

mennonite identity

Where do people belong?

by Conrad Showalter

I suppose there has always been a certain amount of realignment of individuals and churches taking place in relation to the Conservative Mennonite Conference, as well as the broader Amish-Mennonite spectrum. I remember my father commenting on various churches that were once a part of CMC, but had left at some earlier moment in our conference history, some to be more traditional, and some to be more progressive. Also outstanding in my memory is a presentation by former conference historian Elmer Yoder on the strong “feeder” role of the Amish church in relation to more progressive groups. While family size across the spectrum has probably declined, it’s obvious that the average size of Amish families is still larger than that of progressive groups.

In my lifetime, there was one major realignment that impacted me much more than others. That was the time in our conference history when the Biblical Mennonite Alliance (BMA) was formed. A current realignment

impacting the Mennonite Church USA has also felt more personally impacting as congregations within MCUSA have tried to find new places of belonging and identity. Some former MCUSA churches have found a home within CMC, and some former CMC congregations have also found a home in MCUSA. And in a moment somewhat paralleling the formation of BMA almost twenty years ago, within the past year we have seen the formation of the Evana Network.

Interestingly, both of these moments in my church experience are related to issues of gender—what does it mean to be created in God’s image as male and female, what should the relationship of male and female be, and more recently, the question whether such a polarity (M/F) continues to be an adequate understanding of gender. While the issues initially appear widely separated, in reality

they are clearly on a common spectrum, both in relation to practice and in relation to biblical interpretation.

Of course, all such questions of faith and practice are rooted in a particular reading of Scripture. That means that how we read the Bible is often a significant part of the discussions and the differences that lead to realignment and identification with new, or other, groups. And in an Anabaptist context, of course, what it means to follow Jesus is an important part of that discussion. We all recognize the necessity of interpreting Scripture, but the conclusions we reach, as well as the process by which we arrive at those differing beliefs are important components of how we see ourselves as followers of Jesus.

My perspective on differences and institutional identification has certainly been affected by my own experiences, in which I filled differing roles as either a progressive or as a traditionalist. I think those experiences have made me more sensitive to the reality of each of those places in relationships. For example, it doesn’t take keen powers of observation to see that calls for unity (accompanied by pressure, “guilting”, etc.) most often come from the progressive side of any divergence. In contrast, a focus on faithfulness, accountability, and orthodoxy (with similar pressure and “guilting”) will most likely be heard from the traditionalist side.

In reflecting on a middle place (experiencing both roles, but in different relationships), I thought it would be interesting to talk with a couple people that I knew fairly well who would see me in those two different roles. Neither of these brothers continues to be part of this conference, though both are former ministers in CMC. For my role as a progressive, I selected Walter Beachy, a former pastor and mentor of mine. For my role as a traditionalist, I chose a significant former colleague, Sheldon Swartz.

Walter Beachy

My first interview was with Walter Beachy. Walter was my pastor during the decade that spanned my years in high school, Rosedale Bible Institute and Ohio State University. I have often spoken of Walter as an important father figure in a time of my life when my relationship to my father was especially strained and distant. I enjoyed his preaching, his love of Anabaptist history and his ability to weave those stories into a vision of what it meant to follow Jesus in our time and place. Like my father, Walter was a man of deep conviction, but for varied reasons was able to listen longer and refrain from speaking immediate correction to my sometimes radical and confrontational ideas.

When invited to review his memories of leaving CMC, Walter remembered the vote in the Ministers' Meeting of 1997 regarding whether the veiling was to remain a requirement for ministers' wives. The practice of congregations had varied in relation to the issue of the veiling, but this vote represented a potential change in the leadership structures and in the unified practice of leaders' wives regarding this issue. For many who held a strong conviction regarding the importance of the practice of this symbol, it was a watershed event. The vote result allowed diverging practice, and Walter remembered that moment as the "saddest moment of my life."

Uncertainty followed for Walter as he sorted out the best responses. He did not attend the first meeting of the group that later became the Biblical Mennonite Alliance (BMA). Since he was nearing retirement age, he decided to link his ongoing affiliation to the congregation he was pastoring at that time. After a strong vote in favor of leaving CMC, Walter and United Bethel (Plain City, Ohio) became actively involved in the new organization. Some of the concerns of ministers leaving CMC had to do with faithfulness to the Word and accountability to each other in relation to those things we had said we believe.

To a close friend, also a pastor in CMC, who begged Walter to stay in conference, he remembers saying, "You have nothing to lose; United Bethel does." Of one thing regarding affiliation, Walter was sure: "We should not hesitate to align ourselves with those whose conscience is close."

Good things have developed with the realignment—a new Bible School for young adults in southern Indiana, a vigorous outreach through the mission agency, and a sense

of unity, affiliation, and closeness. In Walter's perspective, unaffiliated status for any congregation is not ideal.

As we talked about those things that have continued to be important within BMA, distinctive dress was not one of them. Walter also recognized the difficulty of church planting in urban areas in the United States while teaching the practice of the veiling. In contrast to that effort, he noted the easy connection in outreach to Muslims when we dress conservatively and women are covered.

I was not surprised at all by Walter's central concern. For him, a watershed issue is that we believe the Bible to be God's Word, not simply to contain God's Word. We must continue to seek the objective truth in the Word of God rather than the subjective truth that we may experience or prefer. In his perspective, if we share this common foundation, we will not necessarily interpret every Scripture the same, but we "won't be too far apart."

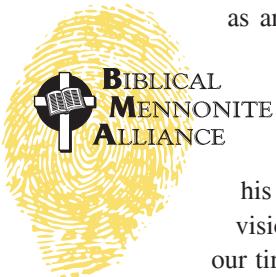
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Sheldon Swartz

My second conversation was with Sheldon Swartz. Sheldon was called to ministry at Maple City Chapel (Goshen, Indiana) a year or two before I was. We served together for about a decade as assistant/associate pastors with Mel Shetler as Senior Pastor and mentor. We later worked together in co-pastoring a new church plant (Siloam Fellowship) for about seven years before "two paths diverged in a woods." Sheldon and his wife Velma are now part of an MCUSA congregation (Waterford Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana) where he has served in the past on a leadership council and Velma is employed as part of the pastoral leadership team.

Sheldon and I not only worked together in church ministry, but followed similar training journeys, both becoming professional counselors, and often working bi-vocationally in church ministry and in private-practice counseling. Apparently there are other similarities, since to this day, it is not uncommon for someone to see me and call out, "Hi, Sheldon."

When Sheldon reflected on the transition from a CMC congregation to an MCUSA congregation, he described it as "like merging from one highway to another." While things in the new context felt unfamiliar, he also discovered that "we



weren't all much different than each other." Sheldon did not see himself as leaving CMC because of disagreements about issues, but rather a more natural journey of "following the path of meaningful connections."

At the same time, Sheldon candidly recognized that the issues of women in leadership and how we relate to people who struggle with ongoing sin patterns were important to him at that time in his journey. When I asked him later in the interview what things he's glad he doesn't have to deal with in the new context, gender-based ministry was the noteworthy example.

Having worked so closely with Sheldon earlier, I was, of course, interested in how he was viewing the current conflict in MCUSA regarding sexuality. He indicated that he has "a high degree of appreciation and respect" for the way the church was attempting to deal with differences regarding scriptural interpretation, as well as acceptance and making

"room for the breadth of ways of being faithful to Jesus." In reference to those differences, he quoted someone who said "When you draw a line in the sand, Jesus is always on the other side of the line."

When asked about the things he appreciates most in his current context, Sheldon noted the emphasis on peace, the recognition that "violence against other human beings made in the image of God violates the commands of Jesus. That the way to peace is not through physical, social, economic force, but through love, through mutual respect, through sacrifice of what one claims as one's own." In relation to "true evangelical faith," Sheldon held up MCC and MDS as some of our best expressions of such faith—bringing the splinters together in the common cause of serving humanity "in practical earthly ways."

Sheldon noted the positive influence of CMC in his life in "building a foundation for faith in Christ—an appreciation for the centrality of Christ and the place of the word of God in that faith." He observed that while his "views of the purpose of the Bible have changed over the years," he was "grateful for the respect for the Word that CMC has." He also observed, "My respect for the Word may have been most impacted by seeing my dad diligently studying his Sunday School lesson at the dining room table, using the Bible, Commentaries, etc.!"

I was not surprised by the recurrent themes in Sheldon's reflections—love and acceptance overshadowing boundaries,

processes being at least as important as positions, and an emphasis on eternal life as a quality of life here rather than a primary concern for life after death. Yet, as he reflected on division and separation, Sheldon assumed what struck me as a fairly pragmatic stance.

"Nature seems to reveal to us that when things grow in healthy ways, they divide, they multiply. There develops a kind of separateness from each other that enhances the growth that comes from the new life in the individual, small group, etc. When this is accepted as a good thing, we can encourage it and continue to relate as brothers and sisters in the same family. When it is seen as a bad thing, we tend to label as good or bad, right or wrong."

Further Reflections

In ongoing reflection on unity and separation, I often remember the triangular model of fellowship that Mel Shetler referenced often. At the base of the triangle we have the broadest fellowship with those who are truly part of the body of Christ. As we move up the triangle there is less space (fewer people) and increasing closeness. This represents the reality that for close working relationships we need more similarity of belief for peaceful, efficient living and serving. (In the last few years of observing calls for unity in MCUSA context, I don't remember seeing a focus on "unity" with the militaristic Christian right, or calls for rejoining the Catholic church with its strong commitment to distinct gender roles.)

The "middle place" that I've referenced is not an easy place to live. I'm grateful that I don't have to spend energy trying to keep Walter and Sheldon on the same page! It takes enough energy to sort out difficult questions internally and with those with whom I work more closely. As the text of my grandparents' wedding sermon reminds me, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?"

What will the future bring? Where do current trajectories lead, especially in relation to the "evangelical Anabaptist" blend that we have held as an ideal? It would seem that we (CMC) are more likely to lose the Anabaptist component of that blend, while more progressive groups (MCUSA) are more

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likely to lose the evangelical side. Perhaps the greatest challenge for all of us on the Amish-Mennonite spectrum is to live in ways that children and youth see Jesus as the center of our faith, rather than seeing the cultural components of faith—whether coverings, hymn-singing, or peace—as rooted primarily in tradition.

The reality, of course, is that time will tell. Our choices do have consequences. Though we don't directly control those who follow, we do have an impact; we do influence others in the movement of time from present into the future. My father often said (probably a quote), "A man can't really evaluate his work as a father until he sees what his grandchildren become." It's a statement that reflects a long view. Ultimately we need, not a time-bound view, but an eternal perspective—one that includes both the here-and-now, and the life that is not lost with death.

I'm grateful for those in my life who have known their own convictions and boundaries, and who have realigned themselves graciously when necessary. I hope that I have been as gracious as they.

Conrad Showalter is a private-practice Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist living and working in Goshen, Indiana with his wife Lynette, also a therapist. He is the father of four children and a grandpa to twelve. He and Lynette teach the Marriage and Family and the Introduction to Counseling courses at Rosedale Bible College during the six-week winter term.





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The God Who Redeems, cont.

was never confused.

One of God's promises to his children is that of redemption. Of course, he redeems our souls, our hearts, our minds—but sometimes, he even redeems moments and days.

There are hundreds of days that I don't remember. Days that I wouldn't be able to tell you where I was or what I was doing. *But I remember the day my daughter was born.*

This is the glorious wonder of the God we serve. The One who gently, with such unbelievable kindness, reaches into our shattered dreams and creates beauty.

Natasha Metzler is an author and blogger from a small farm in northern New York where she lives with her mechanic-husband and two miracle-children. Her newest book, Counting Grains of Sand: Learning to Delight in a Promise-Making God, releases in January 2017. Infertility, adoption, hope, and loss, all collide in this gentle story of how God built a family from splintered pieces and taught one woman how to hold onto faith and learn to delight in a God-Who-Speaks-Promises even while journeying through the wilderness of sorrow.