardness" in this way may help to accentuate God's initiative in baptism, but they still demand the kind of robust subjectivity and individual agency that many persons labeled as profoundly disabled may lack.

Theologian Hans Reinders has pointed out how problematic the modern notion of life lived "from the inside" can be for persons considered as profoundly intellectually disabled. Subjectivity has become such a crucial part of being human in modernity, to the degree that to lack such capacities puts into question how these lives might actually be human in any substantive sense. For "[w]ithout a relationship 'within,' no inner life; without an inner life, no 'self'; and without a self, no person in the modern sense."[26] This kind of subjectivity, combined with the "ethical determination" demanded of activist conceptions of discipleship, emanates from what Reinders calls the "common sense view" of personhood: people are unique "because they have language, they have reason and will and a sense of self, so that they can make up their minds about things and choose what they want, they can pursue plans and ideals, and so on. In other words, the things that human faculties allow people to do or to have are what make people different" from

25 Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 82.

26 Hans S. Reinders, "Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency," in *God and Human Dignity*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) 131–2.

non-human animals.[27] Crucial to this modern sense of self is an understanding of the good life as being coextensive with a chosen self, often named as the demand to be "authors" of their own stories. "In order to have a life that is properly called 'good,' [persons] must be in control of how they choose to live their lives. The good life results from their own project if it is to be a good life *for them*. It will be clear that this conception of the good life excludes all those incapable of purposive agency. It excludes those human beings who, because of their impairment, cannot affirm their own being."[28]

One response to Reinders's critique and attempt to heavily relativize "inwardness" in the context of profound cognitive impairment is that it assumes too much about the "inner" lives of persons so labeled and how much they lack this characteristic. Reinders wishes to de-center subjectivity because making "inwardness" essential to personhood severely risks disqualifying those lacking this capacity from having equal moral status. Yet others will counter by saying that we can never fully know the subjectivity of the other, including those with profound cognitive impairments. So rather than take "inwardness" out of the equation, we should assume its presence, even when it may appear to be absent. The disability rights movement has been fighting for years for others to recognize their competence to make decisions about their lives, which includes those labeled as intellectually disabled.[29] Relativizing subjectivity to "include" others may be well-intentioned, but it assumes too much knowledge of those who make claims and assumes too little of those being talked about.

Yet this critique harbors its own assumptions. For why is there such op-

27 Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–2. For a theological accounting in the free church tradition of this "common sense view," see Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine* (Lanham, MD; Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 300-22, especially 312-17.

28 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 137.

29 For a sample, see, James L. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 127-8; Doris Fleischer and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation,* updated edition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 33-48; Steven E. Brown, "Changing America's Consciousness: A Brief History of the Independent Living Movement in the United States," in *The Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, eds. Roy Hanes, Ivan Brown, and Nancy E. Hansen (London: Routledge, 2017), 492-5.

position to claiming certain persons as potentially lacking "inwardness," unless that capacity is understood as crucial to being a person? And whose anthropology is this exactly? While this conception of personhood purports to be more "inclusive," too often it merely reasserts an anthropology heavily reliant upon (intellectual) ability. Thus the call by many disability rights activists for "autonomy" tends to assume that once one has all the "supports" possible, one can "independently" be in control of one's life. This may work for a wheelchair user or person with full cognitive capacity but can unconsciously forget those persons who live in continual states of radical dependency. Reinders is not the only one who has criticized how this understanding of being human in the disability rights movement creates a "hierarchy" of disability, that is, the more intellectually "able" one is, the louder one's voice becomes.[30] One can understand how "assuming competence" appears "inclusive": when the dominant conception of personhood involves purposive agency, believing that someone like Arthur has a flourishing "inner life" makes him much less "foreign" and much more "like us," that is, worthy of being included in the moral community. Yet this philosophical turn also forces people with profound cognitive impairments into the "common sense view" of personhood, and only illustrates all the more the dominance of a voluntarist anthropology.

The prioritizing of the capacities which empower the will implicit in much Anabaptist theologizing highlight the anthropocentric and subjectivist orientation surrounding its practice of baptism. As a result, theologian Gerald Schlabach wonders whether Mennonites make it difficult to defend themselves from accusations of not needing grace to follow Jesus. Schlabach asks whether one can have sociological voluntarism—a strong belief in a "voluntary community" of disciples—without "falling victim to the psychological and conceptual problems that come with voluntarism in the philosophical sense (will and willpower as the key to human agency and thus moral transformation)."[31]

30 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 26, 134-8; Anne Louise Chappell, "Still Out in the Cold: People with Learning Difficulties and the Social Model of Disability," in *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Tom Shakespeare (London: Cassell, 1998), 211-20; Daniel Docherty et al., "This is What We Think," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 432-440.

31 Schlabach, "Responses," *On Baptism*, 108.

How have Anabaptists begun to respond to the challenges which persons labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled raise in regard to baptism? Do they avoid the voluntarism and "choosing self" so prominent in much of Anabaptist theologizing?

Ecclesial Responses

The lack of reflection by Anabaptist-Mennonite thinkers on baptism and profound cognitive impairments has not prevented believers from addressing these challenges in the context of congregational life. And while few Anabaptist-Mennonite thinkers are directly reflecting on the challenges that the profoundly impaired make to the tradition, recent responses try to address the challenge people with cognitive impairments bring to the church's practice of baptism. The following will look at these congregational and scholarly responses and discern their adequacy in accounting for the lives of persons labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled.

Lay Responses

What is to be done when persons with profound cognitive impairments reach the "age of accountability" where many young people are being baptized or considering it? While the literature is not vast on this phenomena, there seem to be two ways in which pastors, lay leaders, and congregations approach the issue.

One approach lies in baptizing these persons with their peers as "exceptions." Aware of the normativity of "adult" or "believer's" baptism, church members still baptize cognitively impaired people as a form of "inclusion" and "belonging." Not baptizing these persons due to their impairments strikes many as "exclusive," with the potential harm that goes along with it. So ecclesial leaders pursue the process of baptism as a form of recognition and as a way of being a welcoming congregation. This often entails "adjustments" to catechetical material and instruction: simpler and more concrete language; using a variety of forms of communication; more expression in tone and body language; using more pictures than text; and teaching through stories rather than didactic resources.[32]

32 April Yamasaki, *Making Disciples: Preparing People for Baptism, Christian Living, and Church Membership* (Newton, KS: Faith & Life Resources, 2003), 52.

Church members practice these "accommodations" as ways of recognizing persons with cognitive impairments as valuable members of their communities. Yet this approach risks only reasserting these persons as "exceptions which prove the rule": namely, a community implicitly asserts the demand to have the cognitive capacity to rationally name oneself, the community and God in order to receive baptism—but will make an "exception" for the disadvantaged in order to "include" them. This parallels the problems manifest in many "thin" forms of social inclusion, which contain a strong desire to include marginalized persons as a sense of justice but without any questioning of the dominant framework(s) within which those persons are included. The "compulsory capacities" of purposive agency, subjectivity, and instrumental rationality remain implicitly yet firmly in place in order to receive the rite.[33] So, an intellectually "able" norm remains in place, which only solidifies the place of those impaired cognitively as "marginal cases" who are generously "included" even though they will never meet the norm. This guarantees both the dominance of a cognitive foundation for baptism, but also the "abnormal" status of those lacking in the capacities needed for baptism in the first place. Too often this status demotion goes along with the employment of accommodating "special needs," narrating persons such as Arthur as abiding in a "special" category of humanity apart from those who can live the unspoken rule of purposive agency.

Even for those communities which strive to embody this type of "inclusion" towards persons with cognitive impairments, one can legitimately question the consistency or coherence of this "accommodated" baptismal practice with a larger Anabaptist theology. For congregations which place a large emphasis on following the "biblical" practice of baptism—almost exclusively interpreted as consisting of the baptism of "adult" persons (in the cognitive, developmental, social, and biological sense)—in line with the practice and theology of the radical reformers, to baptize persons considered profoundly cognitively disabled appears very hard to justify. If the salvation of persons is not at stake in the rite, what is the purpose of baptizing some-

33 On the "compulsory capacities" often implicitly understood as being essential for citizenship in western, late modern societies, see Stacy Clifford Simplican, *The Capacity Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

one like Arthur? As a "token"? Or is baptism here mainly some kind of "rite of passage," completely disassociated with God or faith, executed to recognize standing or status in a congregation? How coherent is such a view with the 16th century radical reformers, or the common interpretation of baptism as an ordinance of agency and response to God? How different in reality is this practice of "inclusion" from the baptism of non-agential persons (e.g., infants)?

A second approach tries to respond to some of these questions through using alternative rites to recognize the membership and belonging of persons labeled as intellectually disabled. Congregations here create alternative rituals as "public ceremonies of acceptance" similar to child dedications. Along with these ceremonies come "alternative membership categories" for these persons to signify that they are welcomed and a part of the congregation. As one father of a profoundly impaired woman says, "All [baptism] would have meant to her is she stood up front and got her hair wet."[34] His pastor "agreed that baptism was not the best choice" for her, and instead had her mark her name in the church's membership book in front of the entire congregation. The answer to inclusion here entails a certain creativity with church practices that can tell people they are loved and loved members of a congregation.

Like those who baptize persons as "exceptions," this pastor and his congregation arguably seek to lovingly respond to persons with cognitive impairments as fellow Christians. Yet certain problems immediately present themselves. For one, if baptism for this woman is "less important" than her membership status, why should anyone else be baptized? This implication of the *relative* importance of the ritual speaks directly to the concerns of various theologians mentioned above. In addition, while this approach maintains the coherency of a believer's baptism theological anthropology, it potentially does it at the expense of robustly welcoming people severely lacking in cognitive capacity. In this way, one does not really avoid the problem of placing persons labeled intellectually disabled in a "special" category of humanity (or at least Christian) but may in fact accentuate it. Yet a baptismal practice which seeks to be consistent with a Mennonite-Anabaptist view actually demands this position. So while it may look as if this option for people

34 Quoted in Smucker, "Is Christianity about IQ?"

with severe impairments appears highly "exclusive," it may in fact be the correct response for those wishing to stay committed to an authentic Anabaptist theological anthropology.

Scholarly Responses

Three Mennonite theologians who have attempted to offer robust critiques of anthropocentrism in baptismal theology are Anthony Siegrist, John Rempel, and Melissa Florer-Bixler. All three try to accentuate and reveal different ways of relativizing voluntarism in Anabaptist theologies and practices of baptism: Siegrist emphasizes the church as primary subject in baptism; Rempel stresses God's initiative in the rite; Florer-Bixler understands baptism as a form of communal and supported decision-making.

Anthony Siegrist and Ecclesial Mediation

Siegrist's main argument rests on the idea that Anabaptist theology and practice around baptism have become malformed by the influences of 20th century revivalism. This influence has resulted in an inordinate emphasis in churches on the individual believer's "relationship with Jesus," with the "voluntary power of the individual" being at the core of readiness for baptism.[35] Siegrist wants to counter this trend by recognizing the church's primary role of providing "ecclesial mediation" in baptism. As the body of Christ on earth, the church mediates Christ to candidates through baptism, thus acting as a "co-witness" to God's work. "[B]elievers' baptism is initiation into the community that embodies Jesus' presence to the world. With the Spirit it witnesses to the transformative power of Christ, and as a co-witness it participates in this transformation that is both inward and outward. Through baptism, candidates are acted upon by God and incorporated into the Divine life, and through it they become members of Christ's body. Believers' baptism is an act of God through the community of those who have been and are still being made right."[36] For Siegrist, an openness to a more "sacramental" approach could not only mitigate against an inordinate subjectivism, but also undergird robust forms of discipleship at risk of "stumbling in the late

35 Siegrist, *Participating Witness*, 25.
36 Ibid., 95.

modern mist of vague moralism and ambiguous religiosity."[37]

On first glance, emphasizing the "ecclesial mediation" of baptism potentially opens a way for persons considered profoundly disabled to be eligible for baptism. When the church becomes the main subject offering itself as the community used by God to host the other, people like Arthur do not have to meet the strenuous anthropological demands of the "common sense view" to receive baptism.[38] Faith as understood here in a more corporate sense as a body committed to Christ in worship has the potential of recognizing persons with profound impairments as potential recipients and bearers of the church's faith.

But a closer reading of Siegrist's account reveals that he does not necessarily have this kind of social faith in mind. For while his theology seeks to reassert the crucial role of the church in baptism, Siegrist goes to pains not to eliminate the essential place of the "free" decision of the candidate for baptism. The church's participation in Christ's work does not "deny the voluntary character of Anabaptist communities. It does not follow from an affirmation that God acts through the church that anyone should be made to participate or be baptized into this body without their truly free decision to do so."[39] Siegrist repeatedly refers to baptism as a "pledge," "free response," and an "initiative" of the candidate, emphasizing how the subjective aspects of the rite and the initiative of the candidate should not be "compromised."[40]

So, while Siegrist attempts to highlight the ecclesial role in baptism, his (implicit) voluntarism actually mitigates against his intent and still makes baptism contingent upon human response. It is almost as if Siegrist wants to make baptism a 50-50 prospect: 50% the church and 50% human, and when either element is lacking, baptism is simply incomplete, if not invalid. In addition, his demand for "meaningful" preparation for baptism totally excludes those with profound impairments from ever being received due to their limitations in living life "on the inside." Siegrist arguably makes an advance in Anabaptist theology and practice of baptism by recognizing an "objective" element of God in the practice, but he still lets an anthropocen-

37 Ibid., 78.

38 See Stanley Hauerwas's comments in "Response by Stanley Hauerwas," *On Baptism*, 101.

39 Siegrist, *Participating Witness,* 79.

40 Ibid., 168.

tric and subjectivistic orientation define who may legitimately be baptized.

John Rempel and God's Initiative

Mennonite theologian John Rempel has worked for many years at attempting to bring a more "sacramental" theological approach to Anabaptist theology and congregational practice. Drawing upon a theological tradition often either ignored or reviled in Anabaptist contexts, Rempel seeks to both understand Mennonite practices as consistent with the historical "catholic" church, but also as rites with distinctive characteristics that flow from Anabaptist faith and life.

Rempel's worries about the recent anthropocentric and subjectivistic emphases in baptism have led him to reassert God not only as active in the rite but as *initiator*, particularly through the work of the Holy Spirit. Rigidly adhering to a particular process or order of baptism contradicts the way the Spirit leads and acts where s/he chooses. "Like the incarnation, sacraments are acts of God's condescension, his coming to us on our terms."[41] In response to contemporaries who have accepted Christ but who see no need for baptism, Rempel asserts the normativity of the New Testament witness, where he interprets baptism as God's act of salvation and incorporation. While Rempel wants to understand the historical ambiguity of baptismal practices, he wants to strongly critique baptism as "optional." For a following through on this late modern rationalist mindset risks "dissecting what the New Testament hold together. To marginalize baptism is to be left without the seal of salvation, the recapitulation of the Spirit's work in us and our insertion into the body of Christ."[42]

Here Rempel shows that not only does he want to assert God's initiative in baptism, but he also does not want to ignore the church's role in the rite. "For believer's baptism churches, baptism was a seamless initiation into Christ and the body of Christ. It located the believer's belonging to the body of Christ concretely in a congregation."[43] In this way, there is a very corporate dimension to baptism, one that welcomes candidates into a community of

41 Rempel, *Recapturing an Enchanted World*, 72.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 91-2.

faith. Yet that community does not operate on its own but is still very much at the service of the Holy Spirit as her "agent." The church does not act "in its own power but as an instrument of the Spirit. In a similar way, believers are not acting in their own power but as instruments of the Spirit in witnessing to God's work of grace in their lives and pledging to live it out faithfully in the company of the congregation."[44]

The strong divine initiative and ecclesial role at the heart of Rempel's account potentially makes baptismal theology and practice more hospitable for people like Arthur. Rempel seeks to avoid as much as possible the voluntarism of much theology and practice by putting the desire within God's hands first. Not having to worry about making faith primarily "one's own" removes a burden of subjectivity upon persons with profound cognitive impairments. And drawing upon baptism as an ecclesial rite of incorporation brings those persons into the community of faith as fellow disciples, who will subsequently live their lives within the "sacrament" of God which is the church. "[T]he congregation, in the person of the minister, confirms the work of the Spirit outwardly by baptizing the candidate with water. In baptism the whole movement of grace and faith is actualized and 'sealed'; the believer is pried loose from the solidarity of sin and attached to the solidarity of grace, the body of Christ."[45]

But does Rempel's account wholly evade the dilemma of purposive agency in contemporary theology and practice? Even while Rempel stresses the divine initiative in baptism, the traditionally Anabaptist language of "inwardness" often undergirds his baptismal theology. Drawing on the theology of Pilgram Marpeck, Rempel highlights the importance of understanding the "outward" sign of baptism to be of a piece with an "inward" dimension of "surrender and regeneration." He writes, "The outward baptism of water was offered when the candidate confessed Christ and the church confirmed the candidate's faith. Baptism re-enacted all these aspects of the believer's salvation…[T]he outward event was one with the inward event, so a term like *recapitulation* or even *actualization*, the making present of the inward event, would be a more accurate description of what happens in baptism."[46]

44 Ibid., 92.
45 Ibid., 95-6.
46 Ibid., 91.

As noted above, problems immediately arise with this emphasis on "inwardness" for those with profound cognitive impairments: how can we confirm the "inner" event without language or intention or purposive agency? One could generously assume a sort of inwardness, but without any "sign" of this occurring, it immediately makes these persons into "exceptions" and places them in a "special" category of person. For no one would make this kind of assumption with a typical candidate who had the compulsory capacities of subjectivity and agency. Rempel's interpretation of Marpeck states the *essential* aspect of "confession" in order to legitimately offer someone baptism. So even with Rempel's stress of the divine initiative, baptism here still appears to be contingent on human response. And the reception of baptism by those labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled still appears inconsistent at best.

Melissa Florer-Bixler and Supported Decision-Making

Of the three theologians discussed here, Melissa Florer-Bixler is the only one who attempts to grapple with Anabaptist practices of baptism in the context of cognitive impairment. Florer-Bixler wants to take direct aim at baptismal imaginaries and practices that place a high demand upon cognitive assent as requirements for valid candidacy. While the process of teaching and linguistic confession of faith coheres with the Mennonite tradition, it excludes those lacking in the intellectual capacities needed to meet the "knowledge threshold" for baptism.[47] To baptize persons when they cannot meet this demand makes them into "exceptions to the rule,"[48] with the accompanying problems discussed above.

Florer-Bixler addresses this problem by framing baptism as a decision which inherently involves the witness of and presence in the faith community. Drawing upon the thought of Menno Simons, Florer-Bixler understands the tradition as relativizing cognitive ability in baptism. The presence of erudition and intellectual ability in the person are no guarantee that someone will enter into biblical faith. In contrast, at the heart of faith in a Mennonite context is the need for "moral development" and a moral formation that extends beyond cognitive rationality. The acquisition of the virtues of disciple-

47 Florer-Bixler, "Believers Baptism as Supported Decision," 136.
48 Ibid.

ship occur within a community, which forms one's emotions and affections as much as the mind in living a Christian life.

When persons learn faith through the example of others in a community of faith, then they can begin the baptismal process as one of "supported decision-making." Supported decision-making has come in the context of the disability rights movement as a way for people considered intellectually disabled to exercise greater control over their own lives. Often assumed to be "incompetent" or "incapable" of making decisions, many persons with cognitive impairments want to assert that if the proper supports are in place, they can make their own decisions. Importantly for Florer-Bixler, supported decision-making is not relegated to those "special" people who need it, but instead is an inherent aspect of faith for *all* Christians. Coming to faith and being ready for baptism is a communal activity for *everyone*, not just those with cognitive impairments. When one understands faith as something learned in the context of community, baptizing persons labeled as intellectually disabled represents not an "exception" but a regular dimension of the Christian life. Florer-Bixler's understanding of faith as relational certainly creates more space for people like Arthur to be less like marginal persons to "include" and more like fellow disciples to learn from and participate with.

While the benefits to people with cognitive impairments of supported decision-making models should be emphasized, a question remains whether it really challenges the common-sense view of personhood discussed above. Florer-Bixler admirably attempts to make faith a more holistic experience, which can be more hospitable for people like Arthur. At the same time, she never challenges the requirement for autonomy as something of a first principle in the baptismal process. "The grace of chosen baptism is that others support individuals in becoming fully themselves so that they can make an autonomous, informed decision about the community they choose and the life they will live."[49] Florer-Bixler repeatedly uses the language of "agency," "autonomy," and "self-determination" throughout her discussion. One can understand Florer-Bixler's intention to not see people with cognitive impairments as purely passive objects of someone's else's care. Yet the flavor of her use of this language, without further qualification and clarification, seems to assume the kind of robust subjectivity needed for purposive agency. For

49 Ibid.

example, how might someone like Arthur manifest the "desire" required to be a candidate for baptism?

Placing such a strong emphasis on autonomy and self-determination potentially risks overwhelming the relativization of rational ability Florer-Bixler advocates. Florer-Bixler never challenges the voluntarist demand for autonomy and control in order to be a valid candidate for baptism, but merely makes rationality a communal project. The need for a self-determined faith lived "from the inside" remains as crucial for baptism; the only difference is that the agency is extended to include the faith community. While this extension of subjectivity to include the church relates to Siegrist's attempts to counter individualistic practices of baptism, Florer-Bixler never discusses God's role in the baptismal process. Baptism in an Anabaptist context is a "ritual of agency"[50]—but one of the individual and the church. Where God fits into the matter is not discussed. This lacuna then begs the question whether baptism is at all possible or valid if this kind of anthropocentric agency doesn't exist? If so, this baptismal theology risks placing God as a purely contingent and secondary party to the rite, who remains mute and inactive until someone exercises agency.

Conclusion: Baptism as Gift of Reception

There exists within much contemporary Mennonite-Anabaptist theologies and practices of baptism an almost exclusive emphasis on the capacities of purposive agency, instrumental rationality, and willful-inspired behavior in order to be eligible for candidacy. These characteristics of a "common sense view" of personhood throw a heavy shadow over the lives of those labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled and make these persons either ineligible for baptism or as "exceptions which prove the rule." Attempts at making ecclesial practice more "inclusive" not only fail to alleviate the dilemmas that the Mennonite-Anabaptist theological imaginary presents, but sometimes even accentuate the highly exclusionary nature of much contemporary baptismal theology and practice. Recent theological attempts to stress the church's role and God's initiative in baptism have gone some way towards mitigating problematic aspects of congregational practice. Yet the robust forms of subjectivity implicit in the need for "inwardness" in baptism rest

50 Ibid., 137.

uneasily beside persons highly limited in the abilities needed for purposive agency. Anabaptist-Mennonite baptismal theology thus stands at an impasse in regard to the question of how the tradition can account for those persons who do not have the "compulsory capacities" required for candidacy.

But what if, instead of making agency and the human will primary in baptism, Anabaptist theology turned towards understanding the rite as *gift of reception*? One of the things at the center of baptism is the identity of the candidate. As I illustrated in this essay, much Mennonite-Anabaptist theology and practice understands baptism as transforming the identity of candidates through their own purposive agency. God is involved, but often in a strongly contingent fashion: without the candidate's "choice" and "decision," God's work remains either incomplete or not active at all. But what if baptism was more a rite of receiving an identity as gift, a gift which cannot be earned or owned? As Belcher writes, the initiand and the church

> both undergo the rite on the assumption that the one who offers is, ultimately, God—and yet God, according to the rite, is really only 'present' to and for the community in (or on the skin of) the body of the [candidate], who is (paradoxically) the receiver of the gift. Even the blessing of the water is transient, cannot be maintained in the face of time. In other words, the rite *may* maintain that the phenomena of its practice are 'gifts,' precisely by that unending deferral of giving. The rite 'opens' the phenomena of the Christian world by refusing to 'own' these phenomena but finding them in the body of the one who is not yet a part of that world.[51]

As a gift that cannot be earned or owned, baptism does not demand capacities or a "choosing self" but only the gift of being. In this context, Christian identity is not primarily cognitive or propositional or self-directed, but about being welcomed into a community where a person is shaped into a body that can inhabit the world in a Christian way. The gift of the rite recognizes and affirms the candidate as a gift, one which God gifts to the community. Understanding baptism in this way means that our being lies fundamentally in Christ, rather than in our self-determination. As gifts of God, baptism trans-

51 Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement*, 174.

forms the ground of our being: not "I am" but "I am a gift"; not "I choose" but "I am chosen"; not "I know" but "I am known"; not "I believe" but "I am entrusted to."

Orienting baptism towards being a gift of reception means that the church no longer needs to baptize people like Arthur as "exceptions" but can receive them into the Body as fellow creatures, loved and transformed by God into being. Might this baptismal theology not only host people with profound cognitive impairments but also *everyone else* as well? The embodied life of Arthur prods and compels the church to stretch the boundaries of baptism beyond the narrative of agency and rationality dominant in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Taking Arthur's life seriously means interpreting baptism as a gift of reception available with no need for capacity or ability. In other words, I suggest that the lives of people like Arthur call Anabaptist and Believer's Church congregations to consider moving towards a "dual norms" approach to baptism. Rather than rigidly following a norm of baptizing *only* "adults," extending that invitation to children might more adequately counter the marked anthropocentrism of recent practice more than the theologies of Siegrist and Rempel. If the church can baptize profoundly impaired persons without guilt or as "exceptions," why not extend that same hospitality towards *everyone*, including "non-agential" persons such as infants?[52]

Certainly, this reading of baptism entails risks. For a tradition founded on a belief in the illegitimacy of baptizing anyone but "adults," inviting "non-rational" persons to the rite can represent an existential threat to identity. One can rightfully wonder what is left of the tradition once paedobaptism is introduced as valid. Has everything one's Anabaptist-Mennonite ancestors fought and died for all been for nought? What might it mean for the tradition when "choice" and "decision" no longer become requirements for becoming members of the church?

I cannot even hope to provide a definitive answer to these very weighty

52 To be clear, I am in no way wishing to equate people considered profoundly intellectually disabled with children. This is the fallacy of representing and treating people like Arthur as "perpetual children." The point is more to draw out the implications of baptizing persons lacking purposive agency not as exceptions but as fellow creatures created in God's image. If this can be done for persons severely lacking cognitive capacity, why could it not be done for children *of any age*?

and serious questions, yet I can posit a few suggestions. Might the notion of theological "development" not help in this regard? The first Anabaptists responded to what they understood as a static and unfaithful practice of baptism in 16th century Europe. While acknowledging that the questions posed to the magisterial ecclesial communities of the time had validity, have not those same communities developed in their own theology and practice? For example, in response to the witness of Mennonites and other free churches, some Christian communities have felt called to develop more extensive rites for adults entering the church, both drawing on ancient sources as well as contemporary theologizing. In a similar fashion, might not the presence of people with profound cognitive impairments in their communities challenge Anabaptist-Mennonites to a more hospitable theology of baptism? Anabaptist-Mennonites do not have to completely abandon adult baptism. Instead, the call is to strongly consider a "both/and" theology of the practice, one that arises from an attentiveness to some of the most vulnerable members of the faith community. Thus, development does not mean a "watering down" of the tradition to some kind of lowest common denominator, but a renewal of a practice based on the life of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Another way forward exists in a reaffirmation of the community as mediator of the Holy Spirit's grace to each baptized member. One critique of paedobaptist traditions is that they can (and often do) baptize persons irrespective of a commitment to a local ecclesial body, a lack of engagement either from the candidate, or their sponsor, or the candidate's parents. Even for those Anabaptist-Mennonites like Siegrist, who claim that the baptismal rite has a theologically "objective" dimension, entering the church requires a sharing of faith with a concrete body of believers. To receive baptism merely for the sake of "salvation" and to become a part of the "mystical body of Christ" risks making baptism purely functional and fails to understand redemption and faith as an enduring process of conversion in community. If baptism thus needs to happen in a Spirit-filled community to come to full fruition, where persons are shaped and formed into Christians not only through official catechesis but by a living witness, would not Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations be the ideal places for "non-agential" persons to be baptized? The value placed on the shared life of *koinonia* in many Anabaptist-Mennonite communities offers a prime foundation for people like

Arthur to enter the church and be accompanied every step of the way on their faith journey. Having a robust community life means that persons of any age can receive baptism in the assurance that they will not be forgotten or neglected. A mutual opportunity also arises for those who wish to bring someone else to the practice. Believing that God works through the rite *and* the community means that persons considering baptism must be ready to make a commitment to a local faith community. No Christian is a "free agent," no matter the age or level of cognitive capacity. By reaffirming the place of the community within God's sacramental grace, Anabaptist-Mennonite communities' gifting of baptism to persons of any age could offer a profound witness to all Christians of a faithful baptismal practice.

In the end, can the church let the presence of people like Arthur challenge and call communities to renew their witness of justice and hospitality? If a community's theology and practice of baptism form an identity that reduces persons with profound impairments to "exceptions" and "special" people, might that theology not be open to question? Might people with profound cognitive impairments help Anabaptist-Mennonites recognize the limitation of an overly voluntaristic and subjectivist theological anthropology? And might reforming that theological anthropology not be beneficial for *everyone* considering baptism and the life of faith? Anabaptist-Mennonite communities wish to be more and more "inclusive." If that commitment is true, make that inclusion a "thick" one, that is, one that does not simply let people "attend" the church but provides a place and imaginary which takes *everyone* seriously as fellow disciples of Jesus. Do Anabaptist-Mennonites have the confidence to let people like Arthur interrogate their theologies and practices to make them not only "hospitable" but in keeping with God's invitation to all to be incorporated into his body? If Christ is at the center of the church's practice and theology of baptism, what is to fear regarding the baptism of "non-agential" persons? Let Mennonites witness to the global church a robust practice of baptism of *all* persons: in a community of faith, where the Holy Spirit breathes and showers down grace on *all* his children, from the baptismal font to the end of days. May it be so.

jason reimer greig *is the campus minister for the McMaster Catholic Chaplaincy in Hamilton, Ontario.*

Placemaking and Artistic Vocation in the Post-Pandemic Church and World

Jennifer Allen Craft

Abstract

Interrogating the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, this essay suggests that it would be a mistake to assume placed community has disappeared and that an important task of the post-pandemic church will be to develop a renewed sense of place. By developing the contours of a theology of placemaking, the author argues that art and the artist are central to the ecclesial tasks of reconcillation and redemption in a broken but beautiful world.

Introduction: The State of Things

In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, the church has had to confront the influence that physical place continues to have upon its identity, practices, and mission. With the move to online worship and discipleship that occurred in the spring of 2020, our collective understanding of what it meant to "belong" to a congregation and church community dynamically changed in both positive and negative ways. It became less of a burden to attend church with children, for instance, but also easier to remove oneself from the accountability of physical encounters on a weekly basis. Virtual church increased the chance, especially in evangelical congregations, to became further focused on the sermon, and therefore one could be encouraged to "go anywhere" to get a better one. Worship, already marked by the value of choice, could increasingly become a reflection of what individuals wanted out of worship music or biblical teaching rather than about one's bodily relation to a particular place or physical community. In many cases, this resulted in a larger exit of members from churches characterized by theological mismatch, cultural and political tensions, or denominational controversies that

The Conrad Grebel Review 40, no. 3 (Fall 2022).

came to a head during such time.[1]

It would be false to insinuate that placed community life disappeared during the pandemic, though. In fact, many people were able to find a deeper sense of connection with individuals through weekly video calls, and many experienced less social pressure (and, relatedly, more of a desire) to attend weekly gatherings, all of which increased one's feeling of belonging in a congregation. Indeed, the impact of the pandemic on one's sense of place was not monolithic or homogenous. No matter what the individual response to changed physical encounters during the pandemic, though, we can recognize that it called for deeper reflection and self-conscious imagining of oneself in relation to a community and place in new and often-disruptive ways.

For these reasons, an important task of the post-pandemic church will be to develop a renewed sense of place within itself and to integrate that sense of place as part of its mission for the wider culture. As we begin to see how our former ways of living have failed us, as we reflect on the divided landscape of place that came into focus during the pandemic, and as we begin to make new places for community gathering in both physical and virtual environments, our vision for shared space and entangled life together must be a primary point of theological attention. The places we make in the world will reflect a vision for what it means to live as people of the resurrection, and they will mark out patterns and behaviors of belonging that either invite joining together in the Holy Spirit or enforce divisions therein. As our old patterns of behavior for community engagement were questioned or disrupted, Christians are gifted with the opportunity to go about a renewed and redeemed practice of placemaking in the world today.

It is my goal here to develop the contours of a theology of placemaking for the church, with special attention to the role that artists might play in helping construct new senses of place and belonging. These questions of placemaking and the arts, I argue, will invite us to better navigate the particular needs of our post-pandemic lives and the new realities of church engagement in contemporary society that emerged in the pandemic's wake.

1 For instance, one might point to the larger "deconstruction" movement happening within the evangelical church, political tensions in denominations which came to a head during the Trump era, or the controversies in the Southern Baptist Convention which elicited an exit from both members and member organizations.

Here, I offer some foundations for thinking on issues which only serve as the beginning of such work, but which may help open a space for understanding the critical role that both aesthetics and placemaking play in the way we understand ongoing ecclesial mission in a broken but beautiful world.

A Theological Case for Placemaking as Christian Vocation

Before developing a constructive framework for understanding the work of the artist in the church, it will be helpful to outline the broad contours of a theology which takes placemaking seriously as a central way of understanding Christian vocation and which meets the needs of a church grappling with placed belonging in a post-pandemic world. The language of place and placemaking offers a unique lens through which to address the questions of who we are and how we are called to live in the world. Placemaking, as I use the term here, includes all those practices and ways of seeing the world expressed in relation to our physical places. So placemaking can mean physical construction—the way we build our churches for instance—but also includes how we build communities of belonging in and outside those structures. This framework for understanding placemaking takes seriously the role that physical place has in our embodied interactions with one another, including the ways that our construction of self-conscious identity and practices within those places take shape.[2]

While the disciplines of city-planning, philosophy, and humanistic geography all say something about placemaking in human experience,[3] if we allow our understanding to be shaped further by a view of Christian vocation as grounded in the doctrine of work elaborated in many Reformation-

2 For background on some of these ways of understanding place and placemaking, see Jennifer Allen Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts: Cultivating the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), along with the following resources on phenomenological and relational views of place and our work/ life/community within it: Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993) and John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

3 See for instance, Lynda H. Schneekloth and Robert G. Shibley, *Placemaking: The Art and Practice of Building Communities* (New York: Wiley, 1995), 191; Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976); and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

informed traditions, then placemaking must also become a core part of understanding Christian vocational identity. Being called, in other words, to work broadly and creatively in *all* the places of the world and situating this calling further within a doctrine of the reconciling work of Christ in Creation, Christian identity is thus reconceived as a call to various forms of placemaking work in the world.[4] In this article I elaborate on some key doctrinal features of constructing this theological vision for placemaking as it applies to the post-pandemic church.

The Image of God and Christian Placemaking

A Christian understanding of both the value of place itself and our work within it are a central focus on the Genesis creation stories.[5] In Genesis 1, God creates a world of places and their inhabitants, ordering the earth through His own creative work of placemaking. Later in Genesis 2, the Garden of Eden is the first place given to humans as gift, and the story functions as a microcosm for understanding the particular and universal presence of God in all of creation.[6] The accompanying theological anthropology established in the Creation accounts and centralized around the divine desig-

4 While he doesn't use the term placemaking, Lesslie Newbigin explores the missional work of the church for the places of the world in a way that informs my own constructive account. See for instance, Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978) along with the theological summary of Newbigin's work in Michael W. Goheen, *The Church and its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

5 On dual authorship of the Genesis narratives, see Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (London: SCM, 1956). Terrence Fretheim argues that despite their different authorship, the accounts should be read together, a view I take here. While it not necessary to hold to his exact view regarding redaction of the accounts by the author, I suggest that the accounts are best read in theological unity and as a cohesive theological text. See Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005). For a similar view, see Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

6 The Garden of Eden is often understood as the first Temple, with Adam's tasks as the *imago dei* corresponding to the priestly task. See for instance, John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006) and G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004).

nation of humans as "the image of God" (Gen. 1:26-28) scaffolds a larger theological understanding of human work in the community of Creation. As divine-image bearers and co-creators,[7] humans are called to see the places of the world as God sees them and from this vision exercise responsible action in the world.[8]

If the Genesis narratives offer a serious vision of "place" as God-ordained and God-given, then place*making* might also be one of the more significant ways to envision what it means to live into our calling as creative image-bearers of God in the world. In Genesis 1:26-28, the *imago dei* is connected both textually and theologically with a divinely appointed task—with the dominion of the landscape and the calling to procreate.[9] The Genesis 2 calling to "till and keep" the garden and name its animals (2:15,19-20) further elaborates what this "dominion" may look like. Called to be co-creators with God, the first image-bearers (the soil-bound *adamah*) are called to engage lovingly and creatively with the place divinely given (indeed Adam's task in understood as at once agricultural, poetic, and priestly).[10] Creational relationships of all sorts are built through ordered and creative acts of placemaking grounded in humans' vision of the good landscape. In this regard, views of the image of God which focus on creativity, order, relationality, difference, or mission, in some sense all have to do with an underlying theology of place at the heart of the *imago dei*.[11] In other words, we are creatures called into

7 Trevor Hart reflects on this co-creator (or his preferred term, following J.R.R. Tolkien, "sub-creator") role in Trevor A. Hart, *Making Good: Creation, Creativity, and Artistry* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

8 Ellen F. Davis suggests a parallel between this relational seeing of God and humanity in *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 44-47.

9 See Michael Welker's helpful discussion of these tasks in light of the doctrine of *creatio continua* in Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999.)

10 "Tilling and keeping" is in Westermann's view indicative of the nature of all human work. See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 221. I discuss this in more depth in Craft, *Placemaking and the Arts,* chapter 2. It is important to note here, though, that dominion does not mean mastery over the rest of creation, but a responsible and loving relationship to that creation which exercises care and attention.

11 For an introductory summary of these views on the *imago dei*, see Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), ch. 5.

embodied relationship and shared difference with one another and with the world of places. Humans are called to have dominion over creation, yes, but this responsible dominion is only understood and enacted properly within a holistic vision of place and its accompanying relationships. John Inge describes this as a "relational view" of place and argues that the whole of scripture describes this God-people-place relationship.[12] Healthy relationships with one another and with God depend upon healthy relationships to the land beneath our feet—to the places that God has called us into as responsible placemakers.[13]

This creational vision of placemaking work receives decisive focus when further understood in Christological terms. Christ Himself is the image of God called into the work of reconciliation for all of creation's places (Col. 1). Understanding Christ's work in creation as a form of placemaking is helpful here. In the incarnation, Jesus undergoes both displacement and placement. He leaves heaven and comes into our earthly place to do the work of joining divine and human space. Our ecclesiological identity and mission are clarified within this Christological identity and mission, our own placemaking practice being framed as a vocation to participate in Christ's reconciling work in *all.*[14] Jennifer McBride describes the work of the church as becoming like Christ and shows how this vocational identity is achieved centrally through confession and repentance, through taking on the sins of the world as Christ himself does in his image-bearing work, and so working toward reconciliation in our places and communities. What this must mean, then, for churches of the 21st century, and indeed for the church of the post-COVID-19 era, is that they re-imagine and confess their "sins of place,"[15] while at the same time, embody the sacrificial and conciliatory work of Christ in

12 John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2003), 46-47.

13 In this sense the *imago dei* must be situated within the wider theological anthropology of scripture—within Israel's calling to responsibly occupy and steward land and animal resources, their calling to serve the poor, the image of Christ as a model for Christian calling to servanthood, and even the church's participation in Christ's work of redemption brought "to the ends of the earth."

14 Importantly, this may involve becoming both more deeply placed *and* undergoing various forms of displacement for the sake of the displaced.

15 I use this term broadly here to describe the various ways that we have dealt *un*lovingly with our places and their communities, which I will elaborate on in the next section.

their places. The church's vocation of placemaking, as Christ himself shows, is a vocational calling to embodied, loving, confessional, and repentant work in all the places of the world.

The Problem of Sin for Christian Placemaking

This confessional and repentant attitude is integral to understanding Christian placemaking work, especially given that theologies of place often fail to adequately account for the problem of sin. In theologians' efforts to establish the holiness, beauty, and goodness of our embodiment in physical place, we often forget to recognize the damage to both our vision and practices of placemaking sustained by sin.[16] A key feature of the state of sin in which we live is that humans operate with distorted vision.[17] The image of God in us remains intact, but our image-making abilities, the imagination which drives our practices in the world, is bent. Our vision of place is marred by sin, and so our placemaking practices are broken within this disordered sight. Very often, we fail to see the world as God sees it, and because of this distorted vision, we fail to treat places and people as the gifts that they undoubtedly are. Our placemaking practices, then, must account for this blindness.

A theology of placemaking as Christian vocation, therefore, benefits greatly from the insights of Lauren Winner on damaged practices. In *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, Winner provides an insightful account of the ways that Christian practices carry inherent damages within them, and in so doing tempers claims about the redemptive function of practices for the Christian life. In her study of Christian practices such as prayer and Eucharist, Winner argues that because of sin, the practices themselves operate

16 For instance, none of the major theologies of place give any lengthy report of the role of sin on our sense of place or placemaking practices. See John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids, IN: Baker Academic, 2011).

17 One might appeal to Augustinian notions of original sin to understand this damage to our ways of seeing (imagination), but even within more action-based views of sin that reject Augustinian notions we might appeal to the ways that our imagination and way of seeing the world are inhibited and bent by the social frameworks in which we abide. Both views of sin account for such damage to vision and so undergird the theological argument that follows. On varying accounts of original sin from an Anabaptist framework, see https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Original_Sin.

with damage that is proper to them. The Eucharist, for instance, becomes a site of damaged vision in ways that are magnified precisely because of the form of that practice.[18] This does not negate the redemptive and sacramental power of the Eucharist but softens our claims that it will *always* result in redeemed behavior. Our theology of Christian placemaking must take this dynamic into account, understanding the ways that placemaking carries inherent damages by sin which operate in accordance with the very form of that practice. It is not enough, then, to simply offer a theology of placemaking as Christian vocation which focuses on the ways that those practices can express the image or presence of God in place, nor can we sustain a completely optimistic view of the way that our placemaking practices perform redemptively in our environments. Even when attempted with the best of intentions, sin distorts the way we see places and people, and therefore, it is often the case that we fail to understand the true impacts of our actions.[19]

This theology of sin as "distorted vision" allows us to complicate our picture of placemaking and perhaps unearth a way of understanding placed encounters, which does not gloss over the ways in which our encultured encounters tend to go wrong. This definition of sin aligns with the ways that feminist theologians picture the problem of sin. Kathryn Tanner understands sin as blindness, while Winner herself describes sin as a failure of perception.[20] Other scholars focus on the relational rupture present due to sin,[21] though this rupture might also be traced back to a failure to see the true nature of the person or place of damaged relationship. This "failure of the imagination" as Wendell Berry observes, impacts our ability to see places and their inhabitants for what they are, and therefore renders our placemak-

18 Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*: *On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 46-56.

19 For instance, whiteness is a key example here of clouded vision. Racial and gender segregation often come out of a strong sense of place, but that sense of place is undoubtedly clouded by sin.

20 Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 46; Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 9.

21 See Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 242; Darlene Fozard Weaver, "Sin and the Subversion of Ethics: Why the Discourse on Sin is Good for Theological Anthropology," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology,* edited by Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 100.

ing work there inevitably broken, or at the very least, incomplete.[22] While sin is not the last word, it remains an important aspect of understanding our placemaking work in the church today, in a world that reflects the many broken and bumbling ways in which we attempt to navigate our places and communities, sometimes with direct ill intention but most often with the subtleties of indifference or forgetfulness that mark our bent imagination. "Most merciful God…we confess that we sinned against you in thought, word, and deed by what we have done, and what we have left undone."

The placemaking work of the post-pandemic church must directly account for various "sins of place" of both church and culture[23] as we reimagine the future of our places together. If Berry sees the failure of the imagination as central to our mismanagement of place, then his alternative is to see the world with affection, which is also a form of particularizing.[24] To live with affection is to see the ways in which people and places embody the goodness and blessedness of God's creative vision, and in response, to treat them in ways befitting of such a status. Berry does not necessarily offer the systematic framework for understanding how this particularizing affection might be understood in relation to the sinful imagination. But a theological account of the work of the Holy Spirit perhaps offers such insight and helps move us toward a more hopeful picture of the reconciling work of Christian placemaking.

The Spirit's Vision for Christian Placemaking

Fleming Rutledge describes the ways that our "eyes are opened" to sin only after the work of divine grace.[25] We cannot properly know or understand

22 Berry references "a failure of imagination" multiple times throughout his essays, but see for example, Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2003), 86.

23 See for instance, Greg Jarrell, *Our Trespasses: White Churches and the Taking of American Neighborhoods* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024.)

24 Wendell Berry, "It All Turns on Affection," in *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012). On the particularizing work of the imagination, see Wendell Berry, "Imagination in Place," in *Imagination in Place (*Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 12-13.

25 Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 170.

our sin except by the operation of the Spirit of Christ in us to take away the blinders of sin's power and to see the world and ourselves as they truly are. Two things deserve attention here. The first is the metaphor of sight she uses to understand the knowledge of sin and the movement from sin to grace. We were blind, and now we can see. The second is the order of operations—we come to know and understand our sin *after* the operation of divine grace. We cannot, then, go about the work of confession or neighborly affection without the grace of Christ offered up on the cross or the work of the Holy Spirit to move us in all manners according to His grace. Our freedom is further bound to the work of the Spirit who reveals the work already accomplished by Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. As Willie Jennings notes in his commentary on the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit in this sense "overshadows."[26] Our work of love operates in accordance with this divine work of grace to participate in joining together those communities of difference within the kingdom of God. Our work of love—of affection in Berry's words—is, in other words, the work of the Spirit. This affection, though, resists objectification. "This is love," Jennings writes, "that cannot be tamed, controlled, or planned, and once unleashed it will drive the disciples forward into the world and drive a question into their lives: *Where* is the Holy Spirit taking us and into whose lives?"[27]

This question of "where" is especially powerful here. It carries within it the ways that our love of place, cast within a social imaginary marred by sin, must open itself up to the *dis*placing power of the Spirit who opens and retrains our vision, making possible forms of affection which join together rather than divide. As Jennings notes, our affections in place often give rise to exclusionary patterns of belonging, nationalistic perspectives, and false visions of the ways in which God's image is displayed in the world of places. For the church to practice love of neighbor, our affections must be reformed through the eyes of the Spirit *for* and *in* the places of the world.

This call draws us back again to the incarnational work of Christ—to the God who becomes at once displaced and reimplaced for the sake of the

26 Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 28.
27 Jennings, *Acts*, 32, my emphasis.

world.[28] Our God is one who draws us into relationship not only through the beauty of embodied interaction in our places, but also models the sacrificial and often necessarily (dis)placing nature of that bodily work. The Word leaves His home in heaven to tabernacle among us (Jn. 1). Central to that inhabitation of the flesh, Mary as the first Christian models this call in her sacrificial imitation, displacing her own bodily needs (and indeed her social standing as well) to the needs of the baby in her womb, the infant in her arms, the toddler in her life in place. As Jesus later goes about his adult ministry, he gives up social standing and power for the sake of the displaced and the dispossessed. And in the way of the cross, the placemaking work of Christ comes to full embodiment, the God who undergoes the ultimate displacement on the cross—death— in order to make right our relationships in place for the world to come.[29] This Christology gives shape to the pneumatological work that follows, to the Spirit's alighting on the heads of the disciples, drawing them together in the language of their places while also leading them to disperse to the ends of the earth. Ecclesiological vocation and mission, seen through both an incarnational and pneumatological lens, then, must take place and displacement seriously as the church seeks to understand its particularizing work of placemaking.

If Christ's image-bearing work characterizes ecclesiological mission, then it is the Spirit who brings our vocation into full realization. In the Spirit, we realize…we see…we perceive rightly our vocation and identity in God's creation, and so relate to God and one another in the manner in which we are called. Steve Guthrie describes this as the "re-humanizing Spirit,"[30] and writes:

> The Spirit is poured out on God's people so that by the Spirit they may become truly and fully human, recreated in the Image of the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ. . . The work of the Spirit is to restore, rather

28 I use the term "reimplacement" in this essay in keeping with Craig Bartholomew's understanding of scripture as a story of "place-displacement-(re)implacement." See Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell*, 31.

29 Within traditions that focus on the descent into hell, or the harrowing of hell, this might exemplify a further displacement for the sake of the reimplaced.

30 Steven R. Guthrie, *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), xvi.

> than extinguish, our humanity. . . It is by the Holy Spirit that we are joined to the perfect humanity of Christ and remade in his image.[31]

To return to the question of sin and our distorted vision of one another in place, we might say that as the Spirit recreates us in the image of Christ's perfect humanity, our damaged vision is in some manner restored. In Jesus, we can see with the eyes of divine love and attend to the particular beauty of all God's living creatures and places. The Spirit joins us to the humanity of Christ and so joins us to one another, offering a restored vision for belonging in Christ's creation.

This joining is impossible except in the places we inhabit. This embodied particularity of humanity is the image of God called to do placemaking work in the world. Jesus showed us this path in his incarnation and will do so again in the second coming: "See, the home of God is among mortals" (Rev. 21:3). God's presence tabernacles in the garden-city of the New Jerusalem, making a place for us to experience divine-human communion in its eschatological fullness. Until that time, we make our home with one other in imitation of Christ's self-giving love and affection for the world, being joined in the work of the Spirit to make all places new.

The Relationship between Placemaking and Aesthetics

Within this brief exercise, one will notice the role of vision, sight, and imagination in formulating a theological account of placemaking. Placemaking is, at its heart, an aesthetic endeavor, a reality which poses both problem and possibility. Our aesthetic sensibilities are also corrupted by sin and are often molded into ungenerous images of what it means to be beautiful and good. When our placemaking practices operate within these unreflective aesthetic patterns, they too become vehicles for corrosive desire, marked by demonic panoramas of imagining and acting that are counter to the resurrection space of the Christian life.

One key example of this that came into focus in the pandemic/post-pandemic church is the way we understand racial imaginaries operating

31 Guthrie, *Creator Spirit*, xvi, xvii.

within ecclesial and public space. Willie Jennings offers perhaps the most comprehensive account of such dynamics, arguing that the church cannot be disentangled from its aesthetic encounters with blackness and its spatial organization of the world centered on whiteness.[32] The emergence of the Black Lives Matter protests in North America the summer of 2020 shows the exercise of such dynamics in culture. In my own experience, the impacts of these protests filtered into the ecclesial space in interesting and sometimes controversial ways. Local churches had to decide whether they would allow the politics of the moment to impact seeing the reality of racial division that was happening in their communities. In all this, churches and parishes had to decide what kind of placemaking work they were called to do, along with how and whether to address their own complicity in the wider social problem. While it is not the goal of this article to answer this particular question, we should note that its answer will be one that operates from within an aesthetic sensibility tied to space and place. In other words, the church cannot resolve its role in ongoing racial divisions in the world without reflecting on its theological aesthetics and its attendant placemaking practices, which inevitably drive its participation in and construction of community relationships.

Because our sense of place and wider habitus are marked by the realities of a Western colonial imagination, as Jennings describes it, and by the wider patterns of sin in the world, we must take time to re-evaluate the ways that our *sight* is reflected in our *sites* of community relation. And because our ways of seeing will repeatedly require re-training or re-formation , the role of artists in the renewal of our perceptions of one another and the construction and making of place comes into striking focus.

The Artist as Placemaker: Considering Artistic Vocation in the Post-Pandemic Church

If we agree that the church must begin to re-evaluate the ways that it forms sites of belonging and embodied community, given the current culture we find ourselves in, then we should rely not on old patterns of mission and discipleship but create new ones. As artists make a space for developing new

32 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

ways of seeing the world, the arts provide just such a context for Christian placemaking to occur. We will look at a few areas where this is most relevant for the post-pandemic church through the theological lenses established above.

Inhabiting Creation: Art, Embodiment, and the Image of God

As we emerge from the pandemic to find our patterns of placemaking altered, the church must re-adjust the ways it goes about creating holistic spaces for gathering as well as reaffirming the role of the body in place. Both the body and its location in space will need a transfiguring vision as we move forward. Our ways of being and belonging together require a new outlook broken open by Christ's incarnational involvement in His creation, and the arts align with this vision in a variety of significant ways.

First, the ways we value the body must be seriously reconsidered as we seek to re-engage in post-pandemic placemaking. We are not simply souls behind screens; our bodies are indispensable for the ways we go about worshiping God and forming communion with one another.[33] The body is a necessary part of the liturgical experience, a reality heightened and made more visible through our encounters with the arts.[34]

On a practical level, the arts require embodied interaction in place to be best experienced. They re-attune us to the demands of our bodily senses and the physical frameworks we inhabit. The strings of a quartet sound sweeter in the acoustic space of the church. The texture of paint and wood is better seen without the mediator of a screen. The movement of the body in dance is felt more keenly when one sees and hears the way a dancer's body cuts through the air. The arts invite us into new relationships with our own body and the bodies of others, asking us to reconsider the ways our bodies become

33 W. David O. Taylor, *A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of our Physical Bodies in Worship* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).
34 Hannah Lyn Venable, "The Weight of Bodily Presence in Art and Liturgy," in *Religions* 12 (2021): 164.

the site for divine encounter and expression of the image of God.[35]

Second, the arts performed and placed within the space of the church provide at least one reason and ground for re-entry: there is something *here* that can't be experienced elsewhere. The arts become an invitation to physical community for regular churchgoers and visitors alike, performing the role of placemaker so that others may imagine ways to creatively engage with their environments and inhabit spaces in new ways. As physical church attendance dropped in the post-pandemic era, the arts might be one way to call folks back to physical belonging with one another, inviting bodies back into the place of the church and re-engaging them in physical encounters which ignite new ways of imagining worship and community life together. Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, California, for example, enables a variety of artists and art media to enhance their liturgical experience and sense of place, inviting congregational participation and engagement with issues of the wider community to make spaces of embodied belonging.[36] Or Sojourn Arts, a ministry of Sojourn Church in Louisville, Kentucky, hosts exhibits for the community which invite visitors into a different type of liturgical space and invests in the aesthetic discipleship of the community. In early 2023, they hosted the exhibit "Urban Stations" by Steve Prince, which reflects a new perspective on the church's involvement in society by setting the stations of the cross within a contemporary context of injustice. Calling attention to the sacrificial work of Christ for bodies which continue to struggle in the violence of the contemporary world, Prince draws us into a renewed vision of the cruciform work of Christ's body in the world of places. Prince says of the project: "It is my hope that this project will resonate as a symbol of how the body works together to meditate and pray over the issues embed-

35 While, on the one hand, we certainly can encounter new ways of seeing and presence through "virtual" experience of an artwork, and on the other hand, a physical encounter with the artwork does not necessitate our being present to it or one another, a physical encounter with the artwork does at least hold the possibility of making presence known in a greater way than if one experienced it simply through a mediated means. See Venable, "The Weight of Bodily Presence in Art and Liturgy," 5.

36 Grace Cathedral, "Outreach and Community: Art and Exhibits," accessed June 1, 2024, https://gracecathedral.org/art-exhibits/.

ded within ourselves and our community—thus inspiring a call to action."[37] Imbued with the rich symbolism and attention to the body that is characteristic of Prince's work, the stations draw audiences into a liturgical meditation on the ways the church might better model the cruciform image of God in our embodied work in the world, particularly as it relates to physical bodies which are the object of various forms of injustice.

Operating on this basic level to enhance our embodied experience of physical place, while simultaneously calling attention to the church's ongoing mission to the world, the arts become sites for reflexive and active place-making to occur, both in and outside the church walls. As they encourage us to take account of the ways our embodied interactions in place reflect our calling as the image of God, they remain central to the way the post-pandemic church should re-evaluate its sense of place and seek to re-engage physical life together.

Navigating Social Sins: Art, Confession, and Prophetic Vision

A theology of place, I argued, must also account for the role of sin in our lives, which distorts our ability to see the world through the eyes of God. This is a reality which applies not only to personal practices but also to social and structural sins on a wider scale. Our personal vision is distorted, but our ways of seeing are also socially constructed. The social imaginaries with which we see are always themselves distorted by sin.[38] The problem runs deeper than our own wells of practice, and so must our forms of confession.

Our places are thus made in ways that reflect these social sins, forming sites of ongoing breakage between communities with one another and their places. Indeed, our *sense* of place must account for our *sins* of place, those socially enacted and often unselfconsciously practiced ways of being in the world that push against the work of the hospitable Spirit of God to unite creation in the beauty of His presence. The COVID-19 pandemic opened a unique setting in culture to identify and confess some of these sins: racial

37 Sojourn Arts, "Urban Stations by Steve Prince," accessed June 1, 2024, http://www.sojourn-arts.com/urban-stations-by-steve-prince/yp4hd7zc6uckouyavdq45su9psuiom

38 This term is taken from Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

inequities, patriarchal spaces of violence, and socioeconomic injustice, to name a few.[39]

Confession is a powerful and often forgotten tool of the church to engage with the world. As referenced in our framework for understanding placemaking, Jennifer McBride constructs a theology of public witness based on Bonhoeffer's theology of the confessional church, arguing that the church must communally accept and confess guilt for its own sins and for those of wider society. The church exists as the cruciform body of Christ on earth, and this reality distinguishes it not as a moral superior, but rather as that body which suffers for the sake of all, a body which exists for and belongs to the world as "vicarious representative."[40] Confession is the practice which "breaks through sin" and thus becomes the practice in which the church embodies Christ's concrete redemption.[41] This confession is not just acceptance of personal guilt, but rather focuses on "the corporate and complexly intertwined actions that found and shape our local communities, nation, and global world."[42] The church is not innocent, of course, and has been complicit in many of the great social evils of the world. It must, therefore, confess its own sins of place. But also, as the redeemed body of Christ, the body which has experienced the revelation of God in the world, it has a further responsibility—to take on guilt which is not always its own doing, but which nonetheless troubles the waters of community life in place. A major part of the church's placemaking work in the wake of the global pandemic may then be to address the failures, shifts, and sins which have occurred, and which call us into new perspectives on what it means to be the church for the world.

What if the artist could help the church identify and confess some of these sins, not simply for its own sake but as a collective and prophetic work of culture-making? The work of the artist as the confessor of social sin situates the arts as central to a new form of ecclesial mission, involving itself in joining the church to the world, of joining our bodies and spaces to one

39 For instance, take into account the protests associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and the ongoing impacts of the media attention to sexual misconduct among major Christian leaders.

40 Jennifer M. McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 127.

41 McBride, *The Church for the World*, 131.

42 McBride, *The Church for the World,* 130.

another in the power of the prophetic Spirit.[43] As confessor of social sins, the artist acts as the biblical prophets, who often took on sin in order to expose it—marrying unclean women, eating unclean food, or performing otherwise socially determined sins.[44] In the biblical prophets' performance, they take on the sin of the people in order to expose it and work toward its healing. In this way they pre-figure the work of Christ who Himself took on our sin, or became sin for us, in order to perform the work of reconciliation between God and all of creation (2 Cor. 5). The artist who mirrors their artistic vocation to Christ in this way will embody this prophetic vision. The artist who confesses social sin makes a space for the church to do the work of Christ. In the prophetic and confessional practice of artists, we can be invited to see the sins of racism, of environmental consumption and destruction, of patriarchal oppression, of socioeconomic division, and of the North American values of comfort and consumption which exert influence on our everyday practices in place.

For the church to avoid becoming a sanctuary for false moral segregation, and if it is, rather, to live into the cruciform work of Christ in the world who suffers for his creation so that it may experience restored vision, the prophetic artist must become a central figure in ecclesial communities of placed practice. This is not an invitation to elevate the artist above the rest, but for the rest to step into the vocation of the prophetic artist, who sees darkly but who attempts to see nonetheless, consistently pressing into the work of re-training our vision to see the world anew.

Kelly Latimore uses iconography to recast our vision of social sins for which the church may repent. Setting images of the Flint water crisis, migrant families at the border, or Christ breaking rifles within the visual tradition of iconography, Latimore raises questions about the church's role in responding to cultural and social sins. Latimore recasts the image of the icon, a traditional window into heaven, by depicting the sins of our generation, along with their prophetic response. A woman with a halo gives a man bottled water in *The Good Neighbor,* 2022, which depicts the Flint water crisis. A brown-skinned Jesus breaks a rifle over his knee in *Christ Breaks the*

43 Jennings speaks of joining as central and the prophetic power of the arts in "The Aesthetic Struggle and Ecclesial Vision."
44 See Hosea 1; Ezekiel 4.

Rifle, 2022. These images ask the viewer not only to see the ways that Christ is present within the sinful world, but also to convict the viewer of their own complicity in these social evils. God's presence shows up, but as in *The Good Neighbor*, it does so through the woman who goes into the brokenness of the situation. Those of us in the church who wish to offer up "thoughts and prayers" but fail to confess our own inaction and reticence to suffer for the sake of the world, fail to conform to the cruciform image of Christ. The artist breaks through our blindness to these realities in some small way, and in so doing, makes a place for the church to acknowledge, confess, and act in response to the sins of place which continue to destroy God's creation.

The embodied practices of some art forms also have the power to draw communities of difference together to explore the legacy of social sins borne by particular communities, and with which we as a wider culture continue to struggle. One significant example is the 2014 collaborative quilting project of Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana and Community Mennonite Church in Markham, Illinois.[45] The churches, one predominantly white and the other more racially diverse, came together to create a quilt that explored legacies of racism and hopeful practices for the future. Each community made quilt blocks related to histories of African culture, slavery, land removal, and civil rights. The churches then came together to piece the blocks together and participate in a series of workshops and a prayer walk. The project served not only as an embodied community building event but also a collaborative prayer and practice for the future of dealing with racial division in the church and world. Drawing on the rich legacies of quilt-making in both Mennonite and African American culture, the project was a true mix of cultural and communal inputs to reflect on both sins grounded in past senses of place and a collaborative place-based approach to community belonging and healing for the future. While this project predated the COVID-19 pandemic, how might this process help us imagine confronting the racial divisions and displacements that were brought to attention in more recent years? The project and others like it serve to show the ways that community making and joining in a process like quilt making can help illumine the ways that the Holy Spirit continues to piece together belonging through

45 Anabaptist World, "Quilting Cultures," accessed June 1, 2024, https://anabaptistworld.org/quilt-tells-the-story-of-african-americans/.

intentional and aesthetic ecclesial placemaking practice.[46]

Redeeming Sites of Belonging: Art and the (Dis)placing Vision of the Holy Spirit

If the artist is to become central to the ecclesial task of placemaking, then we must also allow room to confront the *displacing* work of the artist who, working in accordance with the Spirit, asks us to redraw the lines of community belonging and engagement for the sake of the other. The work of placemaking is not always about staying put in geographically or socially constructed spaces, the lines of which have often been drawn in ways that suffocate Christ's redemptive work from being experienced in communities and which exclude rather than join together in the unity of the Spirit. There are the physical manifestations of our sinful imagination all around us—legacies of redlining, division of communities with highways and other physical boundaries, political gerrymandering, suburban flight from urban spaces, socioeconomic apartheid and border-creation which affects education or healthcare—all of which show up in the ecclesial space as well.[47] We cannot simply be content to occupy our places as they are, to stay put within comfortable structures of our own or others' making, while other members of the community suffer. So often, churches who might be interested in the work of placemaking only exacerbate the problem, creating spaces of belonging for their own often racially or economically homogeneous communities without ever being fully joined to the places and people around them. In this case, churches in positions of geographical or social power must be open to the Spirit's task of displacement, a Spirit who uproots ways of being in the world that are aligned with the power of death while offering new life.[48]

The artist can offer alternative ways of engaging these larger social structures in place such that these structures might be questioned and uprooted to make way for deeper modes of imagining and belonging in the world. The arts become new structures through which to evaluate liturgies, practices,

46 For a theological reflection on quilting and craft practices as a form of placemaking, see ch. 3 of *Placemaking and the Arts*.

47 See Jarrell, *Our Trespasses* for the legacies of some of these in the placed life of the church.

48 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 264.

geographical boundaries, and so on, therefore beginning the new work of placemaking for a church which acknowledges and confesses its own complicity in sinful practices.

If the church seeks to cultivate new sites of belonging and patterns of placemaking for the wider world, the arts can provide a paradigmatic way of understanding how this might occur. The artist draws us into the work of reimagining the boundaries of places, inviting us to the edges and ecotones, the spaces of mixing and joining. Makoto Fujimura describes the work of the artist as the work of *mearcstapas*, the boundary-dweller, who works at the edges of culture to prophetically call attention to the world.[49] Theologians and scholars such as Brian Bantum, Willie Jennings, Emilie Townes, and Michele Saracino highlight the work of mixing, joining, horizon, or difference as the place where the Spirit works to help us encounter the hospitable presence of God.[50] The church, in other words, should be in the business of de-centering, turning its ministry to the edges and boundaries of society in order to reframe the way it sees power, control, and mastery of the landscape and culture. Artists like Steve Prince do this work by drawing our attention to communities of race, gender, or class that remain at the boundaries of society's care. They invite the church into placemaking work in areas of society which have been marked by social sins bigger than our own creation. Claremont United Methodist Church in Claremont, California creates nativity scenes that displace the ways we traditionally imagine the biblical story by setting the scene in relation to current social issues. In December of 2020, the church put Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus in front of a Black Lives Matter mural, Mary raising her hands in protest with the people represented behind her. They hold signs reading, "I can't breathe" and "Jesus wept." The art exhibit calls our attention to the ways that the Holy Family, displaced in the social conditions of their time, has something serious to say to issues of

49 Makoto Fujimura, *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for our Common Life* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2017), 58.

50 Brian Bantum, *Redeeming Mulato: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*; Emilie Townes, "Living in the New Jerusalem: The Rhetoric and Movement of Liberation in the House of Evil," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, edited by Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 89; Michele Saracino, *Being about Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

displacement, exclusion, and belonging in today's world. They also ask us to displace our own expectations about who belongs and how to do the work of hospitable joining enabled by the Spirit of God. As the pandemic opened up a cultural space to question these realities anew, churches might do better to cultivate this type of questioning in their particular places in order to invite the ongoing work of the (dis)placing Spirit as we navigate new social realities and expectations.

In 2020, a number of religious leaders and churches in Tulsa, Oklahoma sought this type of cultural learning by commissioning artists to make a series of Black Lives Matters murals painted in four church parking lots in the wake of the pandemic and BLM protests.[51] Mostly white congregations sought not only to make an affirming message about the goals of the Black Lives Matter campaign, but to also engage in active renegotiation of white cultural norms and expectations, seeking out anti-racism work for their congregations which became signified in the aesthetic renegotiation of the ecclesial outdoor space. The public facing nature of these murals marked the ways that the congregations themselves must deal with their own sense of community identity as it related to whiteness and racial injustice, but also framed that mission as public engagement for the common good.

We must choose to learn from the hard labors of artists if we are to do the necessary work of placemaking in a world divided by political, racial, socioeconomic, educational, and geographical lines which seek to keep us apart. In our hearts we know better than to allow this sort of division, and as the artist draws us into the work of love, we might expand our desires and affections to include that which we have previously seen as "other."[52] This is the place of the Spirit, who calls us out of our previous sites and sight and offers the clarifying Light for our darkened eyes to see anew.

51 Tyler Butler, "'Black Lives Matter': Tulsa religious leaders paint murals in church parking lots," *KTUL ABC 8*, Sept. 16, 2020, https://ktul.com/news/local/black-lives-matter-murals-painted-on-parking-lots.

52 On art as a work of love, see Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2006).

Conclusion: Artist, Church, and World

I argue that as we enter a new phase of life in the post-pandemic church, we should be empowered to re-evaluate and re-negotiate our ways of being in place. Scripture enjoins us to cultivate a placed imagination in partnership with the Spirit-filled work of Christ in the world. We are called to see Creation in its beauty and particularity, offering ourselves to it and making spaces for all God's creatures to dwell in hospitable and loving relationship. We are marked by this vocation of placemaking, not simply to affirm the goodness of God's world, but to work in Christ-centered and Spirit-led partnership in its reconciliation and redemption. The church, as the body of Christ in the world, offers itself up in confessional, repentant, and often sacrificial placemaking work, creating new spaces of belonging as the Spirit draws us into the particularities of our emergent places. As the arts reframe ways of understanding our own embodiment in places, the sins we have enacted there, and the boundaries of our own making, they also form a necessary partner in discipling renewed Christian imagination and practice. May we then go about our placemaking work with new eyes to see both the problems and possibilities of placed life together, listening for the work of the Spirit to transform and redeem our vision for Christ-like belonging together in the contemporary world. And may we be empowered to invites artists into this ecclesial mission and vocation, living into our work as creative placemakers made in the image of a creative, placemaking God.

Jennifer Allen Craft *is Professor of Theology and Humanities at Point University in West Point, Georgia.*

Reflection

Wandering in the Wilderness: Worship with Creation

Wendy Janzen

Even before the word COVID-19 was on our lips, the Church was entering the wilderness. As a pastor in a vibrant, mid-sized congregation, there were already signs of change. Young adults were not sticking around and were not returning when they got married or had kids. The list of people we did not see regularly at worship was growing. It was getting harder to fill volunteer roles. Giving patterns were changing. At one point, I sat down with a pen and paper and started writing a list of names of people who had been at the church when I started as pastor in 2002 but were no longer present in any regular or meaningful way a decade or so later. Some had moved away; others had drifted away (and others had drifted in). The list topped 100 names. I know this situation wasn't unique.

When I took a sabbatical from that same church in 2014, I went on a short trip to New Mexico. I started with a four-day silent retreat at a remote Benedictine monastery in the high desert, followed by a three-day retreat at a nearby Presbyterian retreat center. A month before the trip, the retreat center informed me that they had to cancel the retreat due to low attendance. Since I had already made travel plans, we arranged that I would still go to the retreat center, and they would provide a few individual sessions for me.

I arrived at the retreat center grounded from my days at the monastery, open and ready for whatever they had in store for me. The first morning, the program coordinator directed me to meet with their yoga instructor. When I found her, she said we were going to walk to a part of the grounds where they have a memorial monument, and she would lead me in a grief ritual. This took me by surprise, but I went with it. (Perhaps providentially, my last service at the monastery was a special Mass for the Dead.)

Before we started to walk, she asked me to think about someone I had lost on whom I could focus for the grief work. Seemingly, out of nowhere, the thought came to me to grieve the death of the Church. Not the death

of my particular congregation, but the death of the capital "C" Church, or Christendom.

We walked to a stunning orange cliff face with the bright sun shining on it and boulders to sit on. There, under the brilliant November sky, she walked me through seven stages of grief: Shock. Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance. Hope. I reflected on my feelings around the death of the prominence of the Church, and I realized that I had experienced most of those first six stages over my years in ministry. Now, with this invitation, I was able to move into gratitude for much of what the Church has been in my life and in society. I felt able to more fully accept this new post-Christendom reality and face the uncertain future with hope. I could say with confidence that I was grateful for what has been, and I look forward to what lies ahead, with all its unknowns. Our faith, after all, teaches that death is not final. New life follows death. Death opens space for resurrection, new life, and new possibilities.

Perhaps the Church is dying. Perhaps it is simply heading into the wilderness. Perhaps those are two sides of the same coin. Both can serve similar purposes—deep reflection and transformation. Todd Wynward, in his book *Rewilding the Way*, observes that wilderness in the Bible is always a place away from the control and powers of empire.[1] I wonder if, after centuries of Christendom's marriage of church and state (including colonialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy), we are heading into an era of wilderness wandering as we reimagine who we are independent from the encumbrances of empire. Perhaps what feels like death is an opportunity to let go of layers of dominant culture's control of the Church and venture into new, unfamiliar territory.

Wilderness is not a place of punishment or banishment. It might feel that way at times. It is disorienting, and it leaves us feeling out of control. It is when we realize we are not in control that we can see that God is in control, accompanying us in the wilderness. Wilderness is a place of renewal and reformation, of re-learning how to rely on God's provision and wisdom.

In hindsight, I believe that the grief exercise I did in the high desert created space for me to imagine a new expression of church. I certainly had not

1 Todd Wynward, *Rewilding the Way: Break Free to Follow an Untamed God* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015), 35.

been looking for an alternative. I was happy in the church I was serving, and I felt both engaged and appropriately challenged in my role as pastor. However, something new was opening up in me.

Earlier in my sabbatical, before the trip to New Mexico, a neighbor confided to me that she was done with church. She had attended a local Mennonite congregation her whole life, but now found it difficult to sit in the building listening to people talk. My first reaction was to defend the church: surely, church was more than that! She should give it another chance, and work to find ways to engage within the structure. As she went on to explain that she felt closer to God outside in nature and would rather go for a hike on a Sunday with her family, I started listening more carefully to what she was saying. I, too, could relate to feeling God's presence in nature, and I had heard that from many others. She continued, saying it would be nice to go on a hike with more than just her family, and to include 'something more,' like a spiritual element or ritual. She was not done with church completely; she was expressing a longing for something different from the way it has been.

This conversation felt very alive to me, like there was something happening beneath the surface to which I needed to attend. About a week later, I had an epiphany. My son was attending a forest school one day a week, and when I went to pick him up, a lightbulb went on in my head: If there could be such a thing as forest school, could there be such a thing as forest church, and could this be connected to the conversation I was having with my neighbor? The question fascinated and excited me. I rolled it around in my head, wondering at the possibility.

A few days later, I Googled the term "forest church" to see if someone had already experimented with the idea. Indeed, there was a website[2] based out of the UK that described fifteen or so forest churches operating there. One of the members of this group had even published a book![3] I ordered it, and my mind whirled as I read it. Groups were going outdoors on a regular basis to worship both *in* and *with* nature. This was not just transplanting regular indoor liturgy to an outdoor setting. This was engaging with God's good creation in new ways, listening with new ears, and seeing creation as

2 See www.mysticchrist.co.uk.

3 Bruce Stanley, *Forest Church: A Field Guide to Nature Connection for Groups and Individuals* (UK: Mystic Christ Press, 2013).

co-congregants and co-leaders.

I held all of this in my mind and heart as I traveled to New Mexico and found myself grieving the death of the Church. Perhaps my instinct to honour and grieve something in the Church that was no longer alive was creating space for something new to take root.

In nature, we observe that death is never final. Think of a tree that dies. When exactly is the moment of death? Its path toward death might start with a lightning strike, an insect infestation, multiple years of drought, or simply living out its projected lifespan. The process is often slow, and even as it is dying, its roots can pass on nutrients to other younger trees, helping them to grow and thrive.[4] Even once a tree has fully died, a 'dead' tree, either in the form of standing deadwood or a fallen log, actually supports more life than it did when it was alive. Finally, as it decomposes, it returns nutrients to the earth, creating fertile soil for new life. I wondered, *what if all death could be like that: a releasing of energy for future new life and growth in the larger community?*

As my sabbatical was wrapping up at the end of December, I knew that once I returned to work on January 1, life would quickly get busy. And so, on Saturday, December 27, I called my neighbor and asked if her family would like to join my family in a local park for a forest church service the next day. She said yes, and asked if she could invite a few others. On Sunday, December 28, 2014, fifteen of us met outdoors for a simple time of worship. We listened to scripture together, walked quietly through a forested area of the park and then shared our reflections from our walk, and closed with prayer. After the service, children played as we lingered. It was lovely.

Life indeed did get busy when I returned to my work as a pastor. However, thoughts about forest church kept filling my head, even as I tried to push them to the back burner. I found myself talking about it with an evangelical passion with anyone who would listen. I had many questions—how could this work in Canada, with our cold winters? How would it be promoted? Who would come? Was God calling me to do this? Did I have the gifts? I am

4 Much fascinating research has been done in recent years around trees and how they support each other, some of it popularized in books like Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Vancouver: David Suzuki Institute, 2016) and Suzanne Simard's *Finding the Mother Tree* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2021).

generally a cautious introvert. I never imagined myself as a church planter, innovator, evangelist, or prophet, and yet here I was feeling compelled to step outside the box and do something radically different.

I let all of this percolate as I researched online, read books, talked to people, and imagined what this might look like. After a year, I felt compelled to take action. I had a list of interested people I could invite to what would become the first worship gathering of Burning Bush Forest Church on March 6, 2016. It started as an experiment with few expectations and no strategic plan or budget. We simply planted the seed and tended it, watching to see what the Holy Spirit would grow. We just celebrated our eighth anniversary this year.

While I was on this journey, others were hearing similar calls. Unbeknownst to each other, a handful of pastors and lay leaders across North America were all feeling the Spirit's nudge to move worship beyond the walls of the building to connect with Creator and creation in new and meaningful ways. Through the miracle of the Internet, conferences, newsletters, and word-of-mouth, we discovered one another and were overjoyed to learn that we were not alone as pioneers. We began to meet monthly on Zoom to support one another, discuss theology, share resources and ideas, find language for what was evolving, and address common challenges. This was the birth of the Wild Church Network,[5] which, in its first seven years, grew from 6 to over 180 groups with connections to a variety of different denominations and faiths.

The polygenesis origins of the Wild Church Network remind me of the beginnings of Anabaptism and the Radical Reformation, as Anabaptism has a polygenesis origin story as well. In the early 16th Century, there were various social, political, and intellectual factors at play in different regions of Europe that "shaped the beginnings of different regional baptizing movements."[6] They were a challenge to the establishment of the Catholic Church and contributed a richer church tapestry reflecting a greater diversity among the people of God. I wonder if movements like the Wild Church Network are contributing similar challenge and richness to the Church of today.

5 See www.wildchurchnetwork.com.

6 C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997), 449.

I am not presuming that the emergence of wild church[7] is driving a church reformation, but it is certainly part of a shakeup we are seeing in the Church landscape. Phyllis Tickle has identified a pattern of upheaval in the Church every 500 years or so, starting with Jesus and moving through to the Reformation, approximately 500 years ago.[8] Though the Church is always growing, changing, and evolving, it seems like we are due for a seismic shift in the landscape of the Church.

For centuries now, Western theology has happened inside square rooms in square buildings with square windows (studies, lecture halls, libraries, offices, and sanctuaries), written in square books and now on square screens. Author Brian McLaren asks what this has done to our imagination about who God is and God's activity in the world.[9] Similarly, Christian worship in the northern hemisphere happens almost exclusively indoors in climate-controlled spaces, sometimes without any windows to the outdoors at all. Has this indoor theology and worship limited our ability to think outside the box about God and church?

Lutheran scholar Lisa Dahill teaches and writes about Christian spirituality and liturgy. In a 2023 Yale Divinity School lecture titled "Rewilding Christian Worship,"[10] Dahill speaks about the impact of centuries of indoor worship on the Church. She suggests that church walls are a symbol of a problem of disconnection with the sacredness of the natural world, a delineation between what is sacred and what is not, implying that the indoor sanctuary is sacred space, while the world outside the church doors is not.

The average North American spends the vast majority of their life indoors. We need outdoor experiences of God who meets us endlessly beyond ourselves and beyond our constructed security. We need outdoor experiences that testify to the uncontrollable power of God, that remind us that God

7 I use the term "wild church" to encapsulate this new movement that includes groups that call themselves by a variety of names including forest church, farm church, dirt church, garden church, mossy church, muddy church, cathedral of the trees, church of the wild, church of the woods, holy hikes, etc.

8 Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012).

9 Brian D. McLaren, *God Unbound: Theology in the Wild* (London, UK: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019), xv.

10 View this lecture at https://youtu.be/-3E-0wXYl8c.

is God and we are not. Moving liturgy outdoors, into the streets, the rivers, the forests, Dahill argues, makes it possible to encounter God and more-than-human beings on their own terms. Taking worship outdoors brings us into connection with the community of creation, where we experience what biblical writers describe—trees clapping their hands, heavens declaring the glory of God, stones crying out, and the Spirit descending from heaven in the form of a dove.[11]

Wild churches are responding to a deep longing among some in Western culture to bring worship back into relationship with God's beloved community of creation through worship in the open air and in connection with our watershed. There is variety among wild churches, but they all emphasize gathering outdoors, both *in* and *with* creation. It is different from simply transferring what is done indoors out into a natural setting. Nature is not only the place where worship happens, but also a co-leader and a co-congregant.

What does it mean to worship *with* creation?[12] Mennonite writer and wild church leader Sarah R. Werner, in her book *Rooted Faith*, writes, "the Bible is clear that it is not only humans who have the ability to connect with God, but each organism in the universe communicates this message."[13] For example, Psalm 98 proclaims an awake and alive earth, where all are encouraged to praise God. In Job 12:7-10 it is the animals, birds, plants, and fish who have something to say to us about God's activity in the world. This understanding, that all creation contains the wisdom of God in some way, invites us into relationship with the more-than-human world in a new way. We see the creatures around us in our outdoor worship setting—the trees, birds, waterways, insects, etc.—as co-congregants, praising God each in their own

11 See, for example, Isaiah 55:12; Psalm 19:1; Luke 19:40; and Matthew 3:16.

12 To explore more about our understanding of engaging with creation in worship, see Maxwell Kennel, "The Gospel of All Creatures: An Anabaptist Natural Theology for Mennonite Political Theology," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Volume 37 (2019); to learn about early Anabaptist worship in forests, see Isaac Villegas, "Wounded Life" *The Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2021).

13 Sarah R. Werner, *Rooted Faith: Practices for Living Well on a Fragile Planet* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2023), 34. Werner goes on to say, "God's presence is suffused in everything around us—rocks, sky, moss, and cardinals. To understand the mindset of those who crafted the Bible and the mindset of Jesus, we must also bind ourselves more deeply to the natural world," 89.

way, and in doing so, helping to lead us in worship. In wild worship, we acknowledge we are worshiping among this community of creation,[14] naming them and getting to know them. Worshiping with creation is about recognizing "that God's glory is amplified the more each creature lives fully into the divine love at work within it."[15] In doing so, we understand ourselves to be part of a larger community that includes all of God's creatures. We pay attention to what they have to show us about God's word and activity in the world.

For Burning Bush Forest Church, we have a flow of worship that begins with 'Gathering and Grounding' ourselves in the particular place where we are worshiping. We use all of our senses to become aware of where we are and who we are with, and we open ourselves to God's presence moving and speaking among us there. We then listen to scripture and other readings together, noting what comes alive in them when read outdoors. We take time for silence—a personal 'Wandering and Wondering' time, usually thirty minutes in length. During that time, we pay attention to how God speaks in different ways, through scripture and through creation, and we open ourselves to insights we are invited to take with us. From there, we return to a time of sharing with one another about what we noticed and heard. (These three movements make up an interactive, multi-voiced, three-part 'sermon': 1) scripture and readings, 2) silent reflection and listening, and 3) sharing with each other.) We sometimes share communion together at this point, offering the first piece of bread and the last drops of juice to the earth as recognition of God's love for all God created, and our fellowship with all God's creatures. We close with a blessing.

---

14 The term "community of creation" is one I was first introduced to in the writings of Richard Bauckham, particularly in *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010). Bauckham draws on the works of scholars like Aldo Leopold and Wendell Berry, and uses this term to describe ecosystems in which humans and the rest of nature are inextricably interconnected. "What we have in common with the lilies of the field is not just that we are creatures of God, but that we are fellow members of the community of God's creation, sharing the same Earth, affected by the same processes of the Earth, affecting the processes that affect each other, with common interests at least in life and flourishing, with the common end of glorifying the Creator and interdependent in the ways we do exactly that." I have since also heard the term used by Indigenous author and leader Randy Woodley (see https://cac.org/daily-meditations/community-of-creation/).

15 Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 78.

Victoria Loorz, a co-founder of the Wild Church Network, said, "I longed for church to be a place where Mystery is experienced, not explained."[16] Embodied and experiential worship, immersed in the community of creation particular to our watershed is what we are aiming for at Burning Bush. The Wild Church Network describes worship this way: "gatherings offer opportunities for contemplation, grief and praise, movement and song, solo wandering and wondering, advocacy, ecological restoration and activism on behalf of and in collaboration with the beloved others in our watersheds."[17]

It seems that more and more people are looking for an expression of church that does all this. In this time of multiple interconnected environmental crises, I believe many established churches are recognizing that this is the existential issue of our time. Setting aside one Sunday a year to talk about creation care, or having an outdoor service that looks exactly like an indoor one, is not enough. Churches need to address the deep climate anxiety people are carrying and offer a place of grounding, grace, hope, inspiration, and action from a faith perspective.

I am noticing Mennonite congregations and organizations working at this in various ways. Mennonite Church Eastern Canada adopted a new Identity Statement in 2022 that states their purpose is to "…come together as a regional church to: Energize congregations in worship, discipleship and mission; Encourage leaders of hope, vision and transformation; Embody God's reconciling ministry *for all creation*"[18] (emphasis added). That same year, Mennonite Church Canada published a document called "The Eco-Mission of the Church in a Critical Time."[19] Both levels of church have recently added staff time to support and encourage congregations in engaging the climate crisis in deep and ongoing ways.[20] A new Mennonite organization, the Anabaptist Climate Collaborative, offers programs for congregations and pastors

16 Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 4.

17 Wild Church Network, accessed February 17, 2024, www.wildchurchnetwork.com/.

18 Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, "Identity," accessed April 23, 2024, mcec.ca/res/pub/Documents/Identity/ENGLISH.pdf.

19 Mennonite Church Canada, "Climate Action," accessed April 23, 2024, www.mennonitechurch.ca/climate-action.

20 Mennonite Church Eastern Canada hired me as Eco-Minister in January of 2022. Mennonite Church Canada hired a Climate Action Coordinator in November 2022.

to learn how to respond to the climate crisis in their congregational setting from a pastoral perspective.[21]

In this post-pandemic place of wilderness and uncertainty, shifts are happening in the Church. New expressions of church like wild church are emerging and transforming the ecclesiological landscape. Established churches are paying more attention to the environmental contexts of our time, including our relationship and God's relationship with all of creation. Wilderness is tough to navigate and presents challenges beyond what we believe we can overcome. It is also a crucible for true transformation, as it requires much from us.

What do I hope our time in the wilderness achieves? I hope for a shift from theology and ecclesiology that is anthropocentric to eco-centric: a Church that brings us into communion with God's beloved community of creation. I dream of a Church whose health is reflected in the health of the river where baptisms are performed. A Church where young people learn to be disciples of Christ and of their watershed.[22] A Church where God's Incarnation, expressed in a particular way through Jesus, is also understood as extending to all of creation.[23]

It is exciting, and daunting, to be living and ministering at such a time as this. Pastoring Burning Bush Forest Church gives me hope that wilderness leads us to renewal and rebirth. I live in anticipation of what our God of resurrection hope has in store for the Church as participants in God's reconciling ministry for all creation.

Wendy Janzen *is Eco-Minister at Mennonite Church Eastern Canada and pastor of Burning Bush Forest Church in Kitchener, Ontario.*

21 Anabaptist Climate Collaborative, www.anabaptistclimate.org

22 Ched Myers, "A Critical, Contextual, and Constructive Approach to Ecological Theology and Practice," in *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, ed. Ched Myers (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2016), 2, 16ff.

23 Christine Valters Paintner, *Earth Our Original Monastery: Cultivating Wonder and Gratitude through Intimacy with Nature* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2020), xii. "God did not become flesh for one time only; Jesus teaches us that the Divine Presence in all created things has been at work from the beginning of time and will continue to the end of time."

Reflection

Reflections on Benjamin Goossen's Critique of Mennonites and National Socialism

Erwin J. Wiens

The shameful "cover up" of Mennonite complicity in Nazi horrors, propagated for decades by venerated spokesmen like Walter Quiring and B. H. Unruh, has been challenged by several Mennonite historians over the past three decades. Perhaps the most compelling critique has come from Gerhard Rempel in his essay in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*.[1] But it was the virtual MCC forum at the University of Winnipeg in October 2021 that brought this subject to the attention of a much wider public. MCC assembled twelve historians to present their findings, then published them in the Fall 2021 issue of *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice*.[2] Their evidence demands a painful reckoning.

Benjamin Goossen was one of those historians, and he seems to have become their standard bearer. His book, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*, was published in 2017,[3] and during the last seven years he has published at least fourteen essays and blog posts on this subject. He has obviously made an enormous contribution to our knowledge of this period based on the evidence he has unearthed in the Nazi archives in Berlin, in the archives of the Allied refugee agencies in Germany after the war, and in the MCC archives in Canada and the United States, among other sources. However, his analysis of the evidence differs from that of some of his colleagues by focusing on the collective guilt of Mennonites.

Chosen Nation narrates a history of Mennonitism from the Reformation to the present, but unlike many other histories, Goossen's focus is not

1 Gerhard Rempel, "Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetration," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84 (October 2010): 507–549.

2 *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice* 9, no. 4 (Fall 2021). https://mcc.org/media/document/130171.

3 Benjamin Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

on how the core tenets of Mennonite faith persisted through the centuries under various political and cultural pressures. Rather, in spite of the revered accounts of Mennonite martyrs who had been cruelly executed for their alleged heresy, Goossen argues that Mennonite beliefs, shaped by time and place, had always been malleable, and therefore, "current beliefs and practices cannot be meaningfully measured against those of the religion's earliest practitioners."[4] Genealogy, however, is not malleable, and therefore "the religion's primary vector was understood to be heredity, not belief."[5] Accordingly, Goossen's primary vector in *Chosen Nation* traces the emergence of a 'Racial Church' (the title of Chapter Five), and by the end of the 19th century, Mennonites regarded themselves as a *Volk* onto themselves, a German Volk, a 'nation' without borders, identified by their genealogy, not their beliefs and practices. Pacifism was only one issue among others that had to adapt to time and place, both in Europe and throughout the Mennonite diaspora. Thus, during the Nazi period, Mennonites were not only tolerated but deemed to be model Aryans by virtue of their racial purity. As such, they were showered with favours and privileges, and hence, Mennonites' collective guilt. Indeed, Goossen concludes with the rather startling statement that the Nazis' images of Mennonitism "helped to propel the slaughter of much of Europe's Jewish population."[6]

Much of Goossen's evidence for the Nazis' high regard for Mennonites as model Aryans is drawn from archival records of Nazi propaganda. This is acknowledged (occasionally with a cautionary gesture) in *Chosen Nation* and in several of Goossen's essays and blog posts.[7] It is well known that Mennonites in Ukraine (and millions of others in the Soviet Union in 1941) regarded the German invaders as their liberators from Stalinist terror. American historian Timothy Snyder begins his highly acclaimed book, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, by frankly stating that not till the invasion

4 Ibid., 7.
5 Ibid., 8.
6 Ibid, 7, 8, and 146.
7 See for example "Measuring Mennonitism: Racial Categorization in Nazi Germany and Beyond," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 225-246; "'A Small World Power": How the Nazi Regime Viewed Mennonites,' *Mennonite Quarterly Review* XCII (April 2018): 173-206; "Terms of Racial Endearment: Nazi Categorization of Mennonites in Ideology and Practice 1929-1945" *German Studies Review* 44.1 (2021): 27–46.

of Poland in September 1939 did Hitler's killings begin to rival Stalin's:

> The Soviet Union was the only state in Europe carrying out policies of mass killing. Before the Second World War, in the first six and a half years after Hitler came to power, the Nazi regime killed no more than about ten thousand people. The Stalinist regime had already starved millions and shot the better part of a million.[8]

It should not surprise us that when the Nazis invaded, Mennonites and millions of others thought they had less to fear from the Nazis than from Stalinist Communism. Nor should it surprise us that during the two years of Nazi occupation, many collaborated by becoming involved in the local economy and certain administrative tasks. But it has also become indisputable that collaboration often involved much more, including active involvement in the notorious *SS Einsatzgruppen*, the Nazi killing squads.[9]

From the late 1940s and into the current century, accounts appeared in German-language newspapers that acknowledged such atrocities but would often maintain that a Mennonite name was not conclusive evidence that these were Mennonites.[10] They were renegades. They argued that long before the Nazi invasion, these thugs had already loudly disavowed any Mennonite affiliation, which they regarded as a hindrance to their careers in the local Communist agencies or to admission as a student at a technical institute. Typically when the Nazis arrived, they would switch their ideology from Communist to Fascist with alacrity and become the most eager and most useful recruits for the *Einsatzgruppen*.

Goossen, like most of his fellow historians, is sceptical of the accuracy of many of these accounts, and for him the distinction between Mennonites and renegades with Mennonite names does not vitiate their Mennonite

8 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), x-xi.

9 The previously cited essay by Gerhard Rempel, "Mennonites and the Holocaust," is one of the most compelling accounts of Mennonite involvement in Nazi killing squads.

10 For example, see Anne Konrad, *Red Quarter Moon: A Search for Family in the Shadow of Stalin* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 149-160, and notes 21 to 58. See also Harry Loewen and James Urry, "A Tale of Two Newspapers: *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* (1880-2007) and *Der Bote* (1924-2008)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review,* LXXXVI (April 2012).

genes, or necessarily absolve Mennonites of collective guilt. One of Goossen's most dramatic blog posts that seeks to demonstrate this point is entitled "How a Nazi Death Squad Viewed Mennonites."[11] It portrays a young woman, Amalie Reimer, whose brief career as an SS agent "illustrates how the concept 'Mennonite' held coveted value during the Holocaust."[12] She had been an agent of the Soviet secret police (the NKVD) when the Germans invaded, and normally that would have been reason enough to have her summarily shot. Yet she volunteered her services to a commando unit of *Einsatzgruppe C* and managed to persuade an SS Commandant that she had been forced to work for the NKVD under threat of imprisonment. She had described herself as a typical Mennonite with a happy childhood in a Mennonite community, until that life was shattered by Soviet Communism. That apparently saved her. Goossen reports that it would have been very easy for the SS to discover that her story was false, because among Mennonites in the Chortitza area, she was hated and despised: "they saw her as a hardened communist who had personally betrayed many fellow ethnic Germans."[13] But her SS interrogators were eager to believe her.[14]

Amalie Reimer may appear as a textbook example of a renegade with a Mennonite name, as eager to commit atrocities for an SS killing squad as for her former Soviet masters, but for Goossen her case demonstrates that Mennonite complicity was not limited to a handful of disgusting thugs. That she so easily persuaded her SS interrogators of her blatantly false story demonstrates collective Mennonite complicity. Her claim that she was forced to be an NKVD agent would have been dismissed with derision, even if she had come from one of the non-Mennonite *Volksdeutsche* colonies. But as a Mennonite, she was believable. According to Goossen, the Nazis held Mennonites in such high regard because they had always kept themselves racially pure, free of contamination by intermarriage. He quotes an SS report that concluded, "the Mennonites make the consistently best physical and spiritual impression of all the ethnic Germans assessed so far."[15] Goossen does

11 "Anabaptist Historians," January 16, 2021, https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2021,/01/16/how-a-nazi-death-squad-viewed-mennonites/, (accessed April 28, 2022).
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.

pose a cautionary question: "To what extent can historians trust the sociological evaluations of a genocidal murder squad?"[16] He acknowledges, for example, that the Nazis' "fanatical hatred of Jews" led them "to drastically misunderstand the basic dynamics of communist society."[17] Nevertheless, he concludes that the lesson to be derived from the case of Amalie Reimer is that "To be within the Mennonite fold during the Holocaust was to wield influence."[18] This, and the privileges it entailed, is deemed adequate evidence to collectively incriminate them.

Some of Goossen's other blog posts that rely on Nazi propaganda to incriminate Mennonites collectively seem to be straining for effect. For example, his blog post entitled "The Kindergarten and the Holocaust"[19] attempts to portray the mutual affection between Mennonites and German soldiers. It begins as follows: "Children's eyes sparkled in the candlelight. This was the first time many had seen a Christmas tree, aglow in the Einlage kindergarten in December 1942. Soldiers handed out wooden toys. They had spent weeks carving them—model houses, schools, churches, city halls, trucks, and trains—while convalescing at the military hospital in this Mennonite village in southeastern Ukraine."[20] This account seems too cartoonish to merit discussion, but a reply to Goossen's blog post by another historian, James Urry, does merit discussion:

> Goossen relies totally on reports in Nazi German language newspapers published in Ukraine during the Nazi occupation. Although he suggests scholars must see the newspapers as examples of propaganda and use them with caution, this does [not] prevent him from drawing uncritical conclusions from them. He also uses the newspapers to add additional support for his earlier views that the story of the Mennonite past in wartime Ukraine is "chilling," must be exposed and used by today's Mennonites "to root out our anti-Semitic narratives." This is not history intended to understand the past, but

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 *Anabaptist Historians*, December 11, 2018, https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2018/12/11/the-kindergarten-and-the-holocaust/, (accessed April 28, 2022).
20 Ibid.

> another example of propaganda to promote a moral crusade in the present.[21]

This judgment is not so easily dismissed.
In *Chosen Nation*, Goossen acknowledges that by 1938, "nearly half of all Mennonite men in Ukraine had been arrested"[22] and either shot or banished. In the Chortitza colony, out of a population of 11,000 Mennonites in 1914, "more than 20% were murdered, banned, starved to death, or deported by 1941."[23] But since this narrative of suffering has been used to mitigate Mennonite collaboration with the Nazis, Goossen's reference to it is guarded. As such, it ranks as #1 in his list of "Five Myths about Mennonites and the Holocaust."[24]

For some readers, twenty years of Stalinist terror may nevertheless mitigate the guilt of Mennonites in Ukraine, but nothing comparable can mitigate the collaboration of many Mennonites in Prussia and the Danzig area. Some had joined the Nazi Party as early as 1934, and Goossen reports that wealthy Mennonite landowners and factory owners were among those who availed themselves of Jewish slave labor. And they cannot be dismissed as renegades with Mennonite names. Some were esteemed leaders in their communities, usually middleclass urban communities. Again, Goossen's focus is on the Nazis' image of Mennonites as model Aryans, but here there is more emphasis on how prominent Mennonite figures avidly promoted this image. His judgment against them is sweeping: "The positive treatment of Mennonites in Nazi-dominated Europe must be understood in direct relation to the systematic annihilation of the continent's Jewish population."[25]

---

21 James Urry, "Three Thoughts on 'The Kindergarten and the Holocaust,'" reply to https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2018/12/11/the-kindergarten-and-the-holocaust/. Internal quotes in Urry's response appear near the end of Goossen's original post.
22 Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 150.
23 Ibid.
24 Goossen, "Five Myths about Mennonites and the Holocaust," *Anabaptist Historians,* (June 14, 2018) https://anabaptisthistorians.org/2018/06/14/five-myths-about-mennonites-and-the-holocaust/, (accessed April 28, 2022).
25 Benjamin Goossen, "'A Small World Power': How the Nazi Regime Viewed Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review,* XCII, no. 2 (April 2018), 175.

Class tensions now complicate the ideology of race. Already in the 1870s, "confessional advocates had cast their theology in a nationalist mold" [26] to promote their own agendas." Pacifism did not suit their agenda, so it was readily foresworn. Goossen describes these "activists" as "urban, affluent, and well educated."[27] Hinrich van der Smissen is one such activist, who "sought to sway state authorities, a wider public, and their own congregations on a host of political and theological issues."[28] The fact that Mennonites had staunchly maintained their German language and culture wherever they settled was indisputable proof that Germany was the *Vaterland* of all Mennonites.[29] The progressive activists had formed a Union of Mennonite Congregations in 1886 to promote their vision of "complete assimilation" to a "non-state national church," but, as Goossen explains, it was not Mennonites "who would abandon their distinctiveness and move into a subsuming German whole; it was the German nation, rather, that would become Mennonite."[30] It is not surprising that these activists at first had little success converting most of their congregants to this vision. Even more bizarre was the activists' contention that the stubbornness of conservative rural congregants was attributable to their "religious indifference."[31] Goossen concedes that "those most adamantly opposed to the Union counted among the country's most conscientious, strictly observant members."[32] So, the accusation of "religious indifference" more accurately represented "national indifference."[33]

But the aftermath of World War 1 and the German defeat "consolidated the idea of a global Mennonite community"[34] and enhanced the influence of the activists in Germany. Kurt Kauenhowen, "a leading Mennonite genealogist," drew upon a decade of Nazi "scientific" research to show that Mennonites were more Aryan than the average German, and therefore "unusually

26 Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 64.
27 Ibid., 12.
28 Ibid., 13.
29 Ibid., 13.
30 Ibid., 70.
31 Ibid., 71.
32 Ibid., 71.
33 Ibid., 72.
34 Ibid., 120.

predisposed to Nazi race laws."[35] Fritz Kliewer, a raving antisemite from the Paraguayan diaspora, argued that Mennonites were an agrarian people, "imbuing their bloodlines with distinctive traits" and that missionaries "could spread Christianity, but never Anabaptism."[36] Goossen takes care to inform his readers that the rants of these activists "were often better barometers of what their coreligionists did not believe."[37] Given this, one might expect that Goossen would exempt the stubbornness of the indifferent congregants, but he seems reluctant to do so because, while they might have opposed the vision of a non-state national church, they too were beneficiaries of the Nazis' favored treatment of Mennonites. And moreover, they too regarded themselves as a "nation" unto themselves, whether in Germany or throughout the Mennonite diaspora.

A fundamental tenet of Goossen's critique of Mennonites is that they have always been fascists, as the title of his book, *Chosen Nation*, boldly proclaims, and this is the implicit or explicit argument of many of his academic articles and blog posts.[38] His introductory remark in *Chosen Nation* states his basic premise: since their inception after the Protestant Reformation, Mennonites have produced a myriad of practices and beliefs, and because of "the malleability of both religious doctrine and national precepts, static understandings of collective identity are untenable."[39] Whether among horse-and-buggy Mennonites or among urban professionals, Mennonite beliefs have always been contested, but what was not contested, wherever they settled, is that they regarded themselves as a distinct *Volk*, based on their genealogy.[40] For Goossen, this is an adequate criterion for the accusation of fascism.

Goossen seems less deterred by the fact that definitions of fascism have also been contested, not least among respected historians. Normally the

35 Benjamin Goossen, "From Aryanism to Anabaptism: Nazi Race Science and the Language of Mennonite Ethnicity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (April 2016), 140.
36 Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 142–43.
37 Ibid., 15.
38 For example, see "Mennonites in Latin America: A Review of the Literature," *Conrad Grebel Review* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 236-265; "From Aryanism to Anabaptism: Nazi Race Science and the Language of Mennonite Ethnicity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (April 2016), 135-140; "Mennonite Fascism," *Anabaptist Historians,* April 27, 2017.
39 Goossen, *Chosen Nation*, 4.
40 Ibid., 4–8.

term designates the most vile political ideology imaginable and conveys maximum opprobrium. It is usually associated with aggressive militarism, death cults, the *Führerprinzip*, and a murderous racism. But for Goossen, evidence of an exclusive ethnic collectivity seems sufficient. He concedes that a "stable definition" of Mennonite fascism may not be possible given its "myriad evolutions," but nevertheless alleges that in Nazi Germany "public perception had so tightly intertwined Mennonitism with Aryanism" that it "helped propel the internment, dehumanization, and slaughter of much of Europe's Jewish population."[41] And while some "individual Mennonites" did commit heinous crimes, "more often it was the broader idea of Mennonitism—a joint racial and spatial construct—that helped facilitate genocide."[42] It is remarkable that these accusations, on this basis, have not provoked more strenuous dissent among Mennonite historians.

Aileen Friesen seems to be one exception. In a recent article in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review,* Friesen cites nine instances where Goossen's data is skewed.[43] For example, in the Fall 2021 issue of *Intersections*, Goossen describes how MCC had duped the IRO into funding the first ship of refugees to Paraguay.[44] Friesen checked his sources and found that he had inflated the amounts. She also writes: "It should be noted that scholars can only identify several dozen specific perpetrators, a far cry from Goossen's tens of thousands of Mennonite collaborators."[45] In Goossen's contribution to the Fall 2021 issue of *Intersections*, he accuses the MCC of facilitating the escape of Nazi war criminals, and portrays it as little different from the underground ratlines that helped high-ranking Nazis escape to Argentina and Paraguay—except that MCC conducted its illegal activity under the guise of a relief agency.[46]

The crux of this story (as Goossen and others have explained) is that Mennonites fleeing the Soviet Union had been granted German citizenship

41 Goossen, "From Aryanism to Anabaptism," 139.

42 Goossen, *Chosen Nation,*145–146, 157.

43 Aileen Friesen, "Screening Refugees: Mennonite Central Committee and the Postwar Environment," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 96 (July 2022): 381-416.

44 Ibid., 400.

45 Ibid., 400 and 383. See also other references to Goossen's work on pages 385, 401, 404, 408, 409, 410, and 414.

46 Benjamin Goossen, "MCC and Nazism, 1929–1955," *Intersections,* 9, no. 4: 3-12.

when they crossed into the Reich at the end of their trek. According to the international refugee agencies in Germany, this proved they were Nazi collaborators, not victims, and therefore they were excluded from the "deserving" refugees who were entitled to Allied aid. But the Soviet Union claimed they were Soviet citizens, and as such subject to repatriation and punishment as traitors. Peter Dyck and other MCC staff therefore claimed that these refugees had accepted German citizenship "under duress."[47] They were neither German nor Soviet citizens but a separate nation unto themselves, of Dutch ancestry. Goossen regards this as a shameful ploy. In an earlier essay, he had already argued that it amounted to a "systematic project to cover up the collaboration of a large percentage of the confession's population with National Socialism."[48]

Peter Dyck knew too well that the Allied refugee agencies recognized no category other than "national" in determining who was entitled to certain rights, including the right to remain alive. He had no recourse but to cast his defense of Mennonites in the only terms they deemed relevant—race or nationality. Goossen himself acknowledges this when he writes, "in an era when certain political proclivities like fascism and militarism were often ascribed to entire national communities, anyone considered to be of German descent was considered party to war guilt."[49] Yet it is this political proclivity that Goossen now invokes to accuse Mennonites collectively of being a party to war guilt.

There is no disputing that some Mennonites had committed ghastly crimes, and that some of these found their way to MCC refugee centres after the war, wringing their hands and telling stories about how they had been forced to join the Nazis. And some of them were among those whose escape to Paraguay and eventually to Canada was facilitated by the MCC. How accountable can we hold the MCC for that? Aileen Friesen gives a more nuanced account of the "evolving set of principles" that confronted MCC workers "in the cacophony of post-war Europe."[50] Rules and the interpretation of the rules varied month to month, from country to country, and from agent

47 Ibid., 8.
48 Goossen, "From Aryanism to Anabaptism," 160.
49 Ibid., 150.
50 Friesen, "Screening Refugees," 385.

to agent. In that milieu, MCC's relatively stable criterion was to save lives.

In the turmoil after the German surrender in May 1945, historians have calculated that there were at least eleven million refugees in Germany fleeing the Soviet Union and the eastern provinces of the Reich, fleeing into, not out of the country that had lost the war and lay in ruins. They were a huge problem for the allied British, American, and Soviet military administrations. Another three million Germans had also become homeless after British/American carpet bombing had reduced their cities to piles of rubble. Mennonites accounted for only a small fraction of these. Roughly 35,000 had begun the eight-month trek out of southern Ukraine in the fall of 1943 when the German army began its retreat, of whom only 12,000 made it as far as the MCC refugee centers and eventually to Paraguay and Canada. The rest, mostly widows and children, were "legally" repatriated to prison camps in the Siberian gulag alongside millions of other Soviet nationals. Goossen acknowledges that many did not survive their first winter there, and the rest faced decades of hunger and other deprivations. Friesen seems to think that in the chaos after the war, with millions of refugees scrambling for relief, saving 12,000 lives was more urgent than prosecuting known and unknown criminals. Goossen isn't so sure.

Erwin J. Wiens *taught English Literature at the University of Ottawa and Heritage College in Gatineau, Quebec.*

Book Review Essay

Not Killing Someone "Frees Up a Relationship Generally"[1]

L. Lamar Nisly

Peter Heller. *The Dog Stars: A Novel*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2012.

One challenge of living during a pandemic is facing so many unknowns. Peter Heller's description of writing *The Dog Stars* (2012), a novel set after a pandemic, makes clear his love of uncertainty, at least when he is writing. Though he had previously written nonfiction, largely for outdoors magazines, Heller embraces the unpredictability of fiction. "This time I wanted to be surprised. Like kayaking a river you've never done: coming around a tight bend and not knowing what would be there—a pool, a waterfall, a bear drinking, a battalion of Yanomami. I wanted to be surprised, shocked, thrilled, awed. Maybe terrified. When I set out to write *The Dog Stars* I began with a first line and wrote into the story."[2] Or as he says another time, "You know, I didn't plan any of it. I started with the first line and just let it rip and at some point I realized I was writing a postapocalyptic novel."[3]

The novel is set at a small airport in Colorado, where the protagonist, Hig, lives somewhat uncomfortably with Bangley, a survivalist whose approach is to shoot first and ignore any questions. Hig's wife, Melissa, died nine years earlier during the flu pandemic, and he then escaped Denver in his 1956 Cessna plane. He had earned his living as a contractor, and he loves to hunt and fish; these useful survival skills are explained in the novel. More

1 Peter Heller, *The Dog Stars: A Novel* (New York: NY: Vintage Books, 2012), 166.
2 Interview with Mark Stevens, "Q&A with Peter Heller—*The Dog Stars*." *Don't Need a Diagram* (blog), August 5, 2012, https://markhstevens.wordpress.com/2012/08/05/q-a-with-peter-heller-the-dog-stars/, accessed July 23, 2020.
3 Interview with Ken Salikof, "The Next Adventure," *Publisher's Weekly* 259, no. 28, 9 (2012): 35.

interesting for the novel, though, are Hig's probing questions, his internal reflections about what gives life meaning—which seem to connect to his poetry writing and reading. Hig and Bangley have created a reasonably stable life together, with enough to eat and a plan to protect their perimeter. And yet, Hig is unsettled, feeling his many losses and desiring connection with more people. *The Dog Stars* wrestles with questions of meaning, with suggestions of religious possibilities. It queries the goal of survival at any price, with a nearby community of Mennonites hinting at an alternative to Bangley's approach. And the novel beautifully embodies the power of being in community, the necessity of touch, as humans seek to find a way forward following catastrophe.

The Dog Stars is not an overtly religious text, but there are hints and resonances with questions related to faith. As such, this novel connects to the post-secular conversation in literature, an approach that explores religious suggestions in fiction that is not explicitly engaged with faith questions. Heller does not claim a particular religious stance, though he describes an experience at the Iowa Writers' Workshop where he had earned his MFA. The poet Jorie Graham said that every poem begins with a question, so rather than asking others, she said they should "ask God." Heller continues, "So before I begin a new book, I always pray. And my god is probably different than your god or anyone else's. My god is in the wind. In the sound of water."[4]

In the novel, Hig makes several references to the Bible. On the first page, he questions the reader: "Did you ever read the Bible? I mean sit down and read it like it was a book? Check out Lamentations. That's where we're at, pretty much. Pretty much lamenting. Pretty much pouring our hearts out like water" (3). Much later in the novel, Hig remembers a conversation with a nondenominational church member from Nebraska that took place before the pandemic. The man says, "We just follow the Bible word for word...Word for word you can't go wrong. Shook his head nice smile. I'd be crazy to disbelieve him" (157). Hig remembers contemplating the man's ideas that one could follow the words like hopping from rock to rock in a river: "Just follow

4 Alison Borden, "Portrait of a Writer: Denver's Peter Heller Talks about His Work and the Life of a Best-selling Author," *The Denver Post* (Denver, CO), Feb. 2, 2018, https://www.denverpost.com/2018/02/02/denver-peter-heller-profile-celine-author-movies-2018/, accessed June 11, 2020.

them, man. Breadcrumbs right to God" (157). From his thoughts about this conversation, it is clear that Hig even then finds this view simplistic. He ponders, "Maybe there is a different translation for *meek*. Maybe it's not the meek who inherit, maybe it is the simple. Not will *inherit* the earth, they already own it" (157). Yet Hig challenges his new acquaintance, noting that he has just read Lamentations and finds it like *Mad Max*, with "women eating their babies, everybody dying" (157). Though the Nebraskan recommends that Hig focuses on the "Right Side of the Bible," or the New Testament, Hig reflects in the present that "We should have all paid more attention to the Left Side, I am thinking now. The Wrong Side, the Side Where Shit Goes Really Really Wrong" (157). Though references to scripture happen infrequently in the novel, these passages show that Hig is familiar with the Bible. He also wrestles with the implications of scripture, considering how the passages may relate to his experience in life. Twice invoking Lamentations provides an appropriate context following the massive loss of life. While relatively minor, these passages do provide a context for noticing religious implications in the novel.

Much more prevalent in Hig's experience is the awe-inspiring, almost sacred role of the natural world. When he tires of the space that he and Bangley share, Hig heads out to the nearby mountain to hunt and fish for food—though he admits, "Mostly I just want to go up there. It feels like church, hallow and cool" (7). In that space, as he fishes, "I breathed and thanked something that was not exactly God, something that was still here" (57), suggesting that he largely feels deserted by God. In a scene that seems almost to invoke Hemingway, Hig describes the ritual of his fishing, the joy and calm that it provides him: "All of this, these motions, the sequence, the quiet, the rill and gulp, the riffle of the stream and the wind soughing the needles of the tall trees. As I strung the rod. I had known it all hundreds, probably now thousands of times. It was ritual that required no thought. Like putting on socks. Except this ritual put me in touch with something that felt very pure" (58). These meditative passages provide a depth and period of reflection in a novel that also includes intense action scenes. For Hig, these quiet times standing in an icy stream offer a sort of religious experience. He remembers a time when he was fishing with his wife, and he felt "my heart might just burst. Bursting is different than breaking. Like there is no way to contain

how beautiful. Not it either, not just beauty. Something about how I fit" (12). This sense that the natural setting helps ground him carries throughout the novel, offering a hint of the divine in a world devastated by disease and violence.

Part of Hig's need to escape the airport that he and Bangley share is his discomfort with Bangley, a "really mean gun nut" (6). While Hig acknowledges that Bangley's sharpshooting and tactical knowledge have protected him many times, he remains unsettled by Bangley's assumption that anyone in their vicinity needs to be killed. Hig interprets Bangley's approach to life as "*Never ever negotiate*" (43) and "kill just about everything that moves" (52); perhaps most concerning to Hig is his suspicion that for Bangley, killing would-be attackers was "like sport" (9). Hig also recognizes the loneliness inherent in Bangley's position: "Follow Bangley's beliefs to the end and you get ringing solitude. Everybody out for themselves, even to dealing death, and you come to a complete aloneness" (97). Hig is no pacifist and readily participates in defending the airport, but he remains uneasy with Bangley's cavalier attitude toward shooting other humans.

In that context, Hig's interactions with a nearby Mennonite community seem to take on greater resonance. Though Bangley dismisses them as Druids and would like to wipe them out, Hig maintains a connection to the Mennonites and provides them with supplies. During the flu pandemic, some people developed a contagious blood disease that left them weakened. The Mennonites have this disease, so marauding bands have avoided their area for fear of infection, allowing them to survive. Though they play a relatively small role in the novel, the presence of this community of nonviolent believers suggests a counterpoint to the survive-at-any-cost approach that Bangley represents. Connecting with this gentle community has provided an essential human connection for Hig, as he provides them fresh food and fixes small mechanical problems. The families stay back from Hig to protect him from their illness and show a "kind of embarrassing gratitude" when he helps them (19). Yet he acknowledges, "Truth is I do it as much for me as them: it kinda loosens something inside me. That nearly froze up" (19). As he defends his interactions with the Mennonites to Bangley, Hig says, "Who knows maybe one day *we* will need *them*. We can't know" (22). While Bangley contemptuously dismisses this possibility, the novel quietly rein-

forces this idea. A poet whom Hig cites at various points is William Stafford, a pacifist who refused to fight in WWII but rather participated in Civilian Public Service. Through his interactions in CPS with others from the historic peace churches, Stafford learned about Anabaptists and taught at related colleges. Jeff Gundy explains that Stafford "believed, in the best Anabaptist tradition, that in the long term active peacemaking and concern for the whole of creation is not just a nice, impractical idea, but the only plausible way that human beings can survive and thrive on this planet." Hig's admiration for Stafford's work, his ongoing connection with the Mennonites, and his questioning of Bangley's shoot-first mindset provide an important undercurrent in the novel, suggesting that if humans are to do more than stay alive, they need to learn from a peaceful community. Later in the novel, when Hig decides he must leave the safety of the airport to find other human connection, he encounters a father and adult daughter living in a valley. Rather than taking Bangley's approach, he works to show them that he is no threat and realizes how it changes the dynamic: "It was this new relationship to a person of any gender: that I was under no obligation to kill them...Amazing how not having to kill someone frees up a relationship generally" (166). This subtheme throughout the novel serves to enrich and complicate assumptions about surviving in a postapocalyptic world.

Hig's ironically serious comment about the relational possibilities present if he does not kill a person points to a significant theme throughout the novel: the centrality of human interaction and community for living a whole life. Heller notes in an interview, "we're blessed with being able to make these connections on the way, in our lives. But sometimes those connections can feel frayed, and we can feel alienated and not understood. And so I think it's almost just a figure for, or an analogy to just the challenge of being a human being in some ways. It's just the apocalyptic situation throws all that stuff into starker relief."[5] These human connections, even in a world with a tiny population and with dangerous marauding bands, become the central focus of the novel.

As Hig looks to form relationships in various situations, the novel reveals both the possibilities and the dangers inherent in opening oneself to

5 Interview with Dave Davies, "Looking to the 'Stars' for a Reason to Live." Fresh Air (NPR), August 13, 2012. Transcript. EBSCOhost.

others. Several years earlier, Hig had heard a faint radio transmission from Grand Junction, the "voice older, kind, concerned" (36), and this voice has remained in his mind, suggesting the possibility of another human connection. So Hig makes the decision to fly away from the safety of his airport, hoping to find other people—and a location to refuel for his return. He stumbles upon the protected valley where the father and daughter live. Though their initial interaction is fraught with the perils and fears that this post-pandemic world induces, as each is tempted to kill the other, Hig eventually persuades them that he comes in peace. He is welcomed into their homestead, and the daughter, Cima, offers him a meal. Cima and her father raise animals, so Hig has the pleasure of eating beef and drinking milk. Yet his intense enjoyment in the experience goes much beyond the flavorful meal: he revels in the joy, the connection, the safety of being a guest: "To be offered cold milk. To have your blue enameled plate filled again. By a woman. To have her walk from an outside fire bearing your dish. To sit in the shade of a big old tree, not a metal hangar, and eat. To hear the bleat of a sheep come through the loud rustle of the leaves...To be a guest. To break bread" (202). Hig's rapturous response to what could seem a fairly ordinary experience underlines the beauty and necessity of these human interactions, of being host and guest.

Part of Hig's motivation to fly away and look for human contact is the recent loss of his dog, Jasper. Along with the other griefs he has suffered, losing his dog companion nearly unhinges Hig. When he visits the Mennonites shortly after Jasper died, they ask where Jasper is. Hig tells them he has died, and they respond, "I'm sorry Hig. We're all sorry" (139). A girl offers him a handful of wild asters. And then, surprising himself, he weeps "uncontrollably, shuddering" (139), recognizing that he was grieving not only Jasper but all the losses. And as he weeps by himself, since the Mennonites need to keep their distance, Hig wonders, "Was this hell? To love like this, to grieve from fifteen feet, an uncrossable distance?" (139). Similarly, after he arrives in the valley and meets Cima, her father initially ties him up and threatens to kill him. Again, in the stress of the situation and the interaction with other people, Hig grieves, sobbing violently, feeling both his immediate and longer-term losses. Over some weeks, Cima and Hig get to know each other and eventually become romantically involved. They tell each other of their spouses, who died during the pandemic, and their emerging love reminds

them of their individual griefs. In their new relationship, they each have "these new reckonings of loss" (269). The novel shows that grief is individual and lonely, yes, but it also cannot be fully embraced and worked through without others to share the load. The power of human interaction is at least as important for processing deep sorrow as it is for sharing the joy of a meal.

Seeking new companionship, though, is risky, as Hig has already discovered in his near death at the hands of Cima's father. Eventually, Hig, Cima, and her father (whom Hig calls Pops) decide to leave together to return to Bangley and the airport. With climate change, the warming temperatures in the valley will no longer support a farm where Cima and Pops live. But Hig needs to refuel the plane for the return flight, so he heads toward Grand Junction and the warm voice he had heard years earlier. He makes contact and is about to land—when he realizes it is a trap. The seemingly welcoming voice is actually a mask for an ambush when pilots are drawn in to land. Hig feels the "punch feeling of betrayal. All those years, thinking about that radio call. The hope it had engendered. It drove me wild" (285). Hig lands on the other side of the airport, and he and Pops attack and kill the older couple who had been controlling the airport. Ironically, the voice that motivated Hig to leave the safety of his home proves to be a false hope, but in that quest he meets Cima, a new love in his life.

Yet the novel holds one more challenge, as Hig worries how Bangley will respond to the two new members of their community. When he lands, Hig observes that there is a different concern: while Hig was gone, an attack occurred and Bangley is missing, either injured or dead. Surprising himself, in his desperation to find his old partner, Hig realizes that he cares about Bangley: "Never know how you feel about someone until their house is torn open" (302). He reflects on their interactions, acknowledging that, in his own gruff way, Bangley was "Telling me I was family. Telling me in my own way to have a good one, to be safe, not for him, but for me" (305). They do find Bangley, hiding and badly wounded, and so they nurse him back to health. Hig's new understanding about his relationship with Bangley and his new community with Cima and Pops suggest a renewed embrace of life in this postapocalyptic world. Jennifer Reese notes this surprising tone of the novel: that Hig's life "is not in the end depressing may be the most disturbing part of this novel. In fact, at times, the destruction of civilization seems to have given Hig the

chance to live more richly in the present, to feel grace more acutely, to sleep outdoors and gaze up at the stars in this purged, rejuvenated universe. It is frightening to face up to the apocalypse. It's perhaps even more frightening when we get past that and start seeing its upside" (4). Though an interesting analysis, Reese's comment seems to miss the pain and loss that the novel makes clear. Hig's embrace of living in the present comes as a response to a terrible situation, not a desired outcome.

Indeed, a final lovely image of the novel draws together the pain of the pandemic with the possibilities of hope. Cima had been a doctor, doing research into the blood disease as the pandemic was raging. Thus, she understands that the risk of contagion is actually much less than popularly understood, so she goes with Hig to visit the Mennonites and treat them: "The children reached out, clung to her skirt, one little girl, I think her name was Lily, Lily held her leg like a bear cub hugs a tree" (315). In this wounded community, with members sick and dying, Cima reaches out with a warm human connection. As Hig watches, he observes, "The wonder of being touched by a stranger. No longer untouchable" (315). Into the beauty of this human-to-human contact, Hig also suggests a hint of the divine: "Well. They were Mennonites. A visitation was in their ken. And I thought I was the descending angel" (314). In the context of a post-pandemic world, with much of civilization destroyed, *The Dog Stars* wonderfully explores the power of human touch and suggests the possibility of divine hope.

L. Lamar Nisly *is Professor of English at Bluffton University in Bluffton, Ohio.*

Book Reviews

Cameron Altaras and Carol Penner, eds. *Resistance: Confronting Violence, Power, and Abuse within Peace Churches.* Elkhart, IN: Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 2022.

Resistance names its purpose as both offering readers accounts of destructive experiences that individuals have faced within the church and moving the conversation forward to the redemptive power that is possible within church communities if these areas of violence and abuse are addressed. The book is built as a collection of individual testimonies that, through their specificity, contribute to the broader conversation of the systemic violence taking place within the Anabaptist church. According to the editors these experiences are not random acts of violence but are examples of how the very "theology of a historical peace church was weaponized in the hands of the perpetrators" (6). The collection is organized topically, beginning by addressing colonialism, racism, and heterosexism as distinct systems that have been supported in the Anabaptist church. After using the beginning stories to highlight how these systems have become embedded within the church, part two continues with testimonies that highlight the way these systems intersect with areas of abuse and harm. Throughout the individual testimonies, the reader is shown the reality of how these violent forces have woven themselves into the fabric of the church. However, the book also includes demands, ideas, and examples for how the Anabaptist tradition can begin to extract itself from these patterns. It is a reminder of the power held by this church tradition to bear witness, find healing, and grow towards the truer image of the community of Christ it is called to be.

A powerful part of the execution of this book is the way the structure integrates some of the teachings contained within the stories. A theme in many of the stories is the way that silence has been a major contributor to the Anabaptist church's upholding of structures of violence supported by theological

convictions. One of the unavoidable gaps this book faces is the omission of accounts from those who do not yet feel safe to share their stories. Despite this book's commitment to undoing the silencing and erasure that occurs around topics of violence and abuse within the church, among those who initially submitted writings, some had to withdraw for fear of having their identity deciphered through their story and risking further violence at the hands of their church community. While the book itself provides a platform within the church for these stories to be heard, it is also powerful to have the absence of stories highlighted within this project. Another structural choice made by the editors was the decision to include stories showing the active role the Anabaptist church has taken in the destruction of Indigenous people. By doing this at the outset of the book, the editors have embued it with an acknowledgement not simply of a land claim but of a relational imperative of reconciliation when faced with the continued harms taking place at the hands of the church today.

While the book is an important read for any individual within the Anabaptist church, it also has the potential to speak to the community of the church both on a large and small scale. *Resistance* reveals the ways that the culture and theology of unquestioned Anabaptist principles and teachings have continually inflicted harm, and thus demands that the church better itself. The works shared in this book need to be considered not just in the private homes of readers, but within the conversations and teachings of a group. The amount of material covered in *Resistance* is vast, and the bonds between Anabaptist traditions and a culture of violence are multifaceted and hidden. However, where previously the church has frozen up at the daunting task of facing past and present abuses, these stories offer the opportunity to unmask and confront the spaces where harm festers. They provide enlightening perspectives on well-worn scriptures that could awaken Bible studies and sermons to the way these beloved texts in the Anabaptist tradition have been weaponized against the vulnerable or have centered the privileged. These stories have been shared so that all those not yet able to speak to their experience can be heard around the council meeting table when policies are being drawn around safe church policies. These stories are hard, but they are ours. As an Anabaptist church, we are bound as a community to witness these testimonies as the beginning of a conversation about how we will confront the

violence among us and work together towards becoming a church of peace.

Nora Pederberg, Master of Divinity student, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Ens, Sarah. *Flyway*. Winnipeg, MB:Turnstone Press, 2022.

Manitoba poet Sarah Ens's most recent work, *Flyway*, is a meditation on questions of inheritance, generational trauma, and what it means to attend to the places we call home. Written as a long poem, *Flyway* attends to stories of human and ecological upheaval, and traces the ways in which our ancestral stories are intimately connected to our understandings of the environments we call home. The collection comprises five sections in which Ens creatively reimagines the story of her Oma Anni's displacement within the Russian empire in the early 20th century, and her family's eventual resettlement on the Canadian prairies.

Alongside her Oma's migration story, Ens charts the migratory flight patterns of grassland birds and laments their slowly disappearing populations from the tall grass prairie ecosystems of Manitoba. In an interview with writer Nathaniel Moore about *Flyway*, Ens comments, "Poetry can connect two seemingly disparate things—my Oma's forced migration from Ukraine during WWII and the destruction of the tallgrass prairie, for example—and a long poem form can extend, complicate, and follow those connections in ways I find exciting."

Flyway's central theme is that of inheritance, and this idea is woven into both the story and the long poem structure, in which Ens includes quotes from other Canadian nature poets like Don McKay and Tim Lilburn, as well as scriptural references and fragments pulled from letters and diary entries from Ens's ancestors. The poem's five sections alternate between the story of the migration of Ens's grandmothers (Flight, Un / Settling), and psalm-like meditations (Tallgrass Psalmody Parts One, Two, and Three). The meditations are written from the writer's perspective, as she observes the unsettled grasslands and the complexities that come with inheriting a home that was not originally her own. The psalmody that begins "How do you unfold bones for flight?" (16) stood out for me in its poignant imagery:

"Not honestly—some
malice uplifts you.
For now, hold
still & till all under.
They won't last,
your puny roots.
Learn to put your
self in the
ending: lie
in the vanishing,
the bright eyes,
the sky lurch.

Swallows spiral against wind which wails into sky" (16).

One of the most striking lines in the entire collection, however, in terms of the complicated meaning it connotes, is "What we did to survive" (14, 42). I found this line haunted my reading of *Flyway*, as Ens uses it to complicate the strict categories of the displaced versus the displacer. Indeed, the land given to the Mennonite immigrants to till up and turn into farmland was first a home to the Indigenous peoples of the prairies, to the Metis, and to a vast number of grassland species, plants, animals, and birds. Ens's poetic voice is written in song-like lament, its sweeping "s" sounds lulling us with melancholic imagery of the disappearing grasslands of the prairies. Perhaps, we can read the entire collection as a lament, with rays of hope offered in the invitation to look, and throw our confusion and questions into the wind, as Ens does in her psalmodies: "How do you unfold bones for flight?" (16) "& how do you sleep?" (17) "Will you get on your knees?" (10) and "Will you stand in the switchgrass exalting?" (13).

Ens writes in a direct, albeit graceful style, and this is ultimately what allows *Flyway* to succeed. Her poetic voice lifts the simplest gestures and scenes off the page through elegant syntax and line breaks that allow the poetry to breathe. On page 49, through her poem Flight, Ens transports us to the mountainside of Lower Styria, against which she unfolds the scene of Anni's sister, Lida, learning Russian.

"To web a rainbow, Lida lifted her hand,
Let late morning light through.
A winter outside shredded by the mountain's teeth,

> But inside, bright summer marigold plucked from the spool.
> ……
> *zhovtyy* she tried, then *gelb, jal,* unwinding colour,
> Swirling it to the floor, sighing my latest lesson: *yellow,*
> *oh-yellow-oh, oh, oh*" (49).

Flyway is a testimony to the grace found in the mundane moments, like a young girl learning Russian, and ultimately lets these moments speak for themselves. I was struck, in my reading, by the way Ens unfolds the larger story of her grandmother's displacement and eventual immigration primarily through these small scenes; in the everyday noticing is where this story hides.

The strength of Ens's voice, as both poet and storyteller, is its desire to invest a wide catchment of readers in the questions she is asking and the story she is trying to tell. *Flyway* is not a project in catharsis, nor is it a poet's effort to divest herself of her own generational trauma. Rather, it is an invitation to examine the threads of storylines that bring us to any place we might call home. It is an invitation to look, and look again, and it is also a proposal that, perhaps, home is not found within a place in and of itself, but within our willingness to travel to that place through paying attention to it. This is no easy invitation, as learning how to look means learning how to hold pain: the witnessing of lost loved ones to war, of lives uprooted, of lost ecosystems, of intricate forms of life paved over by monolithic industry and systems driven by human greed. Ens's invitation to look is a poet's invitation in that it is also a work of art. But it is the *way* that Ens invites her readers in, never alienating her audience through the medium, that speaks to her strength as both writer and eco-thinker. In *Flyway*, Ens writes like a psalmist—for sound and beauty, yes, but primarily to speak with truth and directness into pain's hollow spaces, and to be heard.

Sara Krahn, Master of Fine Arts student, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Gordon L. Heath. *Christians, the State, and War: An Ancient Tradition for the Modern World*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022.

Is pacifism or the Just War tradition the more faithful Christian response to the challenge of living in a fallen world? In *Christians, the State, and War: An Ancient Tradition for the Modern World*, Gordon L. Heath rejects this binary, pointing instead to what he calls an "often-overlooked uniform tradition of the early church on matters related to the state and its use of violence." Heath suggests that this ancient tradition provides a standard against which subsequent Christian responses to state violence should be appraised. "The best of the church's response to violence has been shaped by a faithfulness to that early tradition," he contends, "and the worst of the church's conduct has been when Christians departed from it" (5). This ancient consensus is thus presented as a way forward that should shape Christian views on the ethics of war and peace today.

The early Christian consensus proposed by Heath is comprised of five interrelated convictions about which, he claims, "there was complete unanimity in the early church" (4):

- The state is God-ordained to use the sword for justice
- Supreme loyalty is to Jesus, not Caesar
- All human life is valuable
- Creation is fallen, but not forever
- Christians are to engage the state to ensure a just use of the sword

Each of the five points are briefly discussed in chapter two. Chapters three to seven trace the influence of each point and of the consensus in turn, demonstrating how Christians in different times and places followed—or departed from—this early Christian tradition. Instances where Christians were complicit in abuses of state violence are attributed to its straying from the wisdom of the early tradition. In the eighth and concluding chapter, Heath reiterates his plea that Christians "stop doubling-down on one side or the other of a supposed pacifist-just war binary and start thinking about the issue of violence by first being faithful to that early theological consensus" (209–10).

At the outset of chapter two, Heath writes, "the argument of this book rises or falls on the reality of a common tradition in the early church on matters related to the church, the state, and the sword" (21). By insisting that this common tradition was held "everywhere, always, and by all" Heath sets a precipitously high evidentiary bar for his thesis that he cannot clear.

While he acknowledges that "there are issues related to primary sources," Heath does not seem to fully appreciate the magnitude of the challenge they pose. Briefly stated, the literature that survives from the first three centuries of Christianity cannot be taken as representative of the views of all early Christians. The skills required to produce literary texts were available only to a small proportion of the overall Christian population drawn from the social elite. Of the texts that were written, only those that were deemed worthy of being kept and copied by Christians in later centuries have survived to the present day. Texts that were judged heretical by later church authorities were at times intentionally suppressed; many more were lost due to lack of interest in their preservation. The upshot is that it is not possible to determine what was believed "everywhere, always, and by all" early Christians based on the corpus of texts that survive from the "Church Fathers." The evidence simply cannot bear the weight of Heath's thesis.

Even on the basis of the extant literature, which Heath consults only in English translation, his claims raise problems. No attempt is made to systematically survey the surviving works of the "Church Fathers" regarding the state and its violence. Rather, for each of the five points of his consensus, Heath cites only a handful of short quotations. His interpretation of these decontextualized texts is frequently questionable. For example, Heath claims as a fifth point of his consensus that "Christians are to engage the state to ensure a just use of the sword." But the texts he cites in support of this claim, Justin Martyr's *First Apology* and Tertullian's *Ad Scapulam* and *Apologeticus*, are not pleas for justice in general but specific appeals that Christians be spared imperial punishment. Similarly, none of the texts Heath cites clearly articulate his third point of consensus, the principle that "all human life is valuable," a sentiment which he leaves under-defined. This is a problem because one characteristic idea of early Christian writings is the conviction that the eternal life that awaits the Christian after physical death is of more value than the life lived in the earthly body. The *devaluation* of temporal human life vis-à-vis eternal life is frequently reiterated in early Christian writings, it was remarked upon by outside observers.[1] Tertullian records the Roman proconsul C. Arrius Antoninus's exasperation at Christians who voluntarily surrendered themselves with the goal of being executed, complaining, "You wretches, if you want to die, you have cliffs to leap from and ropes to hang by."[2] This willingness to sacrifice temporal life in exchange for eternal rewards reverberates throughout Christian history, motivating

1 See Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom* for a treatise-length example.

2 Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam*, 5.

both praiseworthy resistance to oppressive state power *and* the catastrophic abuses of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and colonialism. Heath's claim that "the best of the church's response to issues of violence were when it remained faithful to the early church consensus, and the worst was when it drifted far afield from it" seems to blind him to the possibility that widely held ancient Christian convictions can induce both laudable responses to injustice and egregious harms (41).

In *Christians, the State, and War*, Heath argues that the Church Fathers articulated an approach to state violence that Christians should emulate today. One of Heath's most frequent claims is that Christians historically have affirmed the state's right to use "the sword" for the purpose of justice. Heath does not clearly say what he interprets "the sword" to mean, but he seems to understand the term as a euphemism for the state's power to kill legitimately in war. In the early Christian context, however, "the sword" more clearly refers to the literal weapon used to inflict corporal punishment, including execution. I concur with Heath that, for most of Christian history, most Christians—even before Constantine—accepted the legitimacy of capital punishment.[3] But today it is condemned by both the Vatican and the World Council of Churches. Is this an example of Christians "drifting far afield" from the early Church consensus? Ought Christians to support a return to corporal punishment? Or might it be an advance on early Christian ethics that we now reject the use of the sword for deterrence and correction, advocating that the state not use "the sword for justice" but find nonviolent means to address the root causes of crime and conflict?

Jennifer Otto, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta.

3 For a sermon illustration that takes for granted the necessity of capital punishment, see Origen, *Homily on Jeremiah,* 12.5.1–3.

David Saul Bergman. *Unpardonable Sins.* Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021.

Unpardonable Sins marks the literary debut of David Saul Bergman, a pseudonym for the collaboration between writers Daniel Born and Dale Suderman. It is a gritty murder mystery set in the heart of Chicago, and follows the ex-Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite preacher, John Reimer. When a young man is killed in what appears to be the most recent murder in a string of homophobic attacks, Reimer agrees to help a bereaved young woman with a story that doesn't quite add up. What begins as a simple case of pastoral counselling quickly transforms into a one-man private investigation, as Reimer's empathetic doggedness finds him hunting down the truth behind this man's death. The deeper Reimer digs, the less sense it makes, and before long he finds himself thrown headfirst into the city's dark underbelly of political corruption, attempted assassination, and gruesome violence.

Reimer walks a tightrope between the distinct worlds of detective and church leader—an unstable duality which parallels his own inner turmoil. From gay bars to the alderman's office, Reimer encounters people from countless walks of life and contends with varying understandings of sin, guilt, forgiveness, and absolution. Grappling with his own personal demons, he sees fragments of his imperfect life reflected in victims and suspects alike, along with spectres of the people and community he left behind long ago guiding and haunting him in equal measure. The novel builds a tumultuous storm of internal and external conflicts that push its protagonist to the limit of his reasoning and faith, all while still allowing him to make it to the church community potluck on time.

This difficult unity between hard-boiled detective fiction and moral-spiritual quandary lies at the center of the novel, especially as each side bleeds together into the different aspects of Reimer's life. Issues of LGBTQ+ discrimination and generational divides arise as equally at crime scenes as in church council meetings, and Reimer's profession and personal history add a philosophical layer to the standard mystery format. What role does guilt play in salvation? Are any sins truly unpardonable? Beyond the age-old question of "whodunnit," the novel offers a psychological examination of the many different shades of evil.

With Suderman's experience in queer rights activism, and Born's previous publications on cultural perspectives of guilt, both contributors bring a professional expertise that enhances the thematic layers of the novel. Their familiarity with, and passion for these topics transform what might otherwise be a two-dimensional crime backdrop into a multifaceted exploration of discrimination and shame. They provide the novel a moral depth that is interwoven with the simple entertainment of mystery itself.

References to other works, such as those by Jürgen Moltmann, James Frazer, and even John Milton, make appearances as well, further enhancing the spiritual nuance of both the plot and of Reimer's character. While the most essential intertext would be the Bible—the recurring invocation of 1 John 5:16 serving both as the book's epigraph and thematic inspiration—each textual reference hints at a larger intentionality, an overarching argument that the authors aim to make. At the same time, it is difficult to say whether prior familiarity with these texts proves beneficial, due to the brevity of their inclusions.

In fact, brevity consistently proves to be one of the novel's biggest hindrances. At just over 200 pages, it presents a colourful vision of ideas, characters, and even plot points that never seem to have enough time in the spotlight. The book is packed full of intriguing implications, references to prior events and future possibilities that have the reader grasping for more. The risk, however, in this whirlwind of world-building and overlapping plot threads, is that certain elements are left feeling redundant or rushed as they are left unresolved. The world Bergman paints is at times vivid and inviting, and at other times disjointed and wanting. From the grandmotherly Mildred volunteering at the church office, to the fast-talking pagan journalist and Jewish rabbi that make up Reimer's coffee buddies, the book continually presents a wide range of unique and engaging characters begging to be explored in more depth, only to be left abandoned in the margins. Like a photo taken just slightly out of focus, the novel delivers a glimpse of an exhilarating cultural noir, without ever quite fulfilling its potential.

Reminiscent of the long-running series by Dorothy L. Sayers, or more recently Louise Penny, *Unpardonable Sins* reads like a promising beginning. The first of the weary preacher's many adventures, each new entry slowly expanding and illuminating the lives and histories of the recurring characters.

With any luck, this will not be the last the world sees of John Reimer; yet even as a standalone novel it provides a unique perspective of both Mennonite culture and detective fiction and would be a good read for fans of religious philosophy and murder mysteries alike.

Matthew Rempel, Undergraduate English student, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Brian C. Brewer, editor. *T&T Clark Handbook of Anabaptism*. London: T&T Clark, 2022.

The *T&T Clark Handbook of Anabaptism* offers rich accounts of the multiplex movements and personalities seeking radical reform in 16th-century Europe. Chapters written by thirty-five established and emerging scholars focus primarily on the first 100 years of Anabaptist movements, offering an account of the polygenesis of these movements' historical contexts, practices, and beliefs.

Brian C. Brewer's editorial introduction frames the volume's four subsequent sections within a concise sketch of Anabaptist historiography. Brewer highlights two turning points in this field. First, he names early 20th-century historians' retrieval of early (primarily Swiss) Anabaptists as forerunners of contemporary religious voluntarism within a secularizing state. Second, he narrates the emerging awareness, beginning in the 1970s, of the heterogeneity of early Anabaptist movements. This heterogeneity functions as a guiding theme throughout the book. Likewise, the relationship between the varied forms of Anabaptism and the journey of secularization is a recurrent concern, both in chapters attending to early Anabaptist ethics and in the final section's sketch of North American Anabaptists and neo-Anabaptism.

Andrea Strübind's opening chapter, "The Polygenesis of the Anabaptists," sets up Part One's survey of Anabaptist origins. The subsequent ten chapters examine the disparate and varied character of these 16th-century movements for radical reform, each amply rooted in citations of primary

and secondary literature. Over and beyond the common distinction of Swiss, South German/Austrian, Moravian, and Dutch centers of Anabaptist ferment, Part One attends to origins in the German Peasants' War, in Central Germany, in Prussia, and among the Spiritualists, also including a chapter on the ways in which early Anabaptism constructed the role of women. Among these contributions, Kat Hill's overview of Anabaptism in Central Germany and Mark Jantzen's sketch of the Hutterite influence on the Polish Brethren stand out as opening toward even more robust polygenesis accounts.

In Part Two, Doctrine (chapters 12-25), and Part Three, Influences (chapters 26-32), the volume opts to remain focused on Anabaptist origins. The chapters in Part Two gather and collate early Anabaptist perspectives on topics ranging from baptism and the Lord's Supper to nonviolence, religious tolerance, and martyrdom. Nearly all of these chapters put on rich display both the overlaps and eccentricities of early Anabaptist teaching and practice. The chapters of Part Two gravitate toward topics of ecclesiology (with teachings on martyrdom and *Gelassenheit* drawn back into the ecclesial orbit, as Julia Qiuye Zhao narrates) or of ethics. However, Jamie Pitts' treatment of early Anabaptist pneumatology and Christina Moss's survey of the array of early Anabaptist eschatologies break from this norm, pointing to an expanse of Anabaptist belief that extends beyond ecclesial and ethical concerns.

The discussion of influences on early Anabaptism in Part Three provides a more richly textured account of the intellectual context of the movements' origins. Contributors provide perceptive accounts of early Anabaptists' interrelationship with sources as diverse as medieval scholastic theology, Erasmus, Thomas Müntzer, Karlstadt, and Luther.

Part Four functions as a postscript, moving abruptly over intervening centuries to offer a few snapshots of Anabaptism today. The three chapters in this section provide overviews of contemporary Anabaptist denominations in Canada and the United States, of neo-Anabaptism (also in Canada and the United States), and of contemporary Anabaptist ecumenical relations.

The abrupt chronological shift to Part Four points to a first, significant gap in the *T&T Clark Handbook to Anabaptism*. This is a historiographical gap, with the volume's attention to Anabaptist movements trailing off quickly after the Dordrecht Confession in 1632. This leapfrogging from

Anabaptist origins to the late 20th century constructs early Anabaptism as its only "usable history" for contemporary Christian belief and practice in post-Christendom environments. This move largely follows many other introductions to Anabaptism, both the scholarly (e.g., C. Arnold Snyder's *Anabaptist History and Theology*; Hans Jürgen-Goertz' *The Anabaptists*) and the popular (e.g., Palmer Becker's *Anabaptist Essentials*; Stuart Murray's *The Naked Anabaptist*), reinscribing a neglect or denial of Anabaptist practices, divisions, migrations, and beliefs through the ensuing centuries as *also* defining what Anabaptism is and may be.

A second gap within the volume is a geographic chasm. This shows up, perhaps most strikingly, in the final chapter, John D. Roth's "Global Anabaptism and Ecumenism," but also in a constrained regional itinerary evident throughout the entire book. Only a few contributors make any mention of Anabaptism's existence outside Europe or North America. And even Roth's chapter consigns the significance of the overwhelming numerical dominance of African, Asian, and Latin American Anabaptists today to a single concluding paragraph, the rest of its discussion given to attempts at reconciling ruptures from the European Reformation. While the volume provides a laudable introduction to the diverse movements of early *European* Anabaptism, it neglects the polymorphic, polyphonic *global* reality which defines the movement today.

The *T&T Clark Handbook of Anabaptism* offers a robust introduction to the origins of Anabaptism. While drawing together the work of leading scholars, the text remains accessible. It would function well as a textbook in an upper-level undergraduate or introductory graduate course or for a non-academic researcher. Each chapter provides a rich bibliography to extend research, and the volume is well-served by a detailed index, though a non-specialist reader might also wish for an occasional map.

Josh Wallace, Church Engagement Minister, Mennonite Church Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

David C. Cramer and Myles Werntz. *A Field Guide to Christian Nonviolence: Key Thinkers, Activists, and Movements for the Gospel of Peace*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022.

In this book, Cramer and Werntz describe eight different approaches to Christian nonviolence, highlighting the important figures that correspond to each. The argument of the book is not polemical and does not advocate for any particular understanding. Rather, each type is described sympathetically, on its own terms.

The first half of the book includes streams of Christian nonviolence that can be roughly characterized as emphasizing faithfulness. This includes nonviolence as discipleship, virtue, mysticism, or apocalyptic uncovering.

As Christian discipleship, nonviolence is understood primarily as an act of obedience. Following Niebuhr's distinction between "faithfulness vs. effectiveness," this stream emphasizes the teachings of Christ rather than a concern to control outcomes. A challenging question in this stream is how closely to link nonviolence to discipleship: is a disciple who does not commit to nonviolence unfaithful, or simply mistaken? How do we account for nonviolence that is not specifically Christian?

Virtue arguments supply an answer to some of the challenges discipleship poses. "Natural virtues" (like courage in war) exist outside the church, but nonviolence is understood as the supernatural perfection of those natural virtues. The role of the church is to form the virtue of nonviolence in both the politics and the ordinary lives of its members.

Christian mysticism understands the individual's distorted vision of themself and of God to be a source of political violence. In this stream, spiritual practice (especially of mystical prayer) involves an encounter with the God of peace, heals the spiritual disease of violence, and produces an ethic of nonviolence.

In an apocalyptic mode, nonviolent words and actions uncover hidden violence and the power of Death. The suffering of the innocent, especially Jesus's crucifixion, reveals the violence that is normally hidden from sight. Typically, more combative and symbolic, apocalyptic nonviolence attempts to expose violence and injustice in order to dethrone Death and point toward the conditions for a new kind of life.

In the second half of the book, Cramer and Werntz turn to streams of Christian nonviolence that tend to emphasize effectiveness. Here they discuss realist, political, and liberationist nonviolence, as well as antiviolence.

Niebuhr's Christian realism rejects idealism, accepting violence as a

means to justice in the real world. Similarly, a realist approach seeks practical results, but it promotes the empirical benefits of nonviolence for the real world even as it partners with those who are not ideologically committed to pacifism. This approach works more broadly with all levels of society and government for "relative justice" or "just peacemaking."

Nonviolence as political practice is similar to realism in its aim to produce real world results, except that a commitment to nonviolence is nonnegotiable. This stream uses public, nonsectarian forms of action to transform political realities. Though the church may participate in the larger movement, it is not the primary driver of societal transformation. Examples of this approach include the creation of Pennsylvania and Japan's post-war constitution.

Liberationist nonviolence identifies the "ordinary violence" that exists apart from overt acts of violence. Fiscal policy, soaring taxes, and other oppressive economic systems are not simply injustices leading to violence but are themselves violent. Because structural violence entangles everyone, liberationist nonviolence does not merely respond to overt violence but digs out the roots of violence, breaking what Câmara called the "Spiral of Violence."

Finally, antiviolence highlights the ways sexual and gender-based violence is both structural and personal. Christian antiviolence requires self-critique to root out theologies and practices that contribute to sexual and gender-based violence. It begins by listening to and naming the experiences of "Victim-Survivors," and it develops positive practices and theological resources to teach resistance to oppression.

Cramer and Werntz' "field guide" is helpful in several ways.

1) It acknowledges various objections to nonviolence, while also clarifying the limited application of those objections. The valid criticisms of one stream are not minimized, but they do not necessarily indict the others.
2) It articulates a relationship between various streams of nonviolence.
3) It offers conceptual scaffolding to support what might otherwise appear as undisciplined, antithetical, or merely sentimental responses to violence.
4) It prompts exploration of further streams of Christian nonviolence.
5) It encourages the discovery of new forms of nonviolent praxis, as a living tradition.

For the church and the academy, the effect is profound.

A note about John Howard Yoder. In their preface, the authors acknowledge the challenge that Yoder's legacy presents for talking about nonviolence. This work is partly motivated by a desire to rescue nonviolence from the blanket charge of being Yoderian (ix). So, Cramer and Werntz honestly acknowledge the influence of Yoder's thought without centering it, and the remainder of the book demonstrates a much larger and more complex territory of Christian nonviolence—each stream of which contains its own challenges. The final chapter on anti-violence then brings the conversation full-circle to offer a way to respond to the history of sexual and gender-based violence in Yoder's thought and actions, as well as in Christian history and theology more broadly.

This book would be useful as an introduction to the range of approaches to nonviolence for students who are already familiar with some basic theological concepts and 20th century world history. It could also be used for adult education or facilitated small group study in a congregational context where there is interest in discerning ways for the church to engage the world for peace.

Kevin Guenther Trautwein, Pastor, Lendrum Mennonite Church, Edmonton, Alberta.

Jonathan Dyck. *Shelterbelts.* Wolfville, NS: Conundrum Press, 2022.

When reading Jonathan Dyck's *Shelterbelts,* I was reminded of the miles of trees planted on our family farm and other farms across the prairie. I remember the wall of spruce trees that surrounded our farmyard, offering shelter from wind, framing our space in the parklands of Saskatchewan. I remember the toil, summer after summer, of planting rows of trees, Siberian and American elms and Manitoba maples provided by the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Association, designed to prevent the soil drift of the Depression, outlining quarter sections of farmland, being weeded and watered until they rooted and became part of the landscape. And they did offer protection, shelter from winds, capturing snow, shading homes and gardens; but they were also constraints, obscuring farmyards, enclosing spaces with trees meant for other topographies.

Dyck's graphic novel captures those two sides of shelterbelts—protection and constraint— for the inhabitants of Hespeler, a rural Mennonite community on the Canadian prairie. The physical form of the graphic novel can also be viewed as the prairie landscape, each frame a field, its borders a

shelterbelt, bringing a tidy order to the wildness of nature or the rambling of storytelling. Moments in the characters' lives are framed as we see them struggle with the constraints imposed by the community order or the protection they feel by living in the known.

The novel features twenty characters in eleven individual but overlapping stories that explore the various issues that confront the inhabitants of Hespeler as they grapple with faith, sexual identities, Mennonite theology and history, the environment, and relationships. The format of the graphic novel enhances the telling of these stories by establishing visual contrasts and plot details. The opening story begins with young adults drinking and doing donuts on the parking lot of the new megachurch—a story that does not need words and one that many of Dyck's readers will recognize. That opening story sets the stage for the other eleven chapters, teens pushing boundaries, pastors struggling with sermons, differing views of theology. Gerhard Suderman, pastor of the progressive Jubilee Mennonite Church, in conversation with his gay daughter about his unfinished sermon, identifies the central theme of the novel:

> Well, the text is from 1 Peter, so I was thinking…I'm going to speak about being called out…The Greek word used for the early church—*ekklesia*—it literally means those who are called out, as in called out of darkness and into the light. We tend to focus on what we're being called out of…But it's really about what we are being called into (6).

While it would be easy to caricature the citizens of Hespeler, dividing them into binaries of politically and religiously conservative or progressive, Dyck gives us brief glimpses into the complexity of each character as they seek to discover truth. There is a restlessness to this novel, a restlessness that cannot be resolved because there are no easy answers, no clear truth despite Pastor Wall's declaration that only God has the power to free us. His megachurch invites in those who want to see truth in binaries, right or wrong, in or out. Dyck's artful storytelling lets the readers glimpse the complexity of each character and the subtle changes that are transforming a community.

Ultimately, this is a novel about relationships—relationships to God, to neighbours, to the land, to history, and to self. Hespeler serves as a microcosm where current global issues are being played out. It is easy to read this graphic novel as a critique of rural Mennonite communities that have spent decades sheltered in the safety of tradition and are now struggling with the

incursion of modernity, but Dyck has done more than that. Like Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* (2019), *Shelterbelts* provides the reader with insights into a community grappling with change and deciding if the past is a protection or a constraint.

Geraldine Balzer, Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Mennonite/s Writing 10

An International Conference

hosted at Canadian Mennonite University

500 Shaftesbury Boulevard, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3P 2N2

Theme: Words at Work and Play

13–15 June 2025

CALL FOR PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS

Organizers of the tenth Mennonite/s Writing conference invite proposals for critical and creative presentations on any aspect of Mennonite literature, including the 2025 conference theme of "Words at Work and Play."

In her 2020 study, *Making Believe*, Magdalene Redekop attributes the surge of creative writing by North American Mennonites in the late twentieth century to the "many Mennonites [who] have been willing to play and be serious at the same time." Indeed, from the martyr ballads and trickster tales of the early Anabaptists through centuries of sermons, hymns, and diaries to the bestselling fiction and poetry of today, creative writing among Mennonites has always been a type of deeply serious play. At once a form of labour and of entertainment, Mennonite literary work continues to be a source of community and transgression; a means of memory and of revision; a practice of devotion, resistance, lament, and joy.

In keeping with the field's long-standing practice of working across creative and critical boundaries, we invite proposals for scholarly presentations as well as creative and genre-bending work from across and beyond the academy, including: work in any literary genre or medium; audio and visual arts; theatre and film; historical writing; social critique; theological reflection; religious studies; anthropology; community-engaged research; race, ethnicity, and gender studies; ecocriticism; reconciliation and Indigeneity; postcolonial writing; autotheory; ethics; digital humanities; comedy; publishing, printing, & editing; podcasting; translation; and even literary criticism. We especially encourage submissions that will broaden and enrich the field's historical, geographical, methodological, and disciplinary range.

The first Mennonite/s Writing conference took place at Conrad Grebel University College in 1990 and subsequently eight other conferences have been held: at Goshen College (three times), University of Winnipeg Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies (twice), Bluffton University, Eastern Mennonite University, and Fresno Pacific University.

Please send proposals as 250-word abstracts (with short contributor biographies) to mennowritingx@cmu.ca by November 1, 2024.

More details are available on the conference webpage:
https://www.cmu.ca/mennonites-writing