A patchwork community: exploring belonging, gender roles, and God's gifts among progressive American Mennonites

Christa D. Mylin

University at Albany, State University of New York, cmylin@albany.edu
A PATCHWORK COMMUNITY:
EXPLORING BELONGING, GENDER ROLES, AND
GOD’S GIFTS AMONG PROGRESSIVE AMERICAN MENNONITES

by

Christa D. Mylin

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
In Partial Fulfilment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Anthropology
December 2022
Abstract

This dissertation demonstrates that progressive Mennonites in southern Pennsylvania struggle to find belonging within their congregations due to the fluid nature of Mennonite affiliations. Mennonites critically examined their institutions and relations with each other, and this critique often led to schism. This research addresses how a recent schism among progressive Mennonites led some people to experience nonbelonging and highlighted other conflicting values that people had within their conference. An overview of Mennonite history demonstrated that Mennonites have often formed separate fellowships when disagreements could not be resolved. However, this history also demonstrated that Mennonites have been adept at interpreting their values into new contexts and preserving Anabaptism through their different practices.

Each time Mennonites interpreted themselves in new ways, individuals had to negotiate the changing conditions and figure out if they belonged or if they needed to search for a better place to fit. This project began with a 2015 schism among progressive Mennonites and its impact upon church members in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. In particular, it began with female credentialed leaders who thought that their concerns were ignored in the conflict, but it quickly expanded beyond analyzing gendered divisions. Ethnographic research revealed that gender was not the only way people organized their relationships within the church. Sometimes gender was not even a concern. It became evident that there were many factors that contributed to creating a sense of belonging and that belonging was not always dependent upon the institution’s membership guidelines. Individuals were able to influence changes in the institutions, such as overturning the policies that prohibited women from being credentialed, but some Mennonites
still experienced nonbelonging. Their experiences reveal that belonging was an internal sensation that emerged from the way Mennonites interpreted their interactions with other Mennonites.

Understanding that belonging is an internal exchange revealed that Mennonites were able to create a sense of belonging by shifting their self-concept. This transformation occurred in conjunction with a new perspective on God and God’s interactions with individuals. Mennonite leaders and lay persons discussed how God called them to roles and encouraged them to persevere even when they faced opposition. They found support in the Bible, an important source of spiritual authority for Mennonites. As they learned to reinterpret scripture passages that had traditionally restricted women, they had a new understanding of how all people could contribute to the kingdom of God. They also became aware of the gifts they and others possessed. They were clear that God wanted people to take on roles that they enjoyed, and this understanding of God altered their perceptions of themselves. They accepted the call God had placed upon them and were more optimistic about the future of the local and global church.
Acknowledgements

Thanks to my committee members, Louise M. Burkhart, Elise Andaya, and Jennifer Burrell. I acknowledge a great debt to my advisor and chair, Louise, who opened many doors for me before and during my time at the University at Albany. Louise, I am grateful that you invited me into the doctoral program even though I had only intended to complete my Master’s degree. Though you did not convince me to become a Mesoamericanist, you have encouraged me as I followed my own interests. I have enjoyed having you walk with me through this process.

Jennifer, I appreciated the way you often brought a different perspective to an issue that I had not previously considered, and for the way you have shown concern for your collaborators in your own research endeavors. Elise, I am inspired by your efforts as an educator who constantly researches new and relevant material that will challenge students. As an anthropologist, you provided helpful feedback on ethnographic data and challenged me to continue to find new avenues for understanding a topic.

The Initiatives for Women program at the University at Albany provided funding to begin the dissertation research through the Karen R. Hitchcock New Frontiers Fund Award. The University at Albany Benevolent Association Research Grant provided focus group funding.

I have appreciated working alongside numerous colleagues at UAlbany who supported me and who allowed me to encourage them. In particular, Crystal Sheedy patiently offered guidance when I arrived in Albany, with very little knowledge of anthropology and completely ignorant of what a doctoral program required. Sarah Appelhans and Alejandro Arango-Londoño, members of my cohort, thank you for conversations in the office, or between classes, or at a distance, which gave me the mental, emotional, and social support for each step of the Ph.D. process. I am thankful for the continued connections with UAlbany colleagues.
I am grateful to Michael R. Cosby and Melanie A. Howard, who read and commented on an early draft of chapter 5. The chapter has been greatly revised as a result of your feedback.

Thank you to Steven M. Nolt for thorough and thoughtful comments on chapter 1, and for helping me understand some of the nuances of Mennonite history.

Thank you to Emalie Rell and Rachel Bickelman, who served as capable research assistants during my focus group interviews. You each have different and valuable gifts.

I appreciated the assistance of the staff and volunteers at Mennonite Life (formerly Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society) who aided me in finding books and archival materials.

A significant measure of appreciation goes to my Stuck to Unstoppable colleagues, whose insights and personal experiences carried me through this journey. Nowhere else could I find a global group of women whose lives are so wholly disconnected from my own and yet so intimately intertwined. I would not have “PhinisheD” without you.

I am profoundly grateful to the people of Eastland Mennonite Church, who embraced my presence among them week after week, who were vulnerable with me, laughed with me, invited me into their homes, and who ensured me that I would always be welcome in the congregation. This dissertation and my own life have been enriched because of each of you.

Thank you to the Hoover and Rohrer families who not only kept me employed and entertained but who also kept my feet firmly grounded in Lancaster County—literally and figuratively. For all those who worked alongside me, I welcomed all of your diverse gifts so we could complete the work.

Thanks to my friends and many family members who explored new places, went on adventures with me, and who enjoyed doing many other activities that were not related to the dissertation. I need you in my life for the fun events and mundane moments.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction: A Living Critique** .................................................................................................................. 1

“Send Us More Mennonites” .......................................................................................................................... 1

Critical Separation among Lancaster County Mennonites ........................................................................... 5

Establishing Credentials ................................................................................................................................. 9

Critique, Interpretation, and Belonging ........................................................................................................ 13

An Anthropology of Mennonites .................................................................................................................... 22

Purpose and Significance ................................................................................................................................. 30

Research Methodology .................................................................................................................................. 35

Chapter Overview .......................................................................................................................................... 38

**Chapter 1: Listening: Stories of Mennonite Origins and of Mennonite Lives** ........................................... 40

A Big Story ...................................................................................................................................................... 40

Breach: LMC and MC USA in Conflict ........................................................................................................... 44

Background on Mennonite Origins And Polity .............................................................................................. 47

Interpretation and Mennonite Priorities ......................................................................................................... 72

Belonging in Lancaster County Mennonite Culture ....................................................................................... 82

Belonging As Anabaptist .................................................................................................................................. 93

Listening for Common Ground ...................................................................................................................... 99

**Chapter 2: Precarious Dance: The Individual and the Community** ............................................................ 102

Introducing Belonging .................................................................................................................................. 102

Sensing Belonging ......................................................................................................................................... 104

Belonging, Belief, And Behavior .................................................................................................................... 108

Family Matters, Church Matters ................................................................................................................... 122

Critique of the Idealized Community ........................................................................................................... 137

Belonging and Nonbelonging ....................................................................................................................... 149

**Chapter 3: Validating Women: Critiquing the Church and Offering Credentials to Mennonite Women** ...... 151

Men and Women in the Church ..................................................................................................................... 151

Nonconformity and the “Rules and Discipline” ............................................................................................. 154

Gender Revealed .......................................................................................................................................... 161

The Gift of Integrity .................................................................................................................................... 177

Critiquing Belonging ..................................................................................................................................... 187

**Chapter 4: The Quest of the Called: Exploring Calling and Gifts Among Mennonite Leaders** .................. 197

The Staff ......................................................................................................................................................... 197

Gifts and Calling ............................................................................................................................................ 200
The Call: “God was pretty unrelenting” ........................................................................................................ 201
The Call and the Quest....................................................................................................................................... 214
Eastland Mennonite Church: A Case Study....................................................................................................... 225
Contributing Gifts............................................................................................................................................... 241

Chapter 5: Cutting Horns or Catching Foxes: The Adaptability of (Biblical) Hermeneutics for an Interpretive
Community of Practice...................................................................................................................................... 244

Introduction: Off Balance ............................................................................................................................... 244
Interpretation and Belonging......................................................................................................................... 246
Interpretive Communities of Practice ........................................................................................................... 248
Biblical Hermeneutics..................................................................................................................................... 253
Interpreting Scripture....................................................................................................................................... 259
Conclusion: Turning the Gem.......................................................................................................................... 283

Conclusion: A Living Hope.............................................................................................................................. 290

Centered on Jesus............................................................................................................................................. 290
Creating a Centered Community.................................................................................................................. 292
Centered in Hope............................................................................................................................................ 295
A Centered Circle............................................................................................................................................ 299

Appendix A: Interview and Focused Group Details....................................................................................... 302
Appendix B: Anabaptist Mennonite Network’s Seven Core Convictions .......................................................... 303
Appendix C: Ephesians 5:15-29....................................................................................................................... 304
Works Cited....................................................................................................................................................... 305
Introduction: A Living Critique

“Send Us More Mennonites”

“Send us more Mennonites!” the people in the story cried out. The storyteller said that the Mennonite representative speaking to them did not understand. The audience repeated: “Send us more Mennonites! We love them! We hang them up for walls. We wrap our children in them. We sleep with them. We spread them on the floor as mattresses. We love Mennonites!” As I listened to this anecdote, I could not help cracking a smile at this point. The idea of tacking one of the church volunteers beside me to a rafter to create a wall was absurd. The mental image of one of the unflappable ladies in the church sewing circle being spread upon the floor as bedding was enough to make me laugh out loud. My companions chuckled, and the woman who had given the account was smiling broadly. Several women certainly had heard this story before, but they did not mind hearing it again on this Saturday in May. We were all women spending the morning volunteering for Mennonite Central Committee, a relief and development agency supported by several Anabaptist groups, including Lancaster Mennonite Conference and Atlantic Coast Conference.

We came from various Mennonite congregations to volunteer that Saturday morning, and passed the time by sharing stories of our lives and our other experiences within the Mennonite church. In its humanitarian efforts, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) sends food, relief kits, and hand-knotted comforters to sites where people have been displaced or prevented from getting basic necessities. The story the woman had shared with us came from an MCC representative who was delivering supplies. The representative asked the people in the refugee camp what else they needed. “Send us more Mennonites,” they replied. Since there were no MCC service workers in the country (Syria, according to this storyteller), the MCC
representative did not understand why the people would want more persons sent to the crowded camp. Eventually, it became clear they wanted more handmade comforters. It happened that when the comforters arrived, they were in boxes stamped with the label “Mennonite Central Committee.” Not recognizing the words, people in the camp thought that the items in the boxes were called Mennonites.¹

As a piece of verbal folklore, this story is important and endures among Mennonites in Lancaster County, particularly Mennonite women because it validates the work they do and the service they offer to others. Piecing and knotting comforters remains almost exclusively work done by women in Mennonite congregations. (Though I know at least one husband cuts patches for his wife, and some men join in helping to knot comforters as part of an annual party of volunteers.) Foremost, this narrative indicates that the work these women do is valued by people in other regions around the world, people these women will never meet. At the same time, it also reveals that the women are not seeking acclaim or compensation for their work. The humorous part of the story, that the term “Mennonites” is applied to the blankets, makes people smile because they realize that they are part of a small group of Christians, but, even though largely unknown on the world stage, the work their hands produce is valuable.

“Sewing circles” are one way in which Mennonite women, who have often been relegated to less public forums in the church, can spread their influence far beyond the walls of the church building or beyond their local communities. Mennonite women continue to cut and piece and sew and knot comforters because they know that what they contribute is a material

¹ In another version of this story, the MCC representative is in a refugee camp in Africa, handing out blankets alongside United Nations workers. The UN blankets are made from dull colors, while the MCC blankets are full of color. The people in the refugee camp request “the Mennonites” or “the Mennonite blankets” because they preferred the colorful comforters instead of the drab blankets from the UN. Though this version of the story is less humorous, it nonetheless reinforces the idea that the comforters are valuable pieces of work, and the people who receive them appreciate the handmade comforters.
necessity for people whose possessions have been destroyed or discarded. They work as steadily as generations of Mennonite women have worked before them. As they work, they talk. During my fieldwork among Mennonites in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, I joined a sewing circle. Most of the women were retired and could spend the morning stretching comforters on frames and slowly sticking needles through the carefully pieced top, batting, and backing and tying small knots with colorful embroidery floss to hold it all together. The mundane work allowed time for them to chat about grandchildren, food for holiday gatherings, retirement homes, mutual friends, and personal health. They were not only serving people they would never meet by designing and assembling the comforters; they were also forming relationships with one another, strengthening their community. Most of the women had learned to sew from friends or family members. Some only learned when they joined the sewing circle. I learned from my grandmother, so working alongside older women was familiar territory. As we conversed, I realized that these women were not only learning to sew from other women; they were also learning how to be part of a Mennonite congregation together. Some women were brought to a Mennonite church as children. Others joined later in life. But just as they learned to sew by working alongside others, they collaborated to create their own understanding of Mennonitism.

Anthropologist Judith Casselberry explains that women in a Pentecostal-Holiness congregation sustain the church through their labor even though men constitute the church hierarchy (Casselberry 2017, 8–9). “In general,” Casselberry writes, “the church’s women think they work harder than most men and are more responsive to the day-in and day-out needs of the church” (2017, 1). Mennonite women would not verbally make such clear distinctions between men’s work and women’s work, but they do recognize that the work they do behind the scenes contributes to both the local church and the needs of others around the globe, no matter their
stance on faith. Through their handiwork, Mennonite women may have a farther-reaching influence on people’s lives than the men who dominate the local church scene. Mennonite women’s roles are changing in the church so that men are no longer the only authoritative leaders in the church. Most of the formal leaders are men, but leadership roles are expanding so that women’s work can include serving church meals or preaching on Sunday morning. The church changes, but still the work goes on in the sewing circle and beyond.

Sewing comforters is a collective project because the sewing circles are places for women to assemble, and the comforters that are finished become congregational property and represent the community’s effort to enact their faith beyond the wall of the church building. In January 2020, I visited two different progressive Mennonite congregations in different parts of Lancaster County. Each congregation prominently displayed donated handmade comforters in the sanctuaries, foyers, or hallways of the church. One congregation had two comforters, and the other had nearly 50 comforters. Another person reported that yet a third congregation had prepared as many as 111 comforters to send to MCC that month.

In January 2020, MCC requested 6,500 comforters to help meet the increasing need for the blankets in areas affected by conflict and disasters (Mennonite Central Committee 2020), and these congregations were responding to the need. They reacted to the request and sent more “Mennonites.” What surprised me was that these congregations belonged to different Mennonite conferences, had people from a variety of economic and educational backgrounds, and represented a wide spectrum of theological positions. And yet, they were all united in their commitment to creating handcrafted pieces that would be used by people who no longer had their homes due to natural or human-initiated disasters. Each Mennonite, despite their differences, was united in an effort to support not only MCC, but all the people from Jordan,
Haiti, Ukraine, and other places who received those gifts that winter. Together, they were defining Mennonitism and demonstrating that serving others is part of being a Mennonite.

**Critical Separation among Lancaster County Mennonites**

**Grounds for Divorce**

The copious number of Anabaptist groups around the world evinces a long history of conflict and internal critique. The Anabaptist religious family tree twists and turns with so many aerial roots, branches, and tiny twigs that it looks like a banyan tree, each woody pillar piled over and around the other parts of the tree. Conflicts in progressive Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Mennonite churches reached a climax in 2015 when Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) announced its intention to withdraw from the denomination, Mennonite Church USA (MC USA). At the time, LMC was the largest member conference of MC USA. Most of LMC’s member congregations supported the conference’s decision, but a relatively small number of congregations and individuals preferred to maintain connections to the national denomination. Although this was an institutional-level transition, the leaders claimed that the withdrawal occurred out of concern for individual members. Indeed, many individuals and congregations were in favor of the withdrawal, citing moral concerns about MC USA’s failure to discipline a conference that licensed a pastor in a same-sex relationship, in opposition to the denomination’s membership guidelines (Nafziger 2015; Mennonite Church USA 2001).

For a small number of church members and for seventeen congregations (about 10 percent of LMC’s total congregations), the withdrawal was like a painful divorce, in which the children were left to decide between estranged parents. When I interviewed Daniel Frey in 2016 as a prelude to this study, he explained, “Lancaster Conference has chosen to divorce from Mennonite Church USA. And then I say, most times when there’s a divorce, there’s a fight over
the kids. But in this case, it feels like the divorce is going to happen and the kids are being told, ‘Find your way. Figure out a way. It’s up to you.’” Daniel highlighted the personal nature of the institutional conflict and the pain individuals felt and the lack of control they experienced. I wanted to learn more about how people personally experienced and responded to conflict within the Mennonite church.

Historians and sociologists have studied Anabaptism’s fragmented religious history to explain why conflict and schism appear to be endemic within this Christian tradition (M. A. King 2001; Kniss 1997; 2005; Kraybill and Hurd 2006; Ruth 1984). They conclude that different factors, such as American society, moral concerns, and an emphasis on a uniform community all affect Mennonite congregations. These explanations are rich in historical detail, archival material, demographic information, and a knowledge of social explanations for conflict, but they lack the ethnographic detail that anthropologists could provide to more fully understand how individuals are affected by and how they react to the church-wide schisms and personal disagreements in their midst. Some authors do offer this personal perspective on Mennonites (B. Graybill 1998; Ruth 2001), but no one had considered the present conflict or the ways individuals were refashioning themselves in response to the chasm between LMC and MC USA.

After two years of transition, eight of the seventeen original dissenting congregations decided to leave LMC and join Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), another progressive Mennonite conference present in the region, which was continuing its affiliation with MC USA. At the same time, individuals were also shifting their congregational alliances in order to remain faithful to their own ideas of morality and to find belonging in a scene that was constantly shifting. As a result of the conflict, progressive Mennonitism was interpreted in new ways within
disparate conferences, LMC and ACC, and individuals could choose which interpretation best suited their interests. I analyze this conflict in more detail in chapter 1.

**Grounds for Study**

The schism between LMC and MC USA propelled me into further study on Mennonites in Lancaster County because, as I interviewed people, I realized that there was a long history of tension between the conference and the denomination. LMC’s decision to withdraw was not as shocking when I learned more about the history of the relationship between LMC and MC USA. During one of my early interviews, one person remarked that the same congregations that wanted to remain with MC USA after LMC’s departure were mostly the same congregations that had been the first ones in the county to advocate for ordaining Mennonite women. At the time, I was focused on understanding the schism and was not as concerned with the history of women’s ordination, but that brief comment surfaced later and inspired my dissertation research. I initially intended to study how women had worked toward belonging as credentialed leaders in the Mennonite church, but I quickly realized that female pastors were not the only ones who struggled to belong in Lancaster County Mennonite congregations. Therefore, I adjusted my research questions to frame them in terms of belonging, rather than gender: How do individuals interpret a Mennonite identity? How does a desire for belonging contribute to shifting affiliations with others and their internal sense of self? How do Mennonites receive what they have been given and interpret it so that it is relevant for them?

Times of internal tension are particularly constructive for producing new forms of Christianity because the familiar social fields in which people once lived no longer exist. Conflict is a way in which Christian individuals critique their own institutions and translate the global ideology of Christianity into an ever-changing localized context. In times of controversy,
Mennonites engage theology to consider how their ideas of God are translated into action. One distinctive aspect of Anabaptism is that it is a religion that emphasizes action over belief. Conflicts arise when theology is enacted in different ways, creating different Mennonite cultures among people who share a similar Christian confession and religious heritage. When Mennonite individuals translate their theology into practice, they adjust their church alliances and spiritual and social habits to reflect their interpretation of Mennonitism. Therefore, conflict is productive, generating new ways of understanding what it means to be Mennonite in the present era.

Other Christians face similar tensions within American culture. Anthropologist Omri Elisha (2011) explored how American evangelicals engaged in social action and urged fellow church members to join them in social justice projects, though current American evangelicalism does not usually promote social engagement. In this case, there is no direct conflict among church members that results in separation, but it is clear that “socially engaged evangelicals” emphasize certain aspects of Christianity that are not shared by other evangelicals (Elisha 2011, 7–9). The conflict is ideological and theological, rather than communal, but it demonstrates that disagreements can clarify people’s stances on specific topics.

In a study of conflict within a Mennonite congregation, pastor Michael King discusses a theological conflict with practical implications. The congregation was at odds with the conference over different ideas of appropriate sexual expression (M. A. King 2001, 23). King urges individuals to look past binary perspectives and, instead, recognize common ground in the debate (M. A. King 2001, 62, 207). Even if rupture occurs, conflict can be a way in which Christians acknowledge and authenticate the presence of different viewpoints. King’s perspective is reminiscent of anthropologist Courtney Handman’s concept of critical
Christianity. Handman presents the idea that schism is a form of critique, of claiming authority and legitimacy for a new expression of Christianity (2015, 16–17).

I assert that conflicts are rooted in disagreements over what people think God wants, and their perceptions of God result from their personal education, lifestyle, and experiences. This study of Mennonites will demonstrate how people’s ideas of God are based largely on their own experiences and that they evaluate other Christian expressions based on their own experiences. A few recent neuroscientific studies have demonstrated a convergence between people’s own experience and their beliefs (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007; Preston and Epley 2005) and connections between people’s own beliefs and their perceptions of what God believes (Epley et al. 2009). These studies, while offering quantitative and neuroimaging evidence for this phenomenon, lack the ethnographic depth individuals reveal as they struggle with their beliefs, change their viewpoints over time, and attempt to practice their principles in a fluctuating religious and social environment. The following chapters will demonstrate how Mennonites’ perceptions of God, however they understood God, are shaped by their own personal and communal experiences. Since each person has vastly different experiences, ideas of God vary widely. Individuals also report that their perceptions of God and of themselves changed over time. In light of that, I will consider this additional research question: In what ways are new forms of Mennonitism connected to personal and communal perceptions of God?

Establishing Credentials

My own relationship with the Mennonites of Lancaster County begins over three centuries ago, though, naturally, my ethnographic research is much more recent. My paternal ancestors comprised some of the first Mennonite residents in southern Pennsylvania and remained in the county to the present. Growing up in Lancaster County gave me knowledge of
the region, but I had little experience with contemporary Mennonites. In 2016, I began an ethnographic exploration among progressive Mennonites in Lancaster County and learned that schisms speckle the church’s local history. In the same way that my association to Mennonites began well before 2016, the progressive Mennonites who live in the region today are influenced by the actions and beliefs of those who lived before them, people who established church structures, determined their place in civic society, and laid out practices for future church members to follow.

Ironically, though I grew up surrounded by Mennonites in southern Pennsylvania, I did not know much about American Mennonites until I had spent a year in southeast Asia working alongside Mennonites who hailed from regions across the United States and Canada, Those were positive connections, and began to change my negative preconceptions about Mennonites. Later, whenever I talked to Mennonites from Lancaster County, they often spoke of the stereotypes that they encountered. Mennonites were regarded as “backward” or people living fifty years behind the rest of American society. They may also have been portrayed as insular and unfriendly to outsiders. My co-workers in Southeast Asia did not fit any of the preconceived associations I had in my mind. I began to realize that Mennonites were more varied and complex than I had perceived, and my interpretation of Mennonites began to shift.

My time in southeast Asia not only taught me that Mennonitism includes a wide swath of people, but it also propelled me into anthropology, a discipline I had never considered before that time. My initial foray into anthropology did not concern Mennonites, though I was interested in studying other modes of religion. Then, one day in 2015, I was having a casual conversation with a Mennonite friend who told me about LMC’s withdrawal from MC USA, which, at that time, was the largest body of progressive Mennonites in the United States. I recall responding, “Wow,
some anthropologist should study what’s happening there!” without any thought of doing so myself. Slowly, just as my perceptions of Mennonites had changed, my thoughts about researching Mennonites began to shift as I learned more about anthropology and became more interested in intra-church conflicts.

In my mind, anthropologists did not do fieldwork at home, no matter how much rich ethnographic data they could retrieve from a familiar location. In her introduction to Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon, a collection of folktales with ethnographic analysis, Kirin Narayan says that the book arose out of a conversation with her mother. Her mother insisted that she visit an elderly woman in the neighborhood to hear her stories. As a grown woman with a doctoral degree who was staying with her mother while furthering her research, Narayan initially scoffed at the suggestion, “What sort of confused anthropologist would mistake going to ‘the field’ as retreating home?” (Narayan 1997, 5). I found a kindred spirit in her resistance. In my mind, anthropologists did not do fieldwork in their hometown or among a familiar community, a belief that has been dismantled by examples of ethnographers doing just that (Bettez 2010; Brannick and Coghlan 2007; B. Graybill 1998; Jankie 2004; Landsman 1998; Moore 2011; Myerhoff 1978; Narayan 1993).

Having been raised in Lancaster County, though outside the Mennonite fold, I had the benefit of partial “insider” status that would aid in ethnographic research, but I could also bring a critical etic perspective (and lots of questions) about Mennonite church structures, beliefs, and practices. I quickly discovered that I entered the field with an assorted set of credentials, which I would have to wield carefully. At times, it was more beneficial to present my academic credentials and explain that I was an anthropologist doing fieldwork for my dissertation. This was often more important in formal gatherings or when I was introduced to individuals who were
business professionals or people who held higher education degrees and who could relate to my academic experience.

Other times, my educational background was a hindrance, and I relied on my social capital as a native Lancastrian. Diane Zimmerman Umble, who has a background in communication, writes about her ethnographic experience as a fieldworker among the Old Order Amish in Lancaster County. She included the questions that people “asked back” to her as part of her ethnographic data. She said she was often asked, “Who are you?” and spent time discussing her genealogy, which included Old Order Amish ancestors, before people were willing to commence a conversation (D. Z. Umble 2002, 45). I was asked the same question among Lancaster County’s Mennonite population, most often during informal conversations. During these moments, the academic credentials that would have been of prime importance in other situations were considered unimportant and even led to confusion and suspicion. The very aspects of my identity that are less significant in academia, including my family connections and knowledge of local geography and events, became the precise credentials that I needed to access knowledge within my field site. In such situations, I gained rapport only after I had established family connections or found a mutual connection to the other person.

As I discuss later, the need for shifting credentials is related to ways in which individuals interact with one another within the church, and the divergent focus of the two conferences within my study. Personal credentials related to family or to occupation can either enhance or inhibit a person’s sense of belonging within a church. Familial relationships were more important to people whose own families had generations of history in the county. Individuals who did not have family connections had to rely upon other forms of identification, such as educational or professional credentials. As I shifted between identities, I was also learning about how
Christians, particularly Mennonites, adjusted their own perspectives and their church structures during times of tension, whether the friction occurred inside the church or came from external circumstances.

**Critique, Interpretation, and Belonging**

**Critical Christianity**

Mennonites often discussed the interconnectedness between multiple aspects of their identity, which included, but were not limited to, gender and religion. They discussed their own concepts of themselves, their ideas of God, and their interactions with the surrounding Christian community. Therefore, though I spent much of my time with women, my research moved beyond a focus on gender and belonging to consider the larger ways in which Mennonites engage in “critical Christianity.” Anthropologist Courtney Handman introduced this phrase to explain how Christian groups critique one another and evaluate their own positions as participants “in a social field that is Christian” (2015, 15). Her work addresses the multiple ways in which Christian individuals promote themselves as members of “the body of Christ,” and considers the social group as an important level of analysis for the anthropology of Christianity (Handman 2015, 10, 45).

Progressive Mennonites in Lancaster County carefully situate themselves between the Amish and conservative Mennonites and their non-Christian neighbors. On one hand, progressive Mennonites spoke about sharing values with other Americans, such as concerns about the environment or efforts toward racial equality. On the other hand, progressive and conservative Mennonites, as well as the Amish, share the same faith heritage and many of the same Anabaptist values, but they differ in their engagement with wider society, which is how they think their values should be enacted. The terms “progressive” and “conservative” are used
to refer to Mennonites who separated from each other in the 1960s and surrounding decades following an era of nonconformity among American Mennonites. Conservative Mennonites mostly retained the practices of nonconformity while progressive Mennonites did not. I explain these distinctions more fully in chapter 2. Progressive Mennonites in Lancaster County live in “a social field” that is not only Christian but specifically Anabaptist. The region is ripe for critique, and, therefore, distinguishing between groups tends to become more important in order for them to justify their separate identity.

The focus on critique and separation is tied to belonging because participants seek to define who is part of a Christian group and to delineate the social relationships and lifestyle expectations for members of that group. Critique also reforms Christianity in order to enable its adherents to continue to adapt their faith to shifting sociocultural environments. Mennonites are part of the Anabaptist movement that emerged out of the Protestant Reformation, itself a principal example of internal Christian critique. But the political and cultural fields in which Anabaptists live today are significantly different from the pre-Enlightenment, sixteenth-century worlds of the Netherlands, Calvin’s Geneva, or differentiated German states. It is their ability to internally critique their own customs and interpret their faith in new social contexts that has allowed Mennonites, like other Christians, to continue to practice their long-standing religion in the democratic, (post)modern context of the United States.

Christianity’s longevity suggests that perhaps the breaks between groups are ways in which people solidify their faith instead of abandoning it as a failure. As Handman proposes, critical Christianity is the process by which groups define themselves as more explicitly Christian than other groups. Critical Christianity examines the interplay between the individual private sphere and the public social sphere and recognizes that “denominationalism is not the
failure of Christianity but its very practice” (Handman 2015, 24). I posit that the different Anabaptist groups are examples of the ways in which individuals engage in clarifying and refashioning the religious community through their interactions with the larger Mennonite fellowship, through their own understandings of themselves, and through their perceptions of God. They become both communities who do interpretation, providing a greater understanding of Mennonitism in their Lancaster County context, and interpreters of what community should be as they critique the church, noting its value and challenging forms of nonbelonging. They are interpretive communities of practice, an idea I discuss more fully in chapter 5.

**Communities of Interpretation**

Interpretation is an important aspect of the process of critique within a religious society. When people within a community evaluate the existing social structures and viewpoints of other members in order to bring about change, they must offer alternative explanations for why practices and beliefs should be modified. That is, they must reinterpret the rules, rituals, and ways of thinking that had previously guided the religious community. Handman’s ethnographic research among the Guhu-Samane churches of Papua New Guinea reveals how critical Christianity is enacted through different media, such as language, music, and bodily movement (Handman 2015). Similarly, Mennonite congregations each had different practices that set them apart from one another. For progressive Mennonites, aligning with LMC apart from MC USA or moving to ACC to remain with MC USA was a way in which they positioned themselves against opposing interpretations of Mennonitism. Through their behaviors, they display how they think their faith should be enacted and offer a living critique of other Mennonites.

Interpretation, a process of exploration and explanation, is an act of disruption and discontinuity because it forces a word or concept to be exposed as incomplete and fallible. While
interpretation expands the reach of certain types of knowledge, it also opens up the possibility that the original meaning will be challenged and that new meanings will be more relevant in the current context. Michael King analyzed a conflict within his Mennonite congregation by explaining that congregants shared the importance of “maintaining the right fellowship,” a phrase that has been circulated around American Mennonite communities. The tension arose because the people in the congregation disagreed about how to interpret that value. The people in the congregation struggled “to decide whether maintaining the right fellowship or the right fellowship” should take precedence in the midst of an internal conflict (M. A. King 2001, 64).

This same distinction is relevant for Lancaster County Mennonites. It is ultimately the people of a specific community who determine which meaning is relevant for their context, and they may emphasize different priorities at different times, depending on the situation. They are interpretive communities of practice because, as a group, they determine which interpretations they will accept and then act upon that decision.

Christians continually engage in critical interpretation in which ideas and sacred texts are interpreted in ways that support divergent viewpoints. Critical interpretation is not interpretation solely for the sake of understanding, but rather is an intentional effort to indicate critique of and opposition to another viewpoint. Critical interpretation occurs within a specific religious community where members of that community largely agree on the sources of inspiration and authority for that community but disagree on how they should be understood and performed. For the progressive Mennonites I met, the community of faith and the Bible are two main sources of authority. Therefore, the Mennonites are not in conflict over their foundations; rather, they disagree about how to interpret their sources of authority in the present context. Which community has the final authority? The local congregation? The Bishop Board? The
denomination? How should the Bible be used today? Do all parts have equal weight or do some sections take precedence over others? Should Christians consider the original context of the text?

Interpretation, then, becomes a practice of critique in which various factions promote their explanations above others. Jacki Dietrich, a Mennonite pastor, was able to critically evaluate her Anabaptist value of community. She told me that she appreciated the sense of collective identity and purpose in the Mennonite church, but she was also aware that sometimes the integrated nature of the group could be detrimental. “That ‘we’ of community can be pretty hostile in building barriers,” she recognized. Jacki was able to critique the Anabaptist emphasis on community and recognize how it gave some people a sense of belonging and purpose while others felt excluded for various reasons.

Within Christianity, discussions of interpretation are often solely relegated to debates about the Bible, but critical interpretation expands the conversation by considering how practices and beliefs are interpreted within a community of practice. In the midst of presenting arguments for four main topics in biblical interpretation, Willard Swartley writes: “The believing community is an interpreting community” (Swartley 1983, 236, emphasis in original). He is primarily explaining how the Christian community has codified the Bible and how the Bible, in turn, shapes the particular community that uses it. However, critical interpretation views a Christian group not only as an interpreting community, but as an interpreted community. That is, the beliefs and practices of that group of people are continually changing, being challenged and tested and refashioned by members of the church. Sacred texts are not the only factors that shape a religious community. Church policies, governance structures, and roles within the church are continually reinterpreted as the social environment shifts.
The wide range of Christian denominations and the diverse expressions of Anabaptism are all examples of ways in which people wrestle with the elusive truths in their lives. One aspect of critical Christianity that Handman does not fully consider is the pluralistic nature of so many varied expressions of Christianity. Critical Christianity yields ambiguity. It is meant to be messy and difficult to define because it allows for many possible expressions of Christianity to be valid and yet inconsistent at the same time. This ethnography of progressive Mennonites focuses on how internal critiques validate some existing religious forms, while also challenging and rejecting others as no longer sufficient for the present time. When people offer alternative interpretations of Mennonitism, the existing forms are not replaced; rather, as with a diamond, light is refracted on the alternative interpretation to reveal a different facet of Mennonitism.

**Belonging and Agency**

Belonging, as work done by an individual, is an interpretation that motivates a person to behave in a certain way. Anthropological studies of belonging are rooted in modern ideas of personhood, where the individual was recognized as distinct from the collective. Individuals perform their roles in society with some level of conscious awareness of their actions and the social norms surrounding them. Personhood is assigned by the community (Fortes 1987; Mauss 1985; Morgan 1997), and personal identity grows out of that. Individual identity is an image or role that one takes or that is assigned to a person. Belonging, on the other hand, mobilizes people toward a common goal. It is something that must be “felt” (Diaz-Barriga 2008, 137). Belonging is distinct from identity in that it is directly connected to mobilizing people to act in particular ways. There are multiple Mennonite identities in Lancaster County, but no one belongs to all of them. Each group emphasizes a different element of Anabaptism, and, in participating in a distinct group, each individual contributes to their own sense of belonging. A person may
perform an expected role within a group, or one may actively resist the ways of living that the group promotes.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s influential work on the piety movement among nonliberal Egyptian women offers a contrasting perspective to Western feminist notions of agency, freedom, and subordination. Feminist scholars often locate “agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject” (Mahmood 2005, 7). Mahmood does not think of agency “simply as a synonym for resistance to social norms but as a modality of action,” which can take various and flexible forms (2005, 157). Agency cannot be defined only by a progressive social group but must arise from within each network of actors who bring their own discourse and dispositions (Mahmood 2005, 34). Thus, for progressive Mennonite men and women who thought that women could be leaders and ordained as pastors, their behaviors were aimed at changing the existing practices of the church to be more faithful to their ideals of the body of Christ. They were not abandoning church or openly organizing protests against the Bishop Board or other leadership structures. Instead, their actions arose from the repertoire that already existed within the church.

Sociologist Charles Tilly believed that members of a society responded to conflict out of “repertoires of contention,” which allowed them to release their emotions, even if the actions did not have any direct link to the intended result (1993, 264). Their society constrained their possible behaviors. However, just as musicians can add new pieces to their repertoires, members of a society can create new ways of being and acting within their particular context. The Egyptian women of the piety movement believe that choosing to veil and submit themselves to their husbands in many areas meant that they were agents who are actively choosing to revitalize Islam (Mahmood 2005, 43, 51, 177–78). They used elements of their established religious
repertoire, including modest dress and daily prayers, to denote their piety. In a similar fashion, some progressive Mennonites relied upon their religious repertoire in order to enable women to serve as church leaders. They invoked the Bible as a source of authority and offered interpretations that display how biblical women displayed spiritual leadership. They named God as the ultimate authority and argued that God gave gifts to people regardless of gender; therefore, women with leadership gifts should be able to use those gifts for the benefit of the church and the furtherance of God’s mission.

Agency is essential to belonging because, as I argue, belonging is recognized internally as much as it is conditioned externally. Institutions do not sense belonging; individuals do. Mennonites do not passively accept the organizational conditions around them. Instead, through their commitment to enacting their faith, they become agents of change. They actively create and re-create the conditions for belonging within Mennonite institutions.

Interpreting Belonging

Critical interpretation is the way in which individuals reinterpret personhood in order to belong to a specific group, a peoplehood. Other anthropologists of Christianity have already noted that Christianity is a complex mixture of individualism and sociality (Elisha 2011; Handman 2015; Mayblin 2010). When Christians evaluate their religious structures and the behavior of their co-religionists, they demonstrate that critique is an interactive process between the individual and the communal structure to which that individual adheres. Interpretation and reinterpretation, then, is the way in which individuals create belonging and nonbelonging for people within a particular group. If individuals do not agree with the group’s definition of personhood and do not feel a sense of belonging, the individuals can attempt to reinterpret
personhood and alter the community’s definition of peoplehood in order to create belonging for a different subset of people.

Lastly, critical interpretations of Christianity offer new possibilities for understanding God. An important part of the “social field that is Christian” (Handman 2015, 15) is the presence of God as an unseen, but much discussed, actor in the social drama of Christianity. Anthropologists do not often scrutinize how their interlocutors perceive God, nor how those perceptions influence a person’s behavior. Notable exceptions are Tanya Luhrmann’s analysis of evangelical Christians’ prayers and conversations with God and the physical and emotional practices that people intentionally cultivate in order to be able to hear God (2012, 132–35). Additionally, Susan Harding’s (2000) well-known ethnography of fundamentalist Christians explores how Jerry Falwell used specific language to guide people’s ideas of what God wanted them to do. Nor do ethnographers commonly consider that one group of people may have a wide variety of conceptions of God, and, even though they use the same term for the divine, they are discussing rather different perceptions of God. Omri Elisha (2011) considers how individuals within one congregation enact their faith differently, but does not fully discuss how various perceptions of God lead people to different moral ambitions. I address the fact that God is often a silent actor within ethnographies of Christianity but is very important to the people who call themselves Christians. I will explain how Mennonites interpret God as a result of their own personal and professional experiences. As individuals critique Mennonite beliefs and practices, they interpret ideas of gender and sexuality, mission and outreach, and church polity in different ways and envision different characteristics of God that align with their critical interpretations.

The role of the ethnographer is to take a snapshot of people in the moment, before the group is reinterpreted in a new configuration of ideas, institutions, and practices. The challenge
is that, unlike the written words of text, which remain printed on a page, a community of people is never static. As soon as one learns to read the group, the people change and the institutions are reconfigured. The group’s structure and priorities are influenced by social, cultural, and environmental factors external to the religious group. Interpretation is, therefore, an ongoing process by which the written texts of the community are constantly re-evaluated, and the active text of people’s lives continually takes on new expressions. The scene is constantly changing so that there is no one “right” interpretation for all time, which becomes apparent through the diverse patchwork of American Mennonites.

An Anthropology of Mennonites

Ethnography, Religion, and Global Entanglements

Christianity is not a one-size-fits-all religion that can be delivered intact and donned by any group of people at any time; it is a religion of constant transformation, continually being translated into new locations among ever-changing people. Christianity has been regarded as an imperialistic religion, forced upon people who, in turn, found creative ways to indigenize its concepts (Howell 2003; Eriksen 2008). Even when people chose to adhere to Christianity, they have adapted it to novel contexts. Mennonitism has had to be translated into each new geographical, political, and social context in which its adherents have lived. The practice of Christianity is malleable and in need of constant revision and reinterpretation as situations change. When Christianity is transported to a new location, the same institutions, languages, and customs are not usually present in the new region, and, so, the religion cannot be practiced in exactly the same way. A history of Mennonites in Pennsylvania alone, not to mention other locations, demonstrates how the people have adopted their new religious practices into new languages, church structures, dress codes, and rules, and have held waxing and waning alliances.
with the nation (Jacobs 1983; Loewen 2001; Ruth 2001; Urry 1989). Mennonites demonstrate that it is the nature of Christianity to be critical of itself and to adapt both its external expressions and its beliefs in order to survive in a new context.

To date, much of the research about Mennonites has been done by historians and sociologists. A few anthropologists have studied Mennonites (Fountain 2011; Kraybill and Hurd 2006; Urry 1989) and some approach anthropology from an Anabaptist perspective (Jacobs 1983; Janzen 2019; Hiebert 1994). In October 2019, the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies at The University of Winnipeg chose “Mennonites and Anthropology: Ethnography, Religion, and Global Entanglements” as the focus for its annual conference. The presenters represented a variety of professions and academic disciplines and were affiliated with several religious (or non-religious) traditions; nevertheless, Mennonites were well-represented. Their work spanned three continents and reflected Mennonite communities in five countries, though much of the work was historical and did not fully represent the current global diversity of Anabaptism. That is, even though about one-third of Anabaptists are currently located in Europe and North America (MWC 2020), two-thirds of the presentations with a regional focus concerned Mennonites in the United States and Canada (where the conference was held). The presenters considered religious and social questions that confront Mennonites as they consider how to enact their faith, questions within the realm of anthropological investigation.

Mennonite scholars, pastors, and lay persons seem to agree on one aspect of Mennonitism: there is no easy way to define what it means to be Mennonite. In several interviews I conducted, people had an easier time defining what their version of Mennonitism was not, instead of defining it in a positive sense. Anthropologist James Urry (1983) argues that Mennonites are an adaptable group whose primary identity changes over time depending on
external circumstances. Mennonites may be defined as a religious group, ethnic contingent, people with a certain political stance (such as conscientious objectors), or individuals who demand specific provisions for their own educational system. Philip Fountain, one of the co-conveners for the Mennonites and Anthropology conference, stated that one of the gifts Mennonites bring to the anthropology of Christianity is that Mennonites fail to conform to easy definitions. Mennonites allow for different interpretations, and they are aware of that fact. For me, as the ethnographer, this is both a benefit and a challenge because it is hard to capture a snapshot of contemporary Mennonites, since the scene keeps changing. However, I realize that the group is always evolving, and so there will always be ample opportunity for new studies.

Even though Mennonites are a heterogenous group, there are values and identities that the people share, and ways in which progressive American Mennonites in southern Pennsylvania inhabit these greater identities. I shared the anecdote about knotting comforters because I think it is a practice that exemplifies some of the core paradigms that concern Mennonites today. There were four distinct aspects of Mennonite religion that emerged from the “Mennonites and Anthropology” conference and from my interviews with individuals in southern Pennsylvania. These concepts offer a foundation for anthropology and Mennonitism to inform each other.

One of the underpinning tenets of Mennonitism is that faith is not only something one believes and accepts intellectually, but also something that one does and acts upon. Crafting comforters is one way in which Mennonites act upon their faith. Mennonite women produce a piece for which they receive no compensation and no formal recognition. Another facet of their religion is that Mennonites are committed to enacting and sharing their faith in nonviolent ways, such as through acts of service. Giving items like comforters is meant to share God’s compassion by meeting human needs for warmth and shelter. Mennonites also engage in overt mission
activities and evangelism, but usually without direct force or violence. They have been taught that faith must be each individual’s choice and cannot be forced on another person. Thirdly, Mennonites struggle to define their own identity as a group. They describe themselves variously as a historic peace church, as evangelicals, as an ethnic group, or as “the quiet in the land.” Lastly, Mennonites are considered a sectarian group within Christianity and often view themselves as a people apart from “the world,” even though they live out their faith within a worldly existence. These broad generalizations of Mennonites are shifting, as the following chapters reveal, but these aspects of historic Mennonitism impact those who carry on the faith today.

*Advancing the Anthropology of Christianity*

Mennonites offer an important question to Christians: Will Christianity continue as a religion? This is a question which Mennonites ask among themselves, and several of my participants raised this question as I conversed with them. Anthropologist and historian James Urry said someone once asked if he thought that Mennonitism would continue into the future. He responded by saying that Mennonites will have to forge their own future and find their own prophets, but that factors like community, heritage, religion, and economic prosperity will enable them to survive (Urry 2019). Anthropologists seem to take for granted that Christianity exists and can be studied now without considering its future. But the future is of great import for a teleological religion like Christianity. In fact, Christian theology, rooted as it is in a linear conception of time, is often concerned with debates about what will happen when life as we know it no longer exists. Anthropology has largely been a field of study focused on the past or present since it often depends on ethnographic research, and it is difficult, nay, impossible to research people that do not yet exist.
Anthropologists should be interested in the forward-thinking concerns of their interlocutors, and here is one way in which theology may instruct anthropology. Joel Robbins contends that anthropologists can learn from theologians, who are masters at studying otherness and making the other seem real and tenable, as ethnographers attempt to do (2006, 287–88). Though this is not a theological project, I am aware of how much theology arose during my conversations, and that just as I sought to understand Mennonites from my ethnographic lens, they were seeking to understand God from a human lens. I am not suggesting that anthropologists become prophets, but, rather that they examine these teleological considerations as indications of a group’s understanding of the present world and consider how people orient themselves toward the world.

Anthropologist Derrick Lemons found that one way anthropologists engage theology is by sharing insights and methods between fields (Lemons 2021, 402). Anthropologists Philip Fountain and Sin Wen Lau emphasize that theological “[e]ngagement does not necessitate a specific type or mode of interaction. Critique, transformation, affirmation and negation are all viable possibilities” (2013, 231). Though I emphasize Mennonites’ efforts to continue the church, I consider how their idea that God is beyond them shapes their ideas of themselves and of the church. They do not hold tightly to existing structures, though they find them important, because they realize that God continues beyond their finitude. Their ultimate trust in God beyond any individual insight inspired me to write about Mennonite critique not as a way of finally getting things right but as a practice of one possible interpretation among alternative interpretations. Ultimately, it is not the interpretation itself that matters but the fact that the church continues to adapt its traditions as it expands its understanding of God.
Pastors, as theologians-in-residence within a congregation, take on the task of interpreting biblical scriptures, church doctrines, and ideologies and aiding congregants in applying abstract concepts to their daily lives. They take the otherness of divinity and make God seem real to people. In this way, the role of the pastor and the ethnographer are not that different because each one learns to know and understand a different way of living and thinking and then attempts to express that difference in a way that makes it understandable and authentic to a particular group of people. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz adopts the terms “experience-near” and “experience-distant” from psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, to talk about how ethnographers listen when others describe their insights (experience-near) and then turn those terms and ideas into an explanation for a different audience (experience-distant) (Geertz 1974, 28–29).

As a pastor, Nate Evans was adept at switching between the experience-near and experience-distant viewpoint. In one Sunday sermon, he began discussing the 325 C.E. Council of Nicaea and the ideas of atonement from the Nicene Creed. His objective was to describe how Christians of that time were so fixated on getting the creeds precisely right that they missed the lived example of Jesus. He concluded that Christians should hold their distinctive traits loosely because the church is where God meets and shapes people, not where people must align with a certain statement of belief. His discussion of atonement theories and of the Nicene Creed (which was absent from the Mennonite hymnal the church used) were experience-distant constructs for most of the congregants. His reflections urging people to “live a life like Christ” translated the terms into experience-near concepts that had an application for their current situation.

The Practice of Interpretation

Ethnographers are primarily interpreters because they take the words and actions of one group of people and refashion them in such a way as to help people outside that group
understand the language and practices with which they are unfamiliar. Each ethnographer brings her own experiences and tools to the interpretive process and produces one possible interpretation of a group of people. That explanation does not exclude other possible readings. As Geertz wrote, “cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete” (1973, 29). The ethnographer records a few ideas, but there is room for more critique and interpretation. Geertz proposed that the interpretive anthropologist is “in search of meaning” (Geertz 1973, 5). It is not my goal as an anthropologist to find a sign, uncover its meaning, and then propose that the meaning is true for all people. In contrast to Geertz, I was exploring what was meaningful to the Mennonites I met, and then seeking to understand why it was meaningful to a person, based upon that person’s own history and experiences.

The signs within Mennonite culture hold different meanings for each person, and the signs can change meaning over time. Janice Reimer illustrates this dynamic well. In our interview, she described what it was like to return to Lancaster County and see women wearing head coverings again. For Janice, this physical covering was a symbol of female submission, but she quickly realized the symbol did not match her interpretation of it. She describes how her ideas were challenged:

I met a very intelligent woman, older woman. Her dresses were round necks and full sleeves. And inside she was liberated, and it was like whiplash. And then I met one of the women I had grown up with, and she had her hair cut, [was]wearing earrings, she was styling. As soon as she started to talk, I realized she was the same inside as she had been 25 years earlier, that she hadn't grown and changed. And those things were jarring. It was like the old markers weren't there of what it was like when I was growing up.

For these two women as well as for Janice, the head covering was meaningful for different reasons. I present some of the meanings people attached to specific ideas and practices and demonstrate that meaning changes over time or shifts according to context because the people are involved in creating the meaning.
The ethnographer is more of an artist than a detached technician. Like one who pieces a quilt together, the ethnographer is handed a variety of patches, decides how to arrange them, and then stitches them together with thread that binds the disparate elements. I have used the thread of belonging to bind the pieces together, but I relied upon the people I met to create the patches. I let the project be guided by their concerns. Another ethnographer may take the same patches and find a complementary arrangement or use different thread, such as the thread of belief or the thread of identity markers people project or the thread of the effect of professionalization on an agrarian community. Each thread is equally effective in holding the patches together, but it will have a different appearance in the end, and each person who views the finished product will respond with a different interpretation of the result.

What I have learned from theologians is that interpretation requires a good dose of humility because, as anthropologists well know, others may come along and offer alternative and equally valid explanations of a group of people. Lindy Backues, who studies theology and economic development, writes that humility in Christian thought is based upon the incarnation of God in Jesus: “This model and pattern of Jesus as the emptied and incarnate One prescriptively serves as the standard for Christian disciples who seek to engage faithfully in the world” (Backues 2017, 127). Adopting a similar attitude bolsters ethnographers “for doing anthropology with a great deal of integrity” (Backues 2017, 102). In her work about gender among Brazilian Catholics, anthropologist Maya Mayblin candidly states that any ethnography is subjective and is based on the personality of both the researcher and the people she meets. Even though Mayblin tried to let people speak for themselves, she recognized that others had equally valid and contrary ideas that did not make it to the published ethnography (2010, 40). The same is true for this work on progressive American Mennonites. Theologians can teach anthropologists that speaking about
things unknown is an art, not an exact science, and that there are numerous possible interpretations one can draw from the existing data. But not every interpretation is valid; the audience must accept what the pastor or theologian or anthropologist is presenting.

**Purpose and Significance**

Initially, I began studying Mennonites because I wanted to understand more about why LMC decided to withdraw from MC USA and explore how that impacted the individuals who felt deeply connected to both institutions. Their responses referenced parallels between LMC’s withdrawal from MC USA, which was concluded at the end of 2017, and LMC’s 2008 decision to credential women in church leadership, which was still a point of contention in some LMC congregations. Therefore, I began this project intent upon studying the effects of gender distinctions in progressive Mennonite congregations to see how ideas about women in leadership influenced people’s ideas of the church in 2018. As I began interviewing people, it became clear peoples’ interests were much broader than ideas about gender, and I adjusted my focus accordingly. I interviewed Martin Long about halfway through my fieldwork, and in the middle of our conversation, he said, “You haven’t asked me a single question about gender.” It was true, and I laughed and told him that I had learned from others before him that gender is intertwined with many other facets of a person’s life. By this time, I was more interested in exploring those connections instead of keeping a narrow focus only on gender. Throughout our conversation, I had already learned some things about Martin’s views on gender roles while also learning about his other interests. For the record, I did eventually ask him specific questions about women in leadership in Mennonite churches. The semi-structured interviews with Martin and others influenced and modified my original research plan.
The project expanded because I realized that sometimes gender matters served as a screen that hid deeper concerns within the church about religious and cultural identity, power and authority, and individual and communal purpose. People usually discussed times of conflict or transition throughout Mennonite history as if they were centered around a single topic, but that point of contention was only the tip of the iceberg. Throughout conversations with Mennonites, we discussed whether women should be able to hold positions as church leaders, but our discussions meandered into many other personal and church-related topics. People raised questions such as: What does it mean to be Mennonite? What does it mean to be Mennonite in a twenty-first century American context? What are my sources of authority? What happens when those sources of authority appear to be in conflict? Who has power within Mennonite institutions and what does it mean to have power? What happens when we disagree with those in power? What do Mennonites have to offer those around them? What is my own purpose in this context? Who is God calling me to be? What should the church be doing in this setting?

The following chapters reflect these diverse concerns, but they are held together within the framework of belonging. I never intended to write a dissertation about belonging, and I was several months into my fieldwork before I realized that the Mennonites I met were talking about belonging, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. Les Peters, a former pastor, discussed his earlier years in church ministry and admitted, “It was a struggle at times to understand where I belonged, where I fit.” He spoke of belonging as a personal issue, while Ellen Eby-Groff framed the topic more broadly: “So I want the church to be about belonging and transformation. Not about rules and regulations.” The following chapters reflect how people navigated institutional regulations with their own personal understandings and experiences of belonging. The chapters leapfrog from topics such as church history to gendered divisions to personal callings to biblical
interpretation because these were all factors that people said influenced their own sense of connectedness and belonging within their local congregations and wider Mennonite networks.

Belonging is a relevant topic because it is connected to an individual’s identity, but usually groups have restrictions that exclude certain types of persons. For example, the restrictions on Mennonite women meant that, at one time, they could not be ordained as pastors. Most studies of belonging focus on the institutional restrictions, and its effects. Some of that is included in this research because it impacted how people related to their fellow Mennonites. However, in talking with people in church, I learned that those who met all the institutional criteria for acceptance in Mennonite congregations did not always feel a sense of belonging, such as Les Peters. Therefore, this work emphasizes the personal nature of belonging as something that is felt and experienced within a person, not only as something defined by external sources. Mennonites had varying experiences of belonging based on different views of topics such as Anabaptist identity, the purpose of the church, and their own backgrounds and experiences.

This is a study about conflict and critique, interpretive practices, and experiences of belonging. This research complements and expands the limited number of ethnographic studies on the connection between religion and belonging (Davie 1994; Day 2011; Park 2011; Stroope 2011; Winter and Short 1993). The project frames belonging as a nuanced and variable interpretation of a person’s place within a larger group. In order to bring balance to other studies of belonging (Fortes 1987; Gammeltoft 2014; Mauss 1985; Stroope 2011), this dissertation privileges the perspective of the individual and the individual’s interpretation instead of the hegemonic perspective of the group. In doing so, it provides an opportunity for the ethnology of religion to advance its understanding of conflict and critique as productive forces that yield adapted religious expressions within established religious traditions. The work demonstrates how
Mennonite individuals in the midst of church conflict contributed to the formation of religious polity and expression, while also valuing the input of the group. This dissertation contributes to the anthropology of belonging by demonstrating that belonging is not solely defined by the collective nor only felt by the individual, but it is a flexible exchange between the personal and communal influences the group encounters, and belonging is continually reinterpreted as the social field shifts.

My dissertation offers further insights into how religious adherents—progressive Mennonites, in this case—define and shape their stream of Christianity and their experience of belonging, while prioritizing the values and connections that are important to them in order to support their practices within the church. Progressive Mennonites have some freedom to define their religious identity and prerogatives, but these individuals also desire to remain under a communal authority. While the group forms and constrains the individual in some ways, Mennonites want to be part of a social collective, and they are active in choosing where to affiliate and in shaping the activity and trajectory of that group while also navigating the shifting American social context and the ambiguities of their own personal lives. Internal and external conflict with the local and national progressive American Mennonite community led people not to leave the church or seek sweeping reforms but rather to reinterpret their place within the congregation and their role within the broader church. This work frames conflict not as an irreparable rift but as a form of critique and clarification that is not a failure of Anabaptism or Christianity but evidence of Christianity’s adaptability within shifting cultural contexts (see also Handman 2015; Howell 2003).

I draw from other ethnographies about contemporary religious identity and from research on belonging in Christian churches (Davie 1994; Day 2011; Winter and Short 1993) and
religious or non-religious communities in specific locales (Cohen 1982; Diaz-Barriga 2008; Engelke 2012; Fader 2009; Park 2011; Vega 2012) in order to demonstrate that what this study reveals is not unique to this particular community: other religious adherents or geographically-based groups actively participate in forming and interpreting their identities and determining how people should belong within the group apart from institutional requirements. There are times when I weave other contemporary Christian ethnographies into the dissertation as a means of comparison to progressive Mennonites. I use these ethnographic examples as a way to demonstrate that the challenges Mennonites face parallel those confronted by other Christian communities in the United States and around the world. This project augments studies in the anthropology of Christianity that consider how a global religion becomes adapted to a local context and is continually reinterpreted within that context (Droogers 2003; Eriksen 2008; Handman 2015; 2017; Howell 2003; Mayblin 2010).

This research is about progressive Mennonites, but it is also for Mennonites. It is for those Mennonites who feel like they do not belong, for those who feel well-connected and cannot understand why others say they do not belong, and for the skeptics who wonder why others are even talking about belonging. It is important that people well-integrated in congregations realize that not everyone shares their experiences. I want those who feel like they are on the margins to know that they are not alone, that their voices matter and are an important part of shaping their communal and religious history right now. During my interview with Kelly Schwartzentruber, she repeatedly made comments about other interviews and wondered if other people had similar responses or experiences. As we concluded our conversation, she repeated her desire: “I just want to know what your other interviews are like. I'm like, ‘What do other people say?’” For Kelly and others like her, here is your answer.
Research Methodology

My academic foray among progressive Lancaster County Mennonites began after the summer of 2015, when LMC withdrew as a member conference of Mennonite Church USA, a numerically and financially significant loss to the denomination. The schism occurred at an organizational level, but the change was wrought by individuals who argued for different ways of interpreting Mennonite priorities. In addition, the change at the denominational level altered the way individuals perceived their own right to belong or not belong within different institutions. A few individuals and congregations from LMC moved to ACC, another progressive Mennonite conference based in Lancaster County, which continued its affiliation with MC USA. Despite having their conference offices in Lancaster County, LMC and ACC have constituents that extend across the nation. In order to limit the scope of this research, I only focused on those congregations geographically situated within the county.

Therefore, in order to understand the individual voices better and to know how individuals critiqued the church structures through their interpretations, I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty-three individuals in Lancaster County who were from either Lancaster Mennonite Conference or Atlantic Coast Conference. Most of them were people who had a long history in LMC but had recently transitioned to ACC, so they had experience in both conferences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews with Mennonite Individuals (All names of participants and congregations are pseudonyms unless noted)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People currently in LMC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh Hollinger, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly Schwartzentruber, exploring pastoral ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melody Wiebe, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanner Wiebe, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick Zeiset, pastor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to understand how individuals discussed important issues among themselves, I hosted four focused group interviews on topics that emerged in preliminary interviews. The topics were: missional church activity, the role of women as pastors in Mennonite congregations, receiving “the call” from God, and Anabaptist priorities. Conversation in groups can spark ideas for some people that they do not think about in one-on-one interviews, and this was true for those who participated in these groups. Some people who participated in semi-structured interviews also joined focus groups, and they revealed different information in each setting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focused Group Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should women be pastors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Call: What does it mean for God to call people today?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is a missional church?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should be the main priorities of the Anabaptist-Mennonite church today?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My ethnographic research was primarily completed in thirteen months, between September 2018 and October 2019, though I visited twenty-eight congregations from June 2018 until March 2020. From October 2018 until October 2019, I spent the majority of my time at one
congregation, which I call Eastland Mennonite Church. I attended weekly Sunday morning services and Wednesday evening activities, as they occurred. I joined in adult Sunday school classes, volunteered at different events, shared meals at church and in people’s homes, attended staff meetings, and learned to know the rhythm of congregational life at Eastland Mennonite Church. When I visited other congregations, I listened to the sermons, noted the music, observed the aesthetics of the church, browsed through their songbooks and welcome packets, and engaged a wide number of people in informal conversations. I also led an adult Sunday school class for one Sunday in four different congregations to learn some of the history of their congregation and hear about their perceptions of their congregation.

In order to better understand the organizational structure and the relationships among the denomination, conferences, and church attendees, I also attended institutional events prior to and during fieldwork. I was present at the MC USA biennial convention in Orlando, Florida, in July 2017 and joined LMC’s annual Celebration of Church Life in 2016 and 2019 in order to learn about the conference. ACC held a fall and spring conference assembly, and I attended those meetings in the 2018-2019 cycle. At each place, I heard about people’s experiences with the church as well as their own personal joys and struggles. I gauged the atmosphere at each event and listened for themes that leaders presented and informally asked people for responses to sermons, presentations, or other announcements church leaders made. Throughout this process, I focused on the way individuals responded to the circumstances around them and the ways in which they were actively engaged in shaping the future of the local and broader church.

---

2 Jesse Hershey inspired this name. In our March 2016 interview, he commented that many northeastern Mennonite institutions use the name “Eastern.” Examples include: Eastern Mennonite School, Eastern Mennonite University, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Eastern Mennonite Missions, and Eastern Mennonite Publishing.
Chapter Overview

From this ethnographic research, I learned the value of history and the way Mennonites do theology, and I discovered different factors that contribute to belonging. Chapter 1 embraces the history. It contains the ideological and political origins of Anabaptism and explains how Mennonites came to settle in Pennsylvania. I analyze the schism between Lancaster Mennonite Conference and Mennonite Church USA as an impetus for clarifying values, which led some people to align more closely with Anabaptism. The ideological shift led a few individuals and congregations to affiliate with Atlantic Coast Conference, which offered an alternative interpretation of progressive Mennonitism than LMC.

Church matters to the Mennonites I interviewed, and they consistently described the church as family, but it was a family full of disagreements. Those conflicts highlighted tensions that people felt internally; they felt that they did not fully belong in the church. Chapter 2 examines the various approaches Mennonites used to shape their congregation and create a sense of belonging for people in the church.

In chapter 3, I use historical Mennonite conditions to illuminate the ways people classify their relationships with each other in the present. Lancaster County Mennonites used nonconformity to differentiate themselves from the world, but as those practices faded, Mennonites advocated for more equal roles for men and women in the church. Currently, Mennonites are interested in defining the gifts people have and figuring out how those gifts can be used in the church. In each era, Mennonite identity has been interpreted in different ways, but Mennonites have continually contributed to enhancing the work of the church.

God was a significant character in each person’s story as they discussed their relationship with the church. In chapter 4, I discuss the role God had in calling people to specific roles. Even
when the church structures and people’s own resistance made the task seem impossible, God’s call prevailed. The people I met at Eastland Mennonite Church provide an example of a team that functions well together when people answer God’s call and can freely use their gifts in a place that welcomes them.

In chapter 5, I explore how the Bible is viewed by different Mennonite groups, and how their approach to the Bible affects the way they interpret the written words. In order to have a more specific focus, I consider how various biblical passages have been interpreted in relation to the roles men and women have within the church. This engagement with biblical hermeneutics directly impacts how individuals put their faith into practice in a way that shapes their interactions with others, their understanding of God, and their own sense of belonging within the progressive Mennonite church.
Chapter 1

Listening: Stories of Mennonite Origins and of Mennonite Lives

A Big Story

In preparation for my fieldwork, I began contacting people within Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) congregations while the conference was in the midst of a schism with the national denomination, Mennonite Church USA (MC USA). Through one of those early connections, I met Rachel Huber, whose own story was wrapped up in the pain of conflict within the church. We met in her office, and I sat facing her bookshelf. She gave some preliminary information about her experiences within LMC and mentioned one particularly difficult time. She reflected upon her narrative:

Rachel: If I had to go back and do it again—I don't know. All things can be redeemed, and so I don't think my time there was wasted or that I didn't contribute anything, but it was my most painful experience with LMC. And in a way, I did get run over.

Christa: Was the conflict directed at you personally, you think, or at issues you cared about?

Rachel: So that's a whole big story. Are you ready for it?

Her question was pertinent: Was I ready for the stories people would reveal? Was I ready for the challenges I would face? Was I ready for the transformation that this experience would produce within me? As a young researcher, I did not know the depths of what I would encounter, but I have learned from those I met, like Rachel, who believe that good can emerge from difficult situations.

3 Lancaster Mennonite Conference rebranded itself in 2018 as LMC: A Fellowship of Anabaptist Churches. The change reflects its growing geographical and theological diversity (Schrag 2018; Stella 2018). Since I conducted research before and after 2018, and there were no significant structural changes with the rebranding itself, I will use both “LMC” and “Lancaster Mennonite Conference” to refer to the organization as it existed prior to 2018 and through the early months of 2022.
Rachel was right. The sorrow she experienced was wrapped up in “a whole big story” of the history of Mennonitism and its interpretation in local contexts, and the effect upon individuals seeking belonging in a Mennonite context. This chapter tells a narrative that includes the origins of Anabaptism, the Mennonite structures established in North America, and people’s reactions to a church conflict and schism centered around a Lancaster County Mennonite conference. The story includes the backgrounds of Mennonite congregations in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the behavioral expectations imposed on congregants, the elemental beliefs that tie people to Anabaptism, and the search for belonging that precipitated movement between conferences and congregations. Each movement of this account tells how a specific group of Christians reinterpreted their beliefs, practices, and structures in divergent ways in order to fit into fluctuating social environments. These adaptations have allowed Christianity to not only survive but flourish as people find their own identity and unite together in an intentional community, which offers connection despite its imperfections.

Why would a peace church keep splitting? This was a question several LMC constituents voiced as I discussed LMC’s 2015 decision to withdraw from MC USA by the end of 2017. It is a pertinent question because one dominant aspect I learned about Anabaptist theology is that beliefs and behaviors should be aligned. However, schisms often happened precisely because beliefs and practices were out of alignment. Some constituents thought that if people say they believe in peace, then they should act in peace. For many of the Mennonite constituents I met, peace connoted institutional unity. They did not want unity for unity’s sake, but they thought that separation was used as a means to avoid further conflict instead of working to resolve conflict. Throughout this dissertation, I use the word “schism” in this limited sense, to note an institutional separation that was the result of group conflict. There are other times that churches
separate that are not viewed as schisms. A church may decide on an amiable separation, which is what happened when Atlantic Coast Conference was established out of the Ohio and Eastern Mennonite Conference. The institution was divided, but the division was not the direct result of conflict. These cases did not distress the Mennonites who were concerned about schisms. Other times, schism may refer to dynamics internal to an institution. An organization may retain its members but have internal division. Some LMC constituents thought that MC USA was internally schismatic and wanted to separate themselves from the turmoil. They thought that forced institutional unity was more painful than separation. From their perspective, LMC’s withdrawal was not a schism but a move toward re-establishing institutional priorities.

When I interviewed Richard Spangler, he pointed out that Mennonites have a history of solving their differences by splitting. The earliest Anabaptists were never a united group, and their spiritual descendants have carried that varied heritage to the present. In 2020, there were about forty different groups of Mennonites in the United States, and many of the general categories could be further divided into subgroups (Mennonite Church USA 2020). The tendency toward separation is a concern for people like Rachel who believe that solving differences through division is not theologically sound. They want peace churches to practice the same efforts at understanding and reconciliation that they preach. Why would a peace church keep splitting? Peace churches rupture because people value the institutional church and want it to endure, but, as their social environment changes, they have different ideas of how Mennonitism should continue, and they diverge in order to remain faithful to their idealized vision.

**History and Belonging**

In this chapter, I claim that history shapes belonging and that organizational and personal histories influence a person’s sense of belonging within a particular group. I define belonging as
“a sense of affinity or connectedness with a particular group or within a specific situation with the expectation of reciprocal connection.” I consider how the global history of Anabaptism and the local history of two progressive Mennonite conferences in Lancaster County—Lancaster Mennonite Conference and Atlantic Coast Conference—shape the way people experience belonging in Mennonite congregations.⁴ I examine the authorizing processes by which each conference came to define a form of progressive Mennonite identity in the county and gained authority to place restrictions on belonging. Beyond the institutions, each individual came to these conferences with different histories. Their personal experiences shape their individualized senses of belonging. Within this chapter, I analyze how people gravitated toward a Mennonite identity based on their own experiences with Mennonitism and understandings of Anabaptism throughout the centuries.

The heritage of a region and the history of an institution create factors that either enhance or hinder belonging. Sometimes the organization codifies requirements for belonging, such as a specific dress code or specialized training. At other times, individuals may have a shared history within a group that enhances their personal sense of belonging. For example, many of the Mennonites I met who had been raised in Lancaster County talked about attending MC USA Conventions together as youth and spending summers at Camp Hebron and sharing information about common acquaintances from some of the local private Mennonite schools. In each case, belonging was shaped, in part, by the history of the conference and the history of connections people had within the conference. I will explore belonging in more depth in chapter 2. For now, I

---

⁴ LMC and ACC both extend beyond Lancaster County. Both networks have always had a combination of members from within and outside of Lancaster County. This dissertation research is limited to Lancaster County in order to demonstrate the diversity within a specific geographic area.
begin with Anabaptist history in the region to explain how Mennonite institutions gained their authority and molded the lives of Mennonite individuals in Lancaster County.

**Breach: LMC and MC USA in Conflict**

As the twenty-first century opened, tensions ran high within MC USA because members of the denomination placed themselves at divergent points along a spectrum of views on sexuality. Twentieth-century conversations about feminism and the impact of patriarchy had led American society to have more open dialogue about sexuality. People within the North American Mennonite context questioned the extent to which the church should continue to promote and enforce a commitment to monogamous opposite-sex unions. In February 2014, Mountain States Mennonite Conference, one area conference of MC USA, decided to grant a license toward ordination to a pastor in a committed same-sex relationship. This decision ignited internal debates about authority structures in MC USA and led to more disputes about the practices and membership status of LGBTQ persons. That one conference’s actions put them “at variance” with MC USA’s organizational policies and doctrinal statements, and other conferences were watching to see how MC USA would respond.

In 2015, LMC and two other area conferences in MC USA—one based in Pennsylvania and one in the north central states—voted to withdraw from the denomination, citing differences over views on sexuality. However, the issue was much deeper. One Franklin (Pennsylvania) Conference leader explained their reasons for withdrawal: “Continued dialogue is unlikely to resolve it, and Mennonite Church USA lacks polity to address the matter” (Kreider 2015). In a personal interview with Daniel Frey, an LMC church member in 2016, he said that he often heard LMC leaders say there had been “a failure of discipline at the denominational level.” Members had different interpretations of MC USA’s polity and realized that the denomination
was not equipped to address issues of church discipline, at least not as clearly as LMC members expected.

The majority of LMC congregations left MC USA in 2015 without looking back, but at least seventeen congregations were left in limbo during the two-year implementation process.⁵ People’s emotions were raw when I initially met them in 2016, just a few months after LMC’s decision to withdraw from MC USA. Those few people who wanted to remain connected to both LMC and MC USA felt abandoned by their ecclesial parents: the local conference with whom they regularly interacted and the national denomination with whom they maintained ideological and long-distance personal connections. Many people used the analogy of divorce to describe the separation between the conference and denomination. Rachel Huber, whom I met in 2018, reflected, “It was still a divorce. And divorces still are hurtful. They leave wounds. I don't know how we could have gotten through it without somebody paying the price.” Cora Meyer had the misfortune of beginning her pastoral work in the midst of the division when many people were leaving the congregation or bringing their concerns to the pastors. In 2018, Cora reflected upon her earlier years and said it was nearly impossible not to absorb their pain. “I cried a lot that first year and a half of ministry,” she admitted. For Rachel, Cora, and others, LMC’s withdrawal from MC USA was not an institutional conflict between polities and ideologies. Rather, it was a breach of personal relationships and damaged trust between individuals and the interpersonal networks to which they were connected.

Mennonites are not strangers to intra-church tensions. Sociologist Fred Kniss tracked over 200 notable conflicts among Mennonite fellowships in four states with large Mennonite populations between 1870 and 1985 (Kniss 1997, 2). Kniss concluded that Mennonite conflicts

⁵The two-year implementation process was a later concession realizing that the withdrawal would take time. The withdrawal from MC USA was set to be completed on December 31, 2017.
“are related to events and changes in the larger American cultural environment” (Kniss 1997, 3).
Kniss explained the competing discourse in American society as a horizontal axis between modernism and traditionalism. In modernism, authority rests in the individual, but in traditionalism, authority resides in the collective. Bisecting the horizontal axis is a vertical axis from libertarianism to communalism. Libertarians direct their moral efforts at the individual while communalists focus their moral projects on the collective group (Kniss 1997, 129). When there are conflicts within American society, Kniss says, Mennonites feel the tensions between modernism and traditionalism and between libertarianism and communalism. They are likely to divide among themselves if some aspect of the cultural conflict resonates with the religious group (Kniss 1997, 181). Though this sociological data helps explain why LMC withdrew from MC USA at a time of transition within the United States, it does not explain much about how the separation affected individuals and how they reacted to it. There were a variety of responses and reasons people gave for the division between conference and denomination. In addition to discussing sexuality and citing polity differences, Mennonite congregants frequently discussed the varying historical trajectories of Mennonite groups in the region.

The 2015 schism was tied to the history of Mennonites in North America and their continual critique of themselves and others. Schisms are part of “our DNA,” as one Mennonite told me. However, a number of people were uncomfortable with the tendency to split because they were aware of the pain it caused. Sociologist Charles Tilly argued that groups establish repertoires of behavior, and when conflict arises, people rely upon past practices to shape their present response. Thus, in 1758, when Englishmen broke windows in London because they thought Britain’s ally, the king of Prussia, had not received proper respect, they did so, not because the action would mend the oversight, but because window smashing was within their
repertoire of social protest (Tilly 1993, 255). Tilly writes, “Repertoires are learned cultural creations, but they do not descend from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle” (1993, 264). In the same way, Mennonites have dealt with struggles in the past by splitting when there was disagreement within an institution. Not all Mennonites interpret schism as a negative behavior, but, due to the recent pain people had experienced while I was conducting research, the schism appeared to have a negative effect upon all of them.

This chapter will tell the story of Mennonite institutions and ideologies as they have been experienced and interpreted and reinterpreted by individuals. It begins with the background, a brief overview of the history of Anabaptism. Then the chapter will explore Mennonite institutions, first focusing on the polity aspects of Lancaster County Mennonite organizations. Then I consider the beliefs and behaviors that Mennonites say distinguish them from other Christian groups. The conclusion will introduce Neo-Anabaptism and efforts of Mennonites to reconsider the connections between their religious and cultural identities and shape new fields of belonging. Through all the pain wrought by historical movements, cultural shifts, and ecclesial schisms, people remain committed to the idea that redemption can come to and through the church, and they look forward to the day when this historic peace church will finally be at peace.

**Background on Mennonite Origins And Polity**

As I interviewed those who participate in Mennonite congregations, I heard various interpretations of the history of Anabaptism. The narratives came from their own diverse backgrounds and introductions to Anabaptism at different points in their lives. Their stories fluctuate from telling about a problematic but insignificant anomaly during the Protestant Reformation to a narrative of courageous people who dared to challenge the established political
and religious authorities to a story of people who imagined a new way of living intentionally within a Christian community. With comical candor, Nate Evans explains how “the history of this movement is someone who had no legal or ecclesial authority asking someone else who had no legal or ecclesial authority, ‘Will you baptize me?’ And they did it. And that started the Anabaptist movement.” In contrast to this simplistic summary, the origins of the movement are more complex, less individualized, and continue to have repercussions for how people understand themselves and their place in the larger Christian story today. The polygenesis of Anabaptism has enabled diverse expressions of Mennonitism in the present, while adherents find support for their views and way of life among their spiritual forebears.

**Anabaptist Origins**

Mennonites and other Anabaptists emerged in the sixteenth century in the midst of the political and ecclesiastical upheaval of the Protestant Reformation. The Anabaptist movement did not have a single, dominant moment of origin, and this initial diversity has been replicated in the present. Mennonites are one branch of Anabaptists, a larger Reformation-era movement within Christianity that encouraged the personal use of the Bible as a guide for daily living, promoted baptizing people who confessed their beliefs, and rejected established ecclesiastical hierarchies. Anabaptists can trace their roots to three distinct but overlapping European movements. The first group comes from Switzerland. The movement began among privileged intellectuals in Switzerland, but it soon moved away from its elite, urban origins (Snyder 1995, 52; 2004, 17–19). The second iteration concerns the story of Melchior Hofmann in North Germany and the Netherlands and Dutch brothers Obbe and Dirk Philips and their later follower, Menno Simons (Snyder 1995, 151–52; 2004, 22–23). And the third involves the leadership of Jakob Hutter and his followers, who emerged from the South German Anabaptist movement.
(Snyder 2004, 21). Due to their communitarian practices, the Hutterites do not factor significantly into this study, but they do represent the diversities of Anabaptist practice.

Those who were from Zurich were closely connected with the efforts of Swiss Reformed leader Ulrich Zwingli, who had been influenced by a personal study of the Bible, the teachings of Martin Luther, and humanism, among other factors (Snyder 1995, 51). Some of Zwingli’s followers differed from him on certain points. They agreed that the Bible was the final authority for belief and practice, but, unlike the Reformers, they insisted that the Holy Spirit should be active in scriptural interpretation. They viewed sacraments as signs, critiqued the power and authority of the established clergy, and were wary of a close alliance between church and state (Snyder 2004, 25). In addition, Anabaptists rejected the predestination ideas of Luther and John Calvin. They agreed with Luther that salvation came by faith through grace, but they further insisted that faith should be active and demonstrate obedience to God by proper behaviors (Snyder 2004, 25–26). Anabaptists understood themselves as a unique movement, offering views that were distinct from other contemporary Christian groups.

For a long time, Anabaptist history was told by those outside of the tradition who treated it as a troublesome but insignificant group of radical reformers. For example, in an interview, Martin Long explained that people he knew in the Reformed tradition preferred John Calvin’s methods and theology because he “is orderly and understands his relationship to the state, and it's very systematic and clear.” Martin added his own commentary, “And I think intellectually, somehow, it felt more sort of sophisticated.” It was not until the mid-1900s that Mennonite scholars began actively retelling their own history. The effort was led by historians and Mennonite authors such as Harold S. Bender and Robert Friedmann (Dyck 1993, 33–35; Toews 1996, 36, 98). These men published Anabaptist history and helped to popularize a broadly-
shared, though never universal, understanding in the United States and Canada that Anabaptism was a Swiss-derived movement. Within a few years of Bender’s death, however, Bender’s narrative was replaced by a narrative of Anabaptism’s polygenesis, which included streams from the Netherlands and North Germany, and from South Germany and Austria (Snyder 1995, 67; Strübind 2022, 24).

The earliest Anabaptists were particularly defined by their practice of believers baptism,⁶ which became a key symbol in the debate between Zwingli and the Swiss Brethren (Snyder 1995, 53–55). In 1525, Conrad Grebel, a former associate of Zwingli, baptized an adult man named George Blaurock, igniting a movement distinguished by adult baptism (Snyder 2004, 17–19). It was this act that led Nate Evans to summarize Anabaptism as a movement characterized by renegade baptisms. The word Anabaptist has Greek origins and means “one who baptizes again.” In refusing to baptize infants, the Swiss Brethren challenged the authority of the Swiss Reformed church and the state to which the church was connected. Therefore, Swiss authorities would punish or pressure Anabaptists to change their ways (Neufeld 2022, 37–39). As a result, many of the Swiss Brethren abandoned the centers of commercial and intellectual life and moved to the outskirts of Zurich, sometimes encountering peasants who were pressing for social reforms (Snyder 1995, 55). At the same time, the early Anabaptist teachers had promoted missionary efforts, and their message spread through forced and voluntary migration. It was during this time that Balthasar Hubmaier was rebaptized and began writing ideas that defended adult baptism, which helped the ideas to spread (Snyder 1995, 55–56). This history of persecution is the reason some Mennonites in the Eastern United States say they have lived as “the quiet in the land,” a

---

⁶ Believers baptism refers to the practice of baptizing adults or individuals who have made a conscious decision to join the church. It is in direct contrast to infant baptism, which continues to be practiced by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans and other Christians who are heirs of Roman Catholic or Reformed traditions.
description of their efforts to refrain from activities such as proselytism or excessive political or societal engagement. The stories of persecution persist among some Anabaptist families. Some Mennonites I interviewed heard these tales of persecution, and believed that Mennonites have less power in American society, so they must remain separate and preserve their own customs.

Anabaptism in South Germany distinguished itself from Swiss Anabaptism by a greater emphasis on mysticism and apocalyptic expectation (Snyder 1995, 79). In South Germany and Austria, Anabaptism was connected with the outcomes of the Peasant’s War of 1525 (Snyder 1995, 67). The Anabaptist leaders in this region, including Hans Denck and Hans Hut, did not live long after they began spreading their message. As a result, their followers took their teachings in a wide variety of directions (Snyder 1995, 75). Pilgram Marpeck was influenced by Hans Denck and other Anabaptists he encountered. He later formed connections with Swiss Anabaptists and Hutterites and mediated between their “literalistic and separatist” stance and the enthusiastic spiritualism of the South German Anabaptists (Snyder 1995, 78–79). Through his writings, Marpeck helped to unite and refine some disparate Anabaptist streams.

The Anabaptists of North Germany and the Netherlands trace their origins to Melchior Hofmann. In the beginning, Hofmann, a Lutheran lay minister, was attracted to the work of the Holy Spirit and apocalypticism (Snyder 1995, 143). As a Lutheran, he had anticlerical views and, in 1529, he broke with the Lutheran tradition when he denied “a real presence” in the Lord’s Supper (Snyder 1995, 143). By 1530, Hoffman’s writings were clearly Anabaptist, but it is not clear who, specifically, influenced him. He did not join the existing Anabaptist group in Strasbourg, but formed his own Anabaptist fellowship (Snyder 1995, 144).

Hofmann’s teachings gave birth to three distinct phases of Anabaptist activity. The first phase was peaceful, the second phase turned militant, and Anabaptists in the third phase rejected
the violence of their comrades and lived peaceably (Snyder 2004, 22–23). The violent wing became known as the Münsterites. A group of people led by Jan Matthijs caught the fervor of Hofmann’s eschatological teachings and took his ideas to the extreme, expecting that Jesus would return imminently to establish an earthly kingdom in Münster, Germany. The Anabaptists and other Christian associates in Münster took up swords, forced baptism on everyone who remained in the city, and prepared to do battle for the kingdom they expected to come (Klötzer 2022, 123–25; Snyder 1995, 147–49). The story of the militant apocalyptic movement ends tragically when, after sixteen months, as conditions in the city became more desperate, mercenary forces violently ended the siege on Münster (Klötzer 2022, 129). This violent wing was a source of embarrassment to other Anabaptists, who took up pacifism and who rejected the use of violence and millenarian ideas.

Had the violent Anabaptists not been suppressed by outside forces, the practices and values of Anabaptists could look very different today. Instead, those who survived chose to sanction a different version of Anabaptism, one underscored by nonviolence. Anabaptists characterized themselves as peaceful people partly to distance themselves from this incident. Losing many of the Münsterites also helped quench the spread of their violent eschatological ideas. The response to this episode reflects part of the authorizing process that defines Mennonites as a historic peace church. From the inception, Anabaptists have been continually evaluating, reinterpreting, and authorizing different perspectives of this stream of Christianity.

In the Netherlands, David Joris and brothers Obbe and Dirk Philips were attracted to Hofmann’s teachings, but sought to distance themselves from those at Münster (Snyder 1995, 151–52). Joris stressed unity and tolerance rather than emphasizing differences. However, his message eventually lost specific Anabaptist elements, and he left the Netherlands (Snyder 1995,
Obbe Philips was known for preaching nonviolence (Osborne 2022, 134), and he taught that the church should “withdraw and serve God in peace, simplicity, and humility” (Dipple 2022, 160). One of the men who joined the community of Obbenites was a Catholic priest named Menno Simons (Snyder 1995, 152). His charismatic personality, prolific writings, and many travels helped to unite the disparate bands of Anabaptists who had fled their homes for various reasons (Estep 1996, 159; Roth 2006, 90; Snyder 2004, 23). Those who followed Simons preached believers baptism and prompted Christian discipleship and adherence to congregations of faithful, disciplined members who were separate from the world (Strübind 2022, 24). Eventually, a wide number of Anabaptists became known as Mennonites, after Menno Simons, and this name has been carried around the world (J. C. Wenger 1977, 50). These experiences of persecution, migration, and continual work to define Anabaptism became key symbols and storylines for Mennonites throughout history.

Rachel Huber related her own experience within LMC to the history of Anabaptism and tried to gain some perspective on what happened when the conference broke ties with MC USA in 2015. With a wry smile, she admitted, “We’re a little bit better than the Reformation. We weren’t killing each other. We’re past that. Or shunning each other.” However, her time in LMC was not painless. Rachel eventually left LMC and joined Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), but not until after LMC had completed its withdrawal from MC USA. Many individuals and a few congregations in LMC that wanted to remain affiliated with MC USA joined ACC, which also operates within Lancaster County and remained aligned with MC USA. ACC has a different history and polity from LMC, and the newcomers had to learn to belong to ACC after their long history in LMC.
Conference History

Rick Zeiset states, “Churches remember. My church remembers.” During our conversation, he was referring to the 1960s, which is within some people’s living memories. It was a time when the power and authority of the LMC bishops was shifting. For a few decades prior to that time, the bishops carefully regulated people’s dress and recreational activities, and vigilantly oversaw communion and other spiritual practices within each congregation. However, into the 1960s, the bishops were shifting their polity, but the change was uneven. Some bishops strictly enforced certain practices, while other bishops were more relaxed (Nolt 1992). The inconsistency created tension among some constituents who thought the bishops were too stringent, and others who thought they were not severe enough. The members in Rick’s congregation thought the bishops were too strict, and they were glad when the bishops eased restrictions. These LMC constituents evince that the past has shaped their lives and impacts their perception of a bishop’s role. History matters because it not only shapes people’s behaviors, but it affects people’s mindsets in the present and influences who they become. For progressive Mennonites in southern Pennsylvania, the long trajectory of LMC and the relatively recent history of ACC have defined divergent forms of Mennonitism in the region.

LMC is the second oldest Mennonite conference in the United States. It was the largest conference in MC USA, constituting 14 percent of the denomination’s membership, when LMC withdrew from the denomination in 2015 (Huber 2015). LMC had an early beginning in North America. In Europe, near the end of the seventeenth century, political and economic concerns encouraged some South Germans to seek places to emigrate. The vast majority moved east from South Germany, enticed by special exemptions and assistance with the costs of relocating (Loewen and Nolt 2013, 10–11). A small percentage went west. The British offered generous
land grants in Pennsylvania and portions of Canada to the agriculturally adept Mennonites and Amish (Snyder 1995, 183). Those who could afford the journey and who were willing to take the risk of moving to the “New World” were attracted by the promise of what they thought were unclaimed land and a less established government (Loewen and Nolt 2013, 11–13). After Mennonites settled in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1683, a later wave of immigrants established their living farther west, on land occupied by the Indigenous Susquehannock peoples.

Mennonite farmers arrived in Lancaster County in the early decades of the 1700s, and established various church groups. There were early attempts at bringing order to the church, and spiritual overseers arrived from Germany and Switzerland to give leadership to the fledgling fellowships (Ruth 2001, 195, 254). Local ministers would confer together as the need arose (Ruth 2001, 319, 333, 459). As these ministers’ councils became more regular and influential, the leaders began to take on more responsibility for overseeing “disciplinary standards for the congregations” (Dyck 1993, 217). The word “conference” came not only to mean the regular ministers’ gatherings but also the entire body of congregations for which these leaders were responsible. Though the Mennonites intentionally settled in Pennsylvania, the conference emerged gradually. Eventually, and certainly by the mid-1800s, the conference gave oversight to a disparate network of congregations and established standards for Mennonite faith and practice (Ruth 2001, 602–6).

Mennonite conferences were established in different regions throughout the United States and Canada as Mennonites migrated or immigrated to North America. In the 1890s, some Mennonite ministers worked to form a general conference where all of the disparate regional conferences could work on common goals. The (Old) Mennonite General Conference began in 1898 and was based in the Midwest (Schlabach 1988, 139). A few of the eastern conferences,
including LMC, did not officially join the new organization (Ruth 2001, 754–55). In 1970, the general conference began restructuring itself, and it became the Mennonite Church (MC). The Mennonite Church included LMC in its membership in 1971, the year the denomination was fully established (Ruth 2001, 1106). It was the first time LMC was formally affiliated with a denomination or general conference. Before this time, LMC had operated as a distinct regional conference, though it had fraternal relationships with other conferences. MC USA, which was ready to receive members in 2002, was the result of a merger between Mennonite Church (MC) and the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC), which formed in 1860 from another body of regional conferences (Schlabach 1988, 128–29). LMC did not join MC USA immediately in 2002. When LMC decided to withdraw from MC USA in 2015, it was reverting to its pre-1971 practice of maintaining connections with other Mennonites without establishing formal institutional ties.

In contrast to LMC’s organic growth out of Mennonite settlements in eastern Pennsylvania and nearby regions, ACC’s history is less linear. In 1877, some Amish immigrants in Pennsylvania had serious disagreements about worship in meetinghouses and starting Sunday school. Those who advocated for meetinghouses and time for Christian education left the Amish fellowship and formed two congregations. One was at a meetinghouse in Conestoga and the other was near Millwood-Maple Grove, all on the border of Lancaster and Chester Counties. The remaining majority became known as the Old Order Amish (Rudy 2003, 3–4). The people at Conestoga and Millwood-Maple Grove retained the older “Amish Mennonite” designation.7 These newly formed congregations operated under a congregational polity, which was the Amish

---

7 The Millwood congregation also used a second meetinghouse in Maple Grove. They functioned as a single congregation until they separated in 1945, when the Millwood congregation joined LMC (Rudy 2003, 4; Ruth 2001, 1013–14; L. S. Stoltzfus and Steiner 2019).
In order to have greater support for their congregation, in 1893 they joined a greater number of Amish Mennonites in the Midwest to form the Eastern Amish Mennonite Conference (Rudy 2003, 3; G. M. Stoltzfus 1969, 196). Mennonites in Ohio were also becoming more organized around the same time and formed the Ohio Mennonite Conference in the mid- to late-1800s (G. M. Stoltzfus 1969, 67–68; J. S. Umble 1959). The Ohio (Old) Mennonite Conference and the Eastern Amish Mennonite Conference voted to merge, and the first meeting was in 1928 (G. M. Stoltzfus 1969, 196–98). In subsequent years the conference name was modified several times (G. M. Stoltzfus 1969, 202).

New congregations formed and joined this conference, but there were also tensions with LMC as new churches were established. The Conestoga and Maple Grove congregations actively began new congregations in other locations, often nearby (Rudy 2003, 3–6). In the 1940s and 1950s, Ohio bishop O. N. Johns made trips to Pennsylvania and gathered individuals to establish new congregations. John Rudy, who later became a member of one of those congregations, explained that Johns was founding churches for Mennonites who had come from out of the area and did not feel like they belonged in LMC. They appreciated his efforts to help them form new congregations (Rudy 2003, 6; Ruth 2001, 1049). However, this explanation only tells part of the story. For LMC bishops, Johns’ actions were “disruptive of their own church housekeeping” (Ruth 2001, 940). His continual trips to Pennsylvania took increasing numbers of people away from LMC congregations, and LMC leaders protested (Ruth 2001, 1050). The LMC bishops were not going to Ohio and creating new congregations. Johns’ actions were not respectful toward LMC bishops and their authority, and his legacy made it more difficult for LMC to have cordial relations with the Ohio and Eastern Mennonite Conference for a time.

---

8 Steven Nolt, email message to author, June 28, 2022.
In 1978, the Eastern Section of the Ohio and Eastern Mennonite Conference was ready to separate and become its own conference. The new organization was known as the Atlantic Coast Conference and was based in southcentral Pennsylvania. Their departure from the Ohio and Eastern Mennonite Conference was amiable, based more on a recognition of geographical distance and the fact that congregations on the East Coast had grown numerous enough to support themselves without assistance from Ohio (Rudy 2003, 20). Though relatively young compared to other Mennonite conferences in the United States, ACC congregations have a long history in both colonial Pennsylvania and on the Ohio frontier (G. M. Stoltzfus 1969, 273). The Mennonites I met characterized the differences between ACC and LMC as differences in polity, which grew out of their unique histories. ACC had Amish origins and retained a congregational polity, while LMC was more dependent upon a group of religious leaders.

Conference Polity

Within Lancaster County, the two predominant progressive Mennonite conferences, LMC and ACC, are distinguished by their divergent histories and incongruent polities. LMC sprung up from one of the earliest Swiss-German Mennonite settlements in Pennsylvania in the early 1700s. Its polity, or form of political organization, is synodical in character. Historian Steven Nolt describes the synodical nature of LMC in which “denominational power was disbursed among area conferences” where ordained leaders “held ultimate authority to vote on matters.” LMC’s Bishop Board, currently gives “overall leadership to the spiritual life of the Conference” (LMC 2017). In the past, bishops were viewed more as disciplinarians in LMC and other American conferences. Since then, most other conferences have changed their structures

---

9 Steven Nolt, email message to author, November 9, 2022.
and altered the position of bishop. While LMC has retained its bishops, their role has been revised in practice and in political structure.

In terms of polity, ACC’s practice stems from the congregationalism of its Amish heritage. ACC has a less hierarchical polity than LMC, and decisions are made by the Delegate Council, which has “the final responsibility and authority” in the conference. It is comprised of representatives from member congregations (Atlantic Coast Conference 2011). Instead of bishops, ACC describes its conference ministers as spiritual shepherds who work alongside individuals and congregations rather than charting a course for the conference to follow. When LMC was part of MC USA, it was the only conference that retained a Bishop Board in which bishops had the authority to guide the direction of the conference. Those who made the final decisions were credentialed leaders, not elected delegates; the credentialed leaders usually followed the bishops’ recommendations. Each conference has other governing bodies, but the Mennonites I met who are in ACC explained that they liked having greater input in the decision-making process in ACC. Since MC USA’s founding in 2002, its political organization is more closely aligned with ACC. Both organizations currently have a more congregational focus, in which the congregations guide the organization instead of being guided by the conference’s agenda or the denomination’s decisions. Rather than explaining the complex history and intricate organizational structures of these conferences, I primarily focus on comparing their priorities and polities as reasons why people align with one conference over the other. After this institutional overview, I examine how individuals relate to and understand these organizational bodies.

10 The polities of each conference are more complex than what I have explained here and are worth exploring further through LMC’s Constitution (2017) and ACC’s Bylaws (2011). Each conference makes decisions with a variety of input from congregational sources and various other governance groups. However, in my conversations with individuals in each conference, the main difference they noted was that individuals had more input into the mission, vision, and operations in ACC while the Bishop Board and other groups took that role in LMC.
I asked Rachel Huber about the differences between LMC and ACC because she recently joined ACC after a long tenure in LMC. “I'm learning,” Rachel said, “that there's a lot more autonomy for congregations in ACC than in LMC. And I think that's a disconnect between the two conferences and how they understand each other.” She continued, reflecting back upon LMC’s decision to separate from MC USA, “There wasn't a great deal of autonomy with this kind of decision.” Dustin Penner was a pastor in a congregation that transitioned from LMC to ACC between 2015 and 2017. Dustin said one of the differences he noticed was “how decisions are made and the hierarchy of things. LMC has a Bishop Board who more or less makes the decisions about things. ACC is more— The delegates are the ones who vote and make those type of decisions.” Multiple individuals suggested that LMC’s polity could be summarized as “hierarchical” while ACC’s polity can be characterized as “autonomous.” Both of these terms can be misleading because Anabaptists, in comparison to other Christian traditions, are neither overly hierarchical nor very autonomous. Yet, in contrasting the polity of these two conferences, people noticed a significant difference, and, sometimes, chose to align themselves with one conference over the other because of its political structure and its decision-making processes. Church leaders indicated that lay persons in the congregation likely did not notice significant differences between LMC and ACC, but for the credentialed leaders and others who worked closely with the conference and denomination, the differences were considerable.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of LMC’s polity is its Bishop Board, a body whose stated purpose is to “meet for mutual fellowshipping, sharing, and for giving overall leadership to the spiritual life of the Conference, and to coordinate and give counsel to the districts of Conference” (LMC 2017). The description of their role sounds benign, but, in practice, the Bishop Board consolidated a lot of the power within Lancaster Conference, and acted as both the
governing body and the spiritual authority for conference members (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 1962; 2009). Nolt recognized the beneficial nature of the bishops’ role. Historically in American Mennonite communities of the Mennonite Church, bishops had both spiritual and relational authority. They would perform baptisms and officiate communion. “The power to perform these rituals of initiation and reaffirmation of community—matched by the ability to withhold them—was essential to transform a collection of individuals into a visible, corporate body” (Nolt 2004, 15). By meeting regularly with congregations and with other bishops, individual bishops established a relational web that connected congregants to a wider church network.

Throughout the history of LMC and other conferences, bishops would confer together to determine standards for all church members. In LMC, specifically, there were somewhere between eight and thirteen bishops from 1905 to 1945 (Nolt 1992, 13). After World War II, the number of bishops doubled, which made it more difficult for all of them to come to a consensus. In the 1980s, there were 35 to 40 active and retired bishops present at Bishop Board meetings (Nolt 1992, 13). With so many different opinions represented among the conference leadership, practices varied widely, and constituents complained about the arbitrary nature of conference standards. After 1970, LMC moved from a synodical polity to what Nolt calls a semi-synodical polity. Nolt says LMC retained “a synodical polity but without the functional ability to maintain a real synodical polity. Instead it was, and is, I would argue, semi-synodical, which means some things are uniform while other things get left to congregations via benign neglect.”11 In essence, the conference leaders enforced some policies for all constituents, but most of the decisions were left to the congregations.

11 Steven Nolt, email message to author, June 28, 2022.
I personally experienced this semi-synodical polity when I began my research within LMC. I requested permission to do ethnographic research from LMC and ACC. While ACC offered support and entrée into the conference, LMC leadership decided that I should check with each individual congregation I planned to visit. My research did not require a conference-wide mandate. LMC allowed congregations to make most of the decisions that would directly impact them. They only created conference-wide policies in certain areas, such as agreeing to ordain women and changing their affiliation with MC USA.

Kelly Swartzentruber reflected on LMC’s structure: “I think the Bishop Board here had a lot of power for a long, long time that is not similar in most places outside of Lancaster Conference.” Her historical perspective helps clarify why bishops remain so prominent within LMC even though their role has been modified and reduced over the decades. By enforcing lifestyle practices in the early 1900s, which were grounds for excluding individuals from participating in communion services, bishops held sway over individuals’ private and spiritual lives. All conferences throughout the (Old) Mennonite Church followed these restrictive practices at that time. However, LMC’s political organization shifted in 1968, when a conservative element left LMC. These conservative Mennonites thought other bishops had become too lenient in enforcing standards for all church members (J. P. Graybill, n.d.; B. Graybill 1998, 257–59; Ruth 2001, 1095–98; Lancaster Mennonite Conference 2009). Thereafter, the center of LMC shifted to a less authoritarian model of governance, but its members prefer a semi-synodical polity instead of a congregational model. Conference leaders recognize that their political organization has shifted several times since the 1960s. As of 2021, LMC operates under a structure that was revised in 2017 to reflect its withdrawal from MC USA.
Its governance model is under review and will likely be revised again (Governance & Structure Task Force CCL Report 2021).

**The Impact of Polity on Belonging**

Many of the people who remained in LMC felt greater acceptance in that conference and left the denomination because they did not approve of its policies regarding the activities of member conferences. However, LMC had been a reluctant member of MC USA since its inception.\(^\text{12}\) MC USA was formed in 2001, and, in 2004, Lancaster Conference continued to hold meetings to discern if they should fully join MC USA. They initially joined as a provisional conference member. During that provisional period, 35 of LMC’s 190 member congregations chose to have a “non-participating relationship” with MC USA (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 2004, 22–23). This provision was one way in which LMC decided to let “churches do what they want,” as Martin Long said. Melody and Tanner Wiebe explained that MC USA’s polity was never clear to LMC constituents.

**Tanner:** So, a lot of people within the congregation had the impression that MC USA was very much a structured organization. So, there were people who were elected, and this council—whatever was at the top there—was in charge of disciplinary actions. And they were wondering why nothing was happening.

**Melody:** That's the way LMC works.

**Tanner:** It's not the way that MC USA works. And so, there was confusion about that. And even within LMC, leaders were not understanding—like church leaders. The bishops probably understood. But church leaders didn't understand how things worked. There's not a good mechanism, as far as I can tell, to make things happen in a healthy way.

---

\(^{12}\) Prior to 2001, a number of progressive Mennonites in the United States and Canada belonged to either the (Old) Mennonite Church or the General Conference Mennonite Church. In 2001, the existing organizations were disbanded and new organizations were formed along national lines, creating Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. Many of the former MC and GCMC congregations joined the national denominations, but not all.
Tanner and Melody both expressed concerns about MC USA’s polity and lack of ability to take action when members were not aligned with the denomination’s policies. Since LMC members expected MC USA to act like LMC, they were disappointed by MC USA’s inaction. Instead of staying with what they considered to be an ineffective system, many of LMC’s congregations elected to leave MC USA.

LMC’s move to become an autonomous organization apart from MC USA was an effort to revive congregations in LMC who felt weighed down by discussions within MC USA that did not align with their priorities. Since separating from MC USA, LMC has established new connections with other organizations and continued to promote its concerns, such as increasing missional efforts in local neighborhoods. In addition to expanding their own networks, LMC has welcomed congregations from various places in the United States that are dissatisfied with their previous denomination (Stella 2016; Robinson 2019; Schrag 2021). The more recent congregational additions have altered the scope of LMC. It had previously included a few members from areas beyond the East Coast, but now the numbers are greater. The shift in geographical focus and emphasis on conference priorities has meant that other congregations that experienced a lack of belonging in MC USA can now align with LMC to promote their own interests. LMC’s departure from MC USA has been a loss for the LMC congregations who wanted to affiliate with both organizations, but it has created greater space for belonging for other congregations that sought to leave MC USA.

LMC has also been restructuring itself internally and formalizing the role of the bishop as more of a spiritual guide instead of an authoritarian leader. This shift will also necessitate a change in LMC’s organizational structure. In 2017, LMC updated its constitution to reflect its transition away from MC USA, but the Bishop Board remains the final authority. In March 2021,
LMC informed the conference that it had formed a Task Force to review its governance and structure (*Governance & Structure Task Force CCL Report 2021*). No action items have been mentioned yet, but the work demonstrates that the conference is aware of the shortcomings of its governance model.

Belonging is a matter of interpretation. What constitutes belonging for one group creates a sense of nonbelonging for another group. This aspect of belonging led LMC to withdraw from MC USA after it became clear their polities were not aligned. After this decision, a small number of LMC congregations and individuals transitioned to ACC because they felt they no longer belonged in LMC and sought to ally themselves with the policies and views of the denomination. Mennonites who left LMC and joined ACC said the polity of the conference fit them better. They wanted to remain part of MC USA, but they grieved the loss of their historical roots in LMC. Belonging does not occur without loss, but since the former LMC Mennonites had a choice in belonging, they chose the group where they felt greater affinity and acceptance. When people feel like they do not belong, they can either live with the discomfort, challenge the status quo, or seek belonging elsewhere. Some Mennonites who preferred MC USA’s polities remained in LMC and lived with the discomfort. But the Mennonites who left LMC indicated that they had been uncomfortable with its polity for a long time, and they were willing to try another conference.

There are multiple reasons why a few people joined ACC after LMC’s withdrawal from the denomination, but one salient reason is that some Mennonites were dissatisfied with the way the Bishop Board directed the conference. Norm Reimer attends a congregation that

---

13 A significant part of the conflict was about differences over sexual orientation and sexual identity and if the church would discipline members who did not adhere to the membership guidelines. While I agree that this was a major contributing factor to LMC’s departure from MC USA, I address concerns about gender and sexuality in chapters 3 and 4. I see this schism as part of larger practice within Mennonite churches where the church splits over
transitioned from LMC to ACC. Part of the reason for the move, he says, is that “the final word sort of rested with the Bishop Board. It just didn't sell well with us, over the long haul.” He is aware that LMC’s structure has changed over the years, but bishops continue to be the most influential voices in the conference. Dustin Penner recalled a conversation with a longtime LMC credentialed leader who could remember only three significant times he was asked to vote on issues in LMC, and all happened within the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century: “One was to join Mennonite Church USA, one was the ordination for women vote, and then the other one was to leave Mennonite Church USA.” Dustin compares his experience in ACC: “At ACC, at the [annual] assemblies, you get together, you're voting on the budget and all that sort of stuff.” Church members have much more input in ACC in a wide range of conference matters. In a historical review of ACC, author John Rudy explained, “From the very beginning, ACC has been a voluntary and loose affiliation of congregations. It has not been legislative. It has no rules and regulations. ACC has relied on guidelines rather than policy statements. Final authority has rested with congregations and their delegates to Conference” (Rudy 2003, 24). Since ACC is numerically much smaller than LMC, it is easier to seek input from a variety of sources. But ACC is also more intentional about giving authority to delegates from member congregations to make conference-wide decisions.

People who were part of LMC critiqued its hierarchical and male-dominated structure. When I asked Jacki Dietrich what she enjoyed about ACC, she jubilantly exclaimed, “No more bishops!” She was quick to clarify that she did enjoy a good personal and professional relationship with the bishop who had been part of her district, and she was not denigrating a disagreement, from whether a pastor can preach from a pulpit to whether a woman should wear a head covering to whether women can be ordained. Instead of focusing on what one person called the “flashpoint” issue (Cornelius 2016), I examine how conflict affects individuals personally and how it changes their relationship to church.
bishops as individuals. She was relieved to be out of a structure where she felt confined: “I'm out of that system defined by bishops, defined by lots of patriarchy, still, even though women are semi-involved.” Jacki and several other people spoke about the bishops as more of a symbol of LMC’s polity, which people experienced as authoritarian power. Dustin Penner is from a moderate congregation that was not trying to “push the envelope” in LMC, but the church attendees decided to affiliate with ACC. Dustin says, “being part of ACC, there's not a fear that if we do something, we're going to get disciplined or have the hammer brought down on us.” Even in ACC, credentialed leaders are accountable to their conference ministers, and credentials are under regular review, but this system of accountability does not feel as troubling to some people as LMC’s system.

Several progressive Mennonites said they felt like they had space to breathe in ACC. Martin Long reflected upon LMC after spending time in other Mennonite conferences: “Lancaster just felt like a very anxious, uptight system to me.” He was referring to LMC’s process regarding the ordination of women in the early 2000s, but his comments can apply to the way people experienced LMC in 2015 as tensions were high between LMC and MC USA. At this time, ACC was not reconsidering its affiliation with MC USA, so it seemed like a more stable environment. However, ACC’s history of including delegates from a variety of congregations made it a welcome change for the few people and congregations leaving LMC.

Forbearance and Belonging

During the time of transition out of MC USA, “forbearance” became a provocative keyword in the denomination and in area conferences, one that individuals interpreted in ways that demonstrated a chasm between LMC and MC USA. In July 2015, just a few weeks before LMC announced it would withdraw, the delegates of MC USA passed a resolution entitled
“Forbearance in the Midst of Differences.” The resolution recognized that the denomination had become polarized “specifically on issues of human sexuality and scriptural interpretation” (Mennonite Church USA 2015). By adopting this resolution, the delegates of MC USA resolved “to offer grace, love and forbearance toward conferences, congregations and pastors in our body who, in different ways, seek to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ on matters related to same-sex covenanted unions” (Mennonite Church USA 2015). For some people within MC USA, this resolution was a sign that MC USA was going to abandon its commitments to marriage as the union between one man and one woman and condone same-sex unions. Other constituents called upon MC USA to go further and fully accept same-sex unions instead of adopting a resolution that did not change the denomination’s formal teaching position or membership guidelines. Because the resolution used the term “forbearance,” this became a codeword that meant accepting same-sex unions and receiving LGBTQ persons as members.

Forbearance was interpreted differently by people in LMC and ACC. Within LMC, it often had a negative connotation and was linked closely to promoting an agenda of LGBTQ rights, and it was a concern for many LMC constituents who did not want the denomination to change its stance on sexuality. Samuel Harris told me that he and a friend in LMC were discussing their general priorities for the church: “[We] disagree on what the most important theological issue is for the church.” Samuel wanted the church to reclaim “the centrality of Jesus. It's not a ‘gay thing’. But [my friend is] convinced it is ‘the gay thing’. This is what is going to destroy the church.” The perspective that one single issue related to sexuality could take down millennia of Christian history baffled Samuel, who countered, “There is no data that homosexuality is going to destroy the church.” But he also recognized the anxiety his friend

---

14 MC USA has a more congregational polity in which members bring resolutions for delegates to vote on. The delegates are chosen by congregations and sent to biennial Conventions with all of MC USA’s member conferences.
experienced for the church because Samuel admitted that he was also anxious about the church, but in different ways. Samuel was aware that the church had faced many difficult situations in the past, and the current conversations about sexuality were only a small part of the challenges the church had to navigate in the present. Although the topic seemed to dominate the scene, it was not the reason the church would continue or fail. There were many other issues that were more foundational to the church.

Instead of trying to draw a strict line or have a denomination or conference discipline members who crossed the line, members of ACC and of MC USA were more likely to actively promote forbearance on a variety of issues. Martin Long described forbearance by saying, “Okay, we don't agree, but that's where they're at and that's okay.” Instead of seeking agreement in all matters, Martin was willing to remain in fellowship with people even when they disagreed. Josh Hollinger offered a similar definition and explained how MC USA interpreted forbearance: “It's saying, ‘We're gonna trust, even though you're at a different place, that the Spirit of God's at work in your community and that you do have faith and that you truly want to follow Jesus. And you're at variance with the Confession of Faith, but we are going to forbear with you.’” Joyce Sangrey did not specifically use the word forbearance, but she discussed gentleness. She began by quoting Philippians 4:4-6: “‘Rejoice in the Lord always and again, I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.’ That actually means knowing when not to enforce the strict letter of the law.” Her summary of gentleness as the opposite of legalism resembled other people’s explanation of forbearance in allowing flexibility in divergent matters. Having encountered disciplinary measures in LMC during her lifetime, Joyce wanted the church to be joyful and gentle, not legalistic.
LMC is a vast and diverse conference, and its own constituents practice forbearance with one another, even if people do not use that term. Since forbearance was connected so closely to sexuality during this time, some people did not realize its breadth. On the other hand, at least one person noted that forbearance was a biblical virtue, one listed as a fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV) says “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance (μακροθυμία), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” Although the word makrothumia is more commonly translated “patience” in other versions, it does carry the meaning of forbearance or long-suffering. In conversation with Josh Hollinger, he pointed out that he forbears with many things in LMC, and there are many areas, beyond sexuality, where individuals and congregations in LMC are at variance with the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995). Josh gave many examples of how people in LMC practice forbearance:

Women in leadership, we are forbearing. The Lancaster Conference says we should be allowed to ordain women. But [one sizeable LMC church] does not allow women to preach. I'm forbearing with [them]. That is very, very hard for me. We practice forbearance on the military and guns because our Confession of Faith calls people to the nonviolent way of Christ. And yet I know that there's churches in Lancaster Conference that have people packing heat. We're forbearing. They're at variance. Well, we forbear on consumerism all the time. Because I mean, we're called to share our possessions and work at mutual aid. I mean, I'm speaking to myself. We have too much. But yet the one place we won't forbear is on sexuality. And that's why I think we ultimately separated [from MC USA]. But at the end of the day, in my opinion, it was about sexuality. And they weren't willing to have forbearance on that one. We can forbear on every single other issue, but that's too far.

Josh’s comments were insightful because he taught me that forbearance is connected to belonging. In order to belong to LMC, he decided to have patience with the conference and its constituents even if he disagreed with their interpretations of how they should live. Belonging often means that people willingly engage with others with whom they disagree. Belonging is
intentional union, but it is not uniformity. Therefore, belonging is a choice people make. Their choices may be constrained by external measures or policies, but individuals do have power to shape their experience of belonging. Pastor and rhetorician Michael King drew from German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer to frame the conversation about sexuality in his Mennonite congregation. King says that, according to Gadamer, individuals must come to a conversation aware of their own prior understandings and be willing to suspend judgments about right and wrong while listening to another person (M. A. King 2001, 54–56). He concluded that people in his congregation could not embrace their own prejudices and cherish the prejudices of others, as Gadamer advocated, because they needed certitude and closure (M. A. King 2001, 229, 241). That is, they did not offer forbearance to one another and chose not to belong together, and the congregation was fragmented. Though Josh admitted that it is difficult for him to forbear with others, he is willing to do so because he values being part of a larger Mennonite fellowship and appreciates the church community.

In this section, I have given an overview of the different polities that existed among the conferences, LMC and ACC, and the denomination, MC USA. Each institution organizes power and authority in different ways, and constituents place different expectations upon their leaders. In LMC, the leaders were expected to and did enforce certain values, particularly in relation to sexuality. They also had a more authoritarian structure compared to other Mennonite conferences because the Bishop Board guided many of the conference’s policy decisions. ACC and MC USA were less hierarchical than LMC, leaning more toward a congregational form of governance without enforcing all policies on all members. In reality, the two conferences are not that different, especially when compared to the autonomous nature of Southern Baptist Convention congregations or the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic church. In practice, each
conference and the denomination are congregational in some form, allowing individual congregations to be at variance with the *Confession of Faith* and with some of the conference and denominational policies. LMC and ACC, in separate ways, are united by their own central leadership bodies that guide each conference. By forbearing with one another, congregations remain united under one body, either the conference or the denomination.

Forbearance is an integral part of belonging. As Josh noted, forbearance has a broad meaning and should not be limited to topics related to sexuality. Therefore, I demonstrated how Mennonites can emphasize different values and yet remain in fellowship with one another, which means they forbear with other congregants even when they disagree on certain subjects. They may shift conferences to find a better fit for their values, but, even there, they will forbear on some issues.

**Interpretation and Mennonite Priorities**

One way in which people interpret values differently is by creating and affirming dissimilar church polities, which demonstrates that Mennonite fellowships are interpretive communities of practice. Each community of practice has the authority to decide which interpretation it will prioritize. Mennonites value communal input when they make decisions. Josh Hollinger mentioned that he had disagreed with some other practices within LMC, but he was willing to forbear with them because he believed that each Mennonite community should be able to discern how they would practice their faith. He said he was willing to “trust the prayerful discernment of the community.” In this sense, he was defining community as each congregation, not as the community of the conference. He continued to explain the discernment process: “And it might look different than another community. But I really strongly believe in the local congregation's discernment.” While they share values, Mennonites do not all agree on how to
prioritize or live out those values in a fluctuating social context. In this section, I will provide an overview of what people say they value about Mennonitism but also reveal the fact that it is more difficult to live the values than to talk about them. I will consider how Mennonites express what is important to them within their present ecclesial and cultural settings; that is, how they interpret their values in a specific communal environment.

**Mennonite Priorities**

The values Mennonites hold now differ from the ideals of the original Anabaptists in their diverse geographical locations. Re-baptism, the foundational belief and practice of Anabaptists, is no longer a precarious practice in the twenty-first century, so it was important to determine what defined Anabaptists in the present. I convened a focus group where Mennonite individuals discussed the priorities they wanted to see upheld within Mennonite contexts.\(^{15}\) We filled several sheets of paper with characteristics that group members cherished, ranging from nonviolence to love to unity to evangelism to hospitality. When I asked the group to narrow down the list to their top three priorities, they struggled. Finally, Isaac Watson gave an unexpected suggestion, “So, my thought is if we could take one thing from this whole list, I would choose listening. The reason I do that [is because] if we get listening, we get unity. We get evangelism. We get nonviolence all thrown in with it. But, if we don’t have listening, none of that is even possible.” As he spoke, the other group members affirmed his words. I was surprised by this response because it was not something we had spent much time discussing. But the group was in agreement. We summed up the entire conversation on Mennonite priorities by choosing listening as the highest—and only—priority.

---

\(^{15}\) I asked about “priorities” in order to move people away from thinking about “beliefs” as elements often codified by church structures. Instead, I asked about priorities in order to understand what was important to individuals. I discuss beliefs in the context of Christian history in chapter 2.
I found this conclusion ironic because out of the four focus groups I conducted, this group was the one where people continually interrupted each other and talked over each other most often. At first, I thought this was a sign that people were not listening to one another, but, upon reflection, I realized that they had all been engaged in the conversation and responded directly to each other’s ideas. Therefore, it is evident that listening is not a passive activity. Linguist Deborah Tannen explains that interruptions can even be helpful in making people feel like others are engaged in the conversation. She reinterprets verbal jousting as “cooperative overlapping” (Tannen 2021). The cooperative nature of interruptions is that they can add energy to the conversation as long as each person feels welcome to join in (Tannen 2021). Though these participants did not all know each other, they were willing to engage in animated conversation with one another, and their zeal to join the conversation was evidence that they were listening to the other person and attempting to keep the conversation going, even if they joined before the other person had finished speaking.

As soon as the group agreed that all of the other priorities needed to begin with listening, one member pointed out that listening does not always enhance social interactions. Brandon Wimer had two reasons for why listening could be problematic: “One, in the way that becomes debilitating sometimes. Listening to the point that you don't necessarily get anywhere.” In this first scenario, listening could be an excuse for not taking action. Brandon also experienced another shortcoming of listening: “But, at the same time, dealing with a segment of a culture, particularly the Mennonite culture, that doesn't see listening as a high value anyway.” Brandon went on to describe a recent situation where a person he knew disagreed with Mennonite church leaders, and it was affecting his interactions within the church. Brandon felt like the church leaders had not listened to his friend’s point of view, which resulted in a breach between the
friend and the church. Even though he was discussing the pitfalls that could arise, it was clear
Brandon valued active listening and thought it might have been beneficial in avoiding at least
one conflict.

In further conversation in the group, people connected listening to hospitality. Hospitality
was another high priority for group members. Like listening, hospitality involved actively
engaging with other people. Eric Holtzman said, “Hospitality's a really practical example of
some of the things we've talked about. It's not just this ideal; it's practical.” Each person agreed
that it was important to put their values into practice. At the same time, these persons also
discussed ideals and things they hoped for within the Mennonite church because they were well
aware that church members did not always behave as others wanted them to. Brandon, as well as
other people I conversed with, had examples of conflict within the church that showed that
people did not always live up to their own behavioral standards. By sharing their priorities for
Mennonitism, people expressed their values, the things they find important within the church,
and the expectations they have for the people who constitute the church.

**Telling Their Own Story**

Without a central authority to promote a particular creed or catechism, Mennonites create
confessions that guide their faith and practice, and there is flexibility and variability in how
Mennonitism is defined. In contrast to the focus group’s definitions, Mennonite historians and
theologians have condensed various lists of Mennonite distinctives that promote a particular
Anabaptist character. I will focus on three different Mennonite authors whose writings compiled
Anabaptist fundamentals in a way that people in Lancaster County could use to explain
Mennonitism. First, there is the twentieth-century historian and theologian Harold S. Bender,
then contemporary pastor and author Palmer Becker, and lastly current historian John D. Roth.
For most of Anabaptist history, the story of the radical reformers has been told by people outside of the religious tradition. Detailed Mennonite histories only emerged in the middle part of the twentieth century. For nearly four centuries, Mennonite history was the property of non-Mennonites (Dyck 1993, 34). These histories were, at worst, openly hostile to Mennonites or, at best, unflattering. In the 1920s, Mennonite historian and Goshen (Indiana) College professor Harold S. Bender pioneered efforts to have Mennonites tell their own story in a more public and formal way. In 1943, Bender gave an address, *The Anabaptist Vision*, which was published and widely distributed the subsequent year (Dyck 1993, 34). *The Anabaptist Vision* propagated the message that Anabaptists were the true reformers of the Protestant Reformation, and that their history of suffering was to lead them to cherish their heritage and share the ideas of peace and communal charity that, he thought, characterized the early Anabaptists (Bender 1944).

Bender had a tripartite vision. First, the fundamental element of the vision was “the conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship,” in which the believer and society were “fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ” (Bender 1944, 20). Second, Anabaptists were committed to “voluntary church membership,” meaning that individuals chose to devote themselves to a life of discipleship and were not forced to adopt a particular religious stance (Bender 1944, 26). The third part of the vision promoted an “ethic of love and nonresistance as applied to all human relationships” (Bender 1944, 31). In the North American context, Bender and his colleagues framed Anabaptism as a third way. But instead of mediating between Catholicism and Reformed theology, North American Anabaptists offered their tradition as “a new third way between the polarizing influences of theological liberalism and fundamentalism” (Dyck 1993, 34). Anabaptists were taking steps to distinguish themselves from their Christian contemporaries.
Recent Mennonite scholars have taken a more critical look at Bender’s *Anabaptist Vision*. In his efforts to rouse interest in Mennonite history, Bender carefully crafted a story, which highlighted the best ideals of Anabaptism and ignored its less flattering history, such as the incident at Münster. Bender also tried to create a history of “pure” Anabaptism, a notion that is quickly dispelled when one considers that Anabaptism had multiple points of origins and was influenced by other religious trends, such as the Pietist movement (Dyck 1993, 135; Strübind 2022, 14). This vision has also been interpreted and implemented in divergent ways (Nolt 1995; Roth 1995). However, Bender’s words continue to influence and guide Mennonites today. When I asked Jesse Hershey to share his idea of Mennonite core values, he responded, “The old H. S. Bender stuff of nonconformity, community, and nonresistance. I still think those are at the heart of what being Mennonite is.” Maybe Bender’s *Vision* was incomplete as a document, but his vision to get more people interested in Mennonite history succeeded and encouraged people to think more critically about their religious history and contemporary witness at a time of international turmoil.

As a testament to the ongoing legacy of *The Anabaptist Vision*, the concepts have been adapted for a twenty-first century context to explain what it means to be an Anabaptist Christian. Pastor and educator Palmer Becker situates the Anabaptist tradition firmly within the realm of Christianity and encourages Christians to learn from one another (Becker 2008, 1–2). He considers that Anabaptists have something unique to teach other Christians. He summarizes Anabaptist core values by listing them: “1. Jesus is the center of our faith. 2. Community is the center of our lives. 3. Reconciliation is the center of our work” (Becker 2008, 2).  

---

16 Initially introduced in *Missio Dei*, a publication of Mennonite Mission Network, Becker expanded his ideas in a later book, *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith* (2017), which some Mennonite churches in Lancaster County used for congregational or small group studies.
Stoltzfus, ACC’s Executive Conference Minister, said that he had Becker’s three key statements posted in his office. He connected those ideals to ACC’s vision, summed up in the tagline, “Centered in Christ. Building Connections. Sharing God’s Love.” In later chapters, I will discuss more concretely how these values are enacted and contested. For now, I am laying a foundation to explain how these values are promoted within American Mennonite churches, with a specific focus on Lancaster County.

Historian and author John D. Roth aligns with Becker in promoting Anabaptism as a stream within Christianity. His brief excursion into Mennonite distinctive theology begins by first affirming what Mennonites have in common with other Christians, such as adherence to the Bible and salvation through Jesus (Roth 2005, 13). He then goes on to express how Mennonites interpret those ideas differently from other Christians, being careful to note there is also variety and disagreement among Mennonite groups. He focuses on four key topics, some of which overlap with Bender’s and Becker’s three core values. Roth considers how Mennonites interpret scripture, understand baptism as a symbol of ongoing transformation, express faith through discipleship, and make the church visible through communal practices (2005). Perhaps the primary distinctive element of Mennonitism is its incarnational theology, a view shared by Bender, Becker, Roth, and others. Roth explains the incarnational perspective as the idea that the “doctrines of the church become most meaningful for Mennonites only as they are actually embodied, or lived out, in daily life” (Roth 2005, 13).

The incarnational perspective is a crucial element of what makes Mennonites distinct among Christians, and this viewpoint informs the rest of this dissertation as I discuss how

---

17 Name used with permission. Interview 2019
18 Roth is drawing from Anabaptist historian C. Arnold Snyder who also emphasized Anabaptism’s commonality with other Christian streams.
Mennonites enact their faith in various roles, with different interpretations of how people should behave. Anabaptists are not the only Christians who promote an active religious identity, but this idea is key to their identity and religious heritage. Becker explains, “Being a Christian from an Anabaptist perspective is a combination of believing in Jesus, belonging to community, and behaving in a reconciling way” (2008, 3). It is also a major factor in why churches find themselves in conflict with one another and why they split. Joyce Sangrey recognized the difficulty in living out faith within a particular congregation: “Now, I know you can't both have a woman as pastor and not. And you can't both have gays accepted as members and not. So that's the dilemma.” Christian community is a core value, but the requirement for formal membership in that congregation or the roles certain people may have in the church are points of contention.

At some point, each congregational or denominational organization had to make some decisions as to how to codify their convictions into practice, and that would create conflict. Therefore, the divisions between church members were a form of Christian critique, a way for each group to enact their values in divergent ways. In chapter 3, I discuss how ideas of leadership, nonconformity, and gender roles created conflict with LMC. In chapter 5, I expand some of these core values to consider how theological debates were connected to individual and communal practices. In each instance, these distinctive concepts continue to shape the daily lives of Mennonites.

*Christ, Community, Reconciliation*

The triad of Christ, community, and reconciliation was reiterated by Mennonite individuals throughout Lancaster County, but they were also aware of the challenges of enacting

---

19 The alliterative triad of believing, belonging, and behaving comes from Alan Kreider’s definition of conversion (1999, xiv–xvi), which he adapted from Grace Davie’s (1994) work where she discusses behavior and belief in a framework of belonging. (See Kreider’s note on this adaptation: 1999, 109)
their ideals within a Mennonite fellowship. They knew that sometimes the greatest assets to the church could be the greatest sources of conflict. In each interview, I asked people what they appreciated about the Mennonite church. Jacki Dietrich’s response was immediate: “Buzzword. What I like is community.” We laughed together knowing that the word is often tossed about, sometimes carelessly. But Jacki defended herself, adding, “Well, it is a buzzword.” Then she explained that she had not fully understood or appreciated the meaning of community until she was out of a Mennonite context, interacting with people from different denominations and participating in a non-Mennonite church. Jacki defined community as “doing faith together.” She elaborated, “Other denominations have fellowship meals and things like that, but it is different in the Mennonite church. That collective sense of ‘we’ is a little bit stronger, I think, in the Mennonite church, for the good and the bad. And that's what I love about the Mennonite church. It's already there. I learned it by osmosis and not by having a teaching about it.” In the next breath, she was critical of those who have a “quick sense of defining who's in and who's out. That ‘we’ of community can be pretty hostile in building barriers.” For those who feel accepted in the church, the sense of belonging to a community is a comfortable, supportive feeling. But Jacki was also aware that the same factors that contributed to a positive church experience for some could also lead others to experience nonbelonging.

These three values are interrelated, and several Mennonites explained that what happens in one area of the church affects the others parts of the church. For Norm Reimer, a thriving Christian community would be a good witness of Jesus Christ. He said Anabaptism was about following the example of Jesus, living out faith in community, and sharing faith with others. He tied all three values together by saying, “Out of a healthy community of faith comes a witness of what it means to follow Jesus. And I don't think we've done very well at that as Mennonites. I
really don't. I think too frequently we say we don't agree with one another. We just split and start another church. I don't think that's a healthy way to experience and express community.” Since our conversation occurred soon after Norm and Janice Reimer had left an LMC congregation, it is not surprising that the pain of a church schism was fresh in his mind. His point was that separation harms the Anabaptist witness to others about how to be a peaceable, Jesus-centered community. But, though he did not directly say this, the division also harmed those who were already within the Anabaptist-Mennonite community and who felt that divergent viewpoints were unwelcome.

Nate Evans connected the centrality of Jesus to an ethic of nonviolence, one of the early markers of Anabaptism. Nate had a ready answer when I asked him to describe Anabaptism, but he also had enough experience in the church to mitigate his response:

So, to me Anabaptism at its best is about the desire to affirm Christ as Lord over every area of life. So that works itself out most concretely in nonviolence. Saying, ‘Because Christ is Lord, I will not perpetrate violence against other human beings.’ But it also feeds into ethics. It feeds into generosity. It feeds into hospitality. It feeds into a sense of camaraderie and cohesiveness within the community. All of those things are what I think Anabaptism is at its best. It's about trying to live faithfully as someone who affirms Jesus is Lord. Obviously, we don't get it right most of the time. And there's a whole awful lot of dysfunctions that can come into play with that. But yeah, that's what's important to me is saying that ‘Jesus is Lord’ and then trying to live as if that were true.

Defining Mennonitism is a fluid process that changes as people interact with one another. Anabaptists are clear that the church is not a building or an institution but an intentional, imperfect, voluntary fellowship of people who commit to one another for a certain time. What holds people to the fellowship is a conviction that goes beyond the immediate community and envisions a world in which Jesus reconciles people to God and to one another. Alan Klassen appreciated “the gospel of reconciliation. And that means be reconciled with each other but also with God.” Rick Zeiset related God’s work to God’s mission: “In a nutshell, I think it goes back
to Colossians where it's God's mission of reconciling all things through the cross of Christ. The work of reconciling all things to God.” It is this greater hope that seems to carry people through times of conflict. They have a conviction that God can restore what has been broken and reconcile all relationships in the present.

**Belonging in Lancaster County Mennonite Culture**

Religious identity is broader than holding similar beliefs or practicing common behaviors; it also includes the cultural aspects in which the religion is birthed and brought to life through people’s performances. Mennonites have lived in Lancaster County for over three centuries, and religious convictions are firmly entwined in cultural practices that make it difficult for people to imagine how Mennonitism could be envisioned differently. People who enter the county from other locales often find themselves excluded from the tight-knit, family-oriented Swiss-German-dominated Mennonite culture. Though they struggle to belong locally, those from outside the county often have a greater sense of connectedness to the global Mennonite church. This latter group of people have more in common with the Neo-Anabaptists, a wide-ranging term for people who are incorporating elements of Anabaptism into other streams of Christianity. They are Anabaptists by practice, not Anabaptists by heritage or denominational affiliation. These three groups—native Lancaster County Mennonites, Mennonites from outside the region, and people who come to Mennonitism through an interest in Anabaptism—offer different interpretations of what it means to be Mennonite in American society.

*“Not All Mennonites are Created Equal”*

To anyone initially entering the Mennonite world of Lancaster County, it is apparent that there is a particular culture, which can be disconcerting to those who are not familiar with the way the community interacts. The most salient features of the county’s Mennonite culture are a
dedicated work ethic and a concern for outward appearance. This means that sometimes Mennonite individuals focus too much on their work and not as much on forming relationships. It can also mean that Mennonites appear reserved because they are self-conscious and do not want to display their ignorance or imperfections for fear of negative judgment. Some congregants I interviewed say Lancaster County Mennonites carry “cultural baggage” while others described local Mennonites as “awkward” or “passive aggressive.” Most of the people I met who were not originally from the area were more polite and said that the culture was unlike anything they had encountered before.

Some of these other cultural aspects were not linked specifically to church expectations or rules, but appear to come from the culture of the region. Sofia Miller bluntly told me, “I can almost always tell when I meet somebody if they're from a Mennonite background before they tell me because there's an awkwardness. There's a social awkwardness about being in space with people.” Even before speaking to anyone, Sofia observed awkwardness in the way people walk. Instead of striding forward, they shuffle along with chests bent forward, as if they are trying to hide the markers of their sexual identity. Although Sofia attributed the social insecurity and embarrassed gait to religious identity, I have observed that it extends to other people who were raised in Lancaster County. In addition, Mennonites who have lived outside of the area do not carry their bodies in the way she described.

I spent a year at Eastland Mennonite Church, where Sofia attends with her family. The congregation consists of a mix of people from different religious backgrounds, and I was often boldly greeted by people I did not know who confidently strode up to me, chest out, and welcomed me with a brief but friendly conversation. After a negative experience in another Mennonite congregation, Sofia appreciated the connections she made at Eastland. She summed
up the contrasts well: “I've come to realize that not all Mennonites are created equal.” For the first time, Sofia was surrounded by people like her, who did not grow up in Lancaster County Mennonite culture, and she found she was beginning to heal from some of the wounds left by the previous congregation. Not all Mennonites carry these cultural markers, though such behavior remains apparent in the region.

It is difficult for people who did not grow up in the county to navigate some of the cultural aspects. Dustin Penner was involved in several different Mennonite communities in the Midwest before moving to Pennsylvania. He noted some things that were different in Lancaster County, including food, songs, traditions, the way people speak, and the acronyms that were used to refer to a variety of church-related organizations. He also learned that many area Mennonites resisted higher education, an idea that several others echoed. Susanna Kreider said that she was taught that colleges, even church-related colleges “are suspect for liberal theology. And people go to school, and they don't come back the same anymore.” Even worse, Sofia Miller and Martin Long were taught that if people went to college, they would not return to church at all. Therefore, Mennonites in Lancaster County were historically loath to encourage higher education, often thinking that it was unnecessary for most of the congregants, who could learn a trade or carry on an agricultural business by getting a job in the local area. However, the majority of people I interviewed had at least two years of higher education and were very involved in the local church. They remained connected to the church, but it is true that they were not the same; they expressed their convictions in new ways. Dustin also pointed out that Mennonites in the local area are very aware of their three centuries of history in the region and carry that knowledge in their present activities. In sum, Dustin said the Mennonite culture is “much more intense here in Lancaster” than in other Mennonite settings he had encountered.
Another aspect that exists in Lancaster County culture is the appearance of avoiding conflict. Rachel Huber found herself frustrated by the “passive aggressive culture” of people around her.

Christa: What do you mean by “this passive aggressive culture”? Where have you experienced that?

Rachel: All of Lancaster County. In and out of the church. Yeah.

Christa: Oh, that was very specific!

Rachel’s broad answer amused me, and I laughed out loud, but it was clear that she noticed how the surrounding environment affected the religious culture. Rachel defined passive aggressive behavior as avoiding direct conflict in a tense situation. Instead, “you might kind of jab them down here while you're smiling.” Passive aggressive behavior means that people never discuss conflict openly, but let it linger under the surface so that it is never fully resolved. As a result, the wounds people create fester without a cure.

The present Lancaster County Mennonite culture has been shaped by memories of legalism within the local conferences, particularly in Lancaster Mennonite Conference. Rachel Huber heard people talk about the strict, authoritarian bishops’ practices that prevailed in the county into the 1970s, but she did not have any direct experience with the bishops. “I didn't have some of the baggage that I hear folks that grew up in this area talking about,” Rachel told me. “Like, bishops didn't come in and look at what we were wearing and decide whether or not we could receive communion and all that kind of stuff. There was none of that.” Joyce Sangrey had a similar experience, where she heard stories from other people: “A woman my age said that when she showed up for her baptismal service, she had a collar on her dress and was sent home. Said she could not be baptized with a collar on her dress. And it ruined her entire memory of her baptismal day.” In the 1960s and prior decades, a person’s religious commitment was
measured according to how closely one followed the “Rules and Disciplines,” which I explain more fully in chapter 3. Though these practices no longer happen, the memories remain and, for some, the fear of repercussion affects their actions in the present.

Since the more severe restrictions of conservative Mennonite culture were applied to women, some people I interviewed talked about the negative aspects of Mennonite culture in gendered terms. For women, the patriarchal culture of Lancaster County Mennonite churches felt restrictive, and it has repercussions in the present. Shana Bushong and I met in her cozy living room, surrounded by pictures of smiling family members. She told me that she has only recently begun to be more active in voicing her thoughts that women can be talented leaders, which differs from what she was taught as a child. Shana is not even thinking specifically about church. She wants to encourage women to pursue careers in STEM fields and to become teachers who empower young girls and who teach boys to recognize that anyone can have gifts in any field. For Shana, it has been difficult to come to this realization because of how the church and her family shaped her thoughts about gender. Even though she told me she is only now actively speaking out for women, these ideas have been percolating within her for a long time, so much so that her children inherited her viewpoints. Shana says that she often lacks confidence in herself, but her children (gesturing toward photographs on the wall) are a great encouragement when she wants to organize something as a woman: “It's just clear-cut to them because they don't have the baggage or the background or whatever.”

Shana’s example is evidence that women’s roles in the church and in society are initially interpreted through one’s own experience. As people gain different experiences, they see that other roles are possible, and they may decide to interpret those roles differently. For Shana, being a Christian woman initially meant she had to be silent and let others lead, but now she interprets
the roles of women differently. She is speaking out about the gifts of women and their benefit to others around them. Shana communicated how her own views changed over time, even though she never left the Mennonite church. Her example illustrates that people can shape the way Mennonitism is expressed within Lancaster County. As Sofia Miller articulated, “not all Mennonites are created equal,” and the culture of the region itself is often intertwined with how individuals change their interpretations of their own Mennonite identity.

**Judgment from Without**

Within Lancaster County, there are a wide range of Mennonite expressions, but the religious identity has a largely negative connotation within the county, which church members often carry with them. Martin Long is one of the few people I interviewed who did not come from a Mennonite family background, and he gives his perspective from outside the fellowship: “I've lived in Lancaster County so I heard about Mennonites, although it was largely in mocking terms. Yonies and, you know, that kind of thing. So, it was from a distance. And it was a fairly stereotypical and fairly not real friendly.” As a young girl, Cora Meyer absorbed the disdain others expressed toward Mennonites: “There were comments from peers like about ‘a little Mennonite girl’ and being a Yonie. There were lots of derogatory things happening that as a fragile, young teen, then, that was significant and hurtful.” As a teenager Cora did not wear the plain dresses of conservative Mennonites, and her parents owned a car, but her peers did not make a distinction between groups. The markers of difference within the Mennonite community were not important to those outside the community.

---

20 A reference to horse-and-buggy Mennonites whose particular lifestyle followed the ways of Bishop Jonas Martin (d. 1925), who opposed the automobile as an unnecessary worldly possession that would divide the Old Order fellowship. His name has the Pennsylvania Dutch pronunciation, “Yonas,” and his nickname was Yonie Martin. (See Kraybill and Hurd 2006, 64–66 for more details about Jonas Martin.)
Even today, Cora still gets questions such as, "Where's your buggy?" and inquiries about a woman’s “little bonnet”. Instead of being flustered by these questions as she was earlier in life, Cora now views people’s curiosity as an opportunity to explain her own values and to educate people about alternative forms of Mennonitism.

**Judgment from Within**

In addition to the criticism people faced from outside of their religious flock, it was not always comfortable on the inside of the fold. As strange as the blend of Lancaster County and Mennonite culture appeared to outside observers, it was important for some people to be able to preserve their culture. Sofia Miller mentioned earlier how much she struggled to feel accepted in the first Mennonite congregation she attended. When she made an effort to form friendships with people from that church, the reception was almost worse than not knowing anyone. One day, Sofia and her husband were entertaining people from their congregation, enjoying a pleasant day sitting on their spacious lawn. A guest told Sofia that it was fine if she attended the church, but she should not invite any of her friends. Curious, Sofia’s husband queried why they should not invite others. The guest responded, “Because if you bring your friends in, you're going to dilute our culture.” When Sofia told me this story, I gasped in astonishment at the bold and heartless declaration. I would have been tempted to think that this church member’s reluctance to welcome new members was due to the fact that Sofia’s Catholic background was unfamiliar to him, but it became evident from others that preserving a particular flavor of Mennonite identity was important to some church members in Lancaster County.

In order to maintain a certain culture, the Mennonite members were regularly monitored from inside the conference. Many people repeated a refrain that their behaviors in the church were constrained by a constant fear of “What will other people think?” Josh Hollinger explained
the attitude this way, “The way you come across to others is very important. [You have] to look like you have it together, which does not give that space then for vulnerable sharing.” Anyone who openly talked about difficult situations or who did not present the right appearance was quickly corrected. In a focus group conversation on women in church leadership, people mentioned that often it was not formal church leaders who restricted women’s roles; it was fellow church attendees.

Elvin Thomas: Women can sometimes be women’s worst enemy when it comes to taking pastoral leadership. Because that kind of scuttlebutt was going around in our congregation. Women were more against it than men.

Rebecca Ward: You have the rule followers wagging fingers, “Get back in your place.”

At times, the church community functions like Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. By placing people in solitary cells facing an inner courtyard with a single watch tower, the prison is designed to divide and individualize people. In this model, the individual learns to police herself since she can never tell when the one in the tower might be watching her (Foucault 1977, 200–201). In Sri Lankan villages with garment factories, anthropologist Caitrin Lynch declares that the entire village becomes a panopticon. Villagers monitor and regulate the behavior of the people who work in local, village-based factories. Women, especially, are watched closely. Because she knows she is being watched, each woman becomes “her own surveyor” (Lynch 2007, 128). For this reason, factory owners say they prefer to have female workers from the village. Since these women have been trained and disciplined by the village and continue to live within this environment, factory managers think they are more self-controlled and obedient and less likely to cause trouble than women who move away from their families to work in urban factories. At the same time, Lynch says, the village women feel safer when the factory is located near their home because the closeness of the community offers moral protection as they enter the
workforce (Lynch 2007, 140). Lynch raises an important point that discipline is also a form of security. For both men and women in Mennonite churches, the church community can be a place where rules are clearly defined and each member knows how they are expected to perform. As will become clear later, these boundaries are always changing. Unlike the strict panopticon prison model, there is no national authority for Mennonites, though congregations may join a specific network with a limited authoritative body. Therefore, the church community constantly shifts around a fabricated center that is created either by tradition, a few dominant personalities, or the consensus of people in authority.

Several Mennonites mentioned that the emphasis on right behavior and internal surveillance was stronger in LMC than in ACC and contributed to their decision to leave LMC. Jacki Dietrich found that ACC was “not so wound up with ‘What will people think?’ and ‘Will we be contaminated by this association?’” For Jacki and a few others, the fear of contamination was a deciding factor in why LMC member congregations left MC USA. The conference did not want to be associated with an organization that held conflicting values and an incongruent polity. Kelly Schwartzentruber told me, “LMC is an institution in and of itself that I do not think exists anywhere else in North America.” I smiled at her summary, but she helped to clarify the reason why LMC withdrew from MC USA. It is an organization that is large enough to exist on its own, without a denomination. It has a long history, a distinct culture, and it has retained a semi-synodical polity instead of adopting the congregational polity of the recently-formed MC USA. It is this unique combination of factors, that distinguishes LMC as “an institution in and of itself.”

Some people interpreted LMC’s desire to maintain its uniqueness as a fear of being tainted by people who brought opposing viewpoints. Other people expressed the opinion that LMC had different priorities from MC USA and so the separation freed the conference to spend
more time equipping people for local ministry. LMC constituents and leaders emphasized the conference’s missional work through various efforts to form relationships with people in their own neighborhoods. LMC did not want to be distracted by MC USA’s agenda and internal conflicts, which would force those in LMC to lose their focus on their local work. I noticed the differences in priorities after attending LMC’s annual meeting for its member congregations because the topics were different from those highlighted at MC USA’s Convention. It was apparent that LMC’s path did diverge from MC USA’s trajectory.

There is not a single, all-encompassing interpretation of why LMC separated from MC USA. What is collected here is only a small sample of LMC’s vast identity. The impressions I recorded come mainly from people who left LMC; therefore, their views reflect their own experiences and biases. Their insights into ACC are more limited due to their shorter duration in that conference. Instead of emphasizing reasons for the withdrawal, I have emphasized people’s reactions to and experiences of the division between LMC and MC USA, with a greater amount of data from people who left LMC in favor of ACC.

To understand LMC and its constituents at the time, it is important to note that the second decade of the 2000s was a tense time within the United States. The 2016 presidential election had sharpened many of the polarities that existed within the nation, and church attendees felt this divisiveness filter into their congregations. There is no doubt that people felt fear and anxiety during this time, but it would be inaccurate to classify LMC as an uptight organization while ACC remained relaxed. One main difference between the two organizations was that ACC had a clearer sense of its identity during that period. Several theologically and cultural conservative congregations had left ACC when it decided to join MC USA (Rudy 2003, 9–12, 17). It was an organization that was committed to remaining with MC USA, and it had already had
conversations about accepting members who were openly part of the LGBTQ community. These discussions and decisions had been painful for ACC. By staying with the denomination and welcoming certain congregations, ACC lost some members, including Maple Grove, one of its founding congregations (Steiner 2022). By the time LMC members joined ACC, most of the turbulent waters had subsided.

LMC, in contrast, was trying to define its identity in the midst of concerns that the conference would change its priorities. Not all LMC member congregations had joined MC USA, and they put some pressure on the conference to leave the denomination. Other congregations had not been aware of MC USA’s polity and practices, and they were dissatisfied when they learned more about the denomination. Just like in the 1960s when the bishops unequally enforced regulations, the divergent opinions of MC USA created anxiety for those within LMC.

The positive lesson from each of these interviews was that people were aware of the shortcomings within the church system and made efforts to amend the deficits. They critiqued the behaviors of the past and began to relate to people differently. Josh Hollinger said that, as a child, he was taught not to share his struggles openly, but, as an adult with experiences outside of Lancaster County, he learned to view his spirituality as a journey toward becoming more like Jesus that involved asking complex questions. Instead of being handed a list of rules and a checklist of beliefs, Josh was forced to wrestle with his faith, and this struggle increased his adherence to an Anabaptist expression of Christianity. Cora Meyer, who felt the sting of judgment from her peers as a young girl because she was Mennonite, is now seeking ways to help people outside of the church understand another aspect of Anabaptism from within her progressive Mennonite congregation. Sofia Miller has moved to different Mennonite
congregations and has “been both guarded and refreshed by the lack of judgment” she is experiencing in the new setting.

**Belonging As Anabaptist**

Anabaptism comes in many different forms, and efforts to reframe an Anabaptist vision have come from within Mennonite churches and also from others who appreciate the values of Anabaptism but seek to clothe it in new cultural forms. “Culture's a very powerful reality,” Elvin Thomas informed our focus group. “The Mennonite community was a very tightly knit community of culture. Cultures don’t change fast.” Elvin was defining culture as the practices of the church, including dress, the way individuals were expected to behave, and leadership structures. His examples emphasized the restrictive culture of LMC during the 1960s, but Elvin also explained that this history had a lasting impact in the present. His congregation did not have a female pastor and women rarely preached, and Elvin lamented that many women with leadership gifts had left the congregation. Instead of blaming individuals for these circumstances, Elvin realized that the church’s cultural system did not allow space for women in that capacity, but he and others encouraged women as leaders in other ways. Even if he could not alter the entire culture of the congregation, he could inspire transformation in individual Mennonites. In this conclusion to a chapter on Mennonite history, values, and culture, I explain ways individuals choose Anabaptism for themselves, and I briefly discuss works by Neo-Anabaptists who seek to avoid some of the negative cultural aspects of Anabaptism and expose what Anabaptism has to offer people beyond a Mennonite culture.

**Neo-Anabaptism**

Anabaptism began as a movement in which a few people decided to declare their voluntary commitment to Christian faith by re-baptizing adults among themselves and
advocating that the state should not determine a person’s religious affiliation. Over time, it became more common for people in Mennonite congregations to become Anabaptists not because of a radical break with their past but through religious osmosis from their upbringing. Instead of being assigned a religion by a political authority, people associated themselves with religion as a familial inheritance. Anthropologist Abby Day notes a similar trend in England, where people identify themselves as Christian, specifically as part of the Church of England, even if they do not participate in any Christian activities or adhere to the Church of England’s creeds (Day 2011, 174, 182, 187). For Mennonites in Lancaster County, the familial culture was predominately Swiss-German for most of the church’s history in the region. However, this ethnic aspect of Anabaptism in the region is shifting. There are a significant number of congregations within LMC that have recently joined but do not hold a Lancastrian or Anabaptist history. Congregations of Nepali (LMC 2021a) or Vietnamese descent (LMC 2021b), and a number of Spanish-speaking groups (Schrag 2021) offer a different form of Anabaptism than British and American Neo-Anabaptists and Pennsylvania German-descended Mennonites.

Neo-Anabaptist is a term that has been used to define people who do not come from a cultural or religious background related to Anabaptism but who are enthusiastically embracing Anabaptist principles.21 Although it has been called a “rising movement” (Boyd 2014), it is an elusive term with no organized center. Theologian and pastor Gregory A. Boyd writes that Neo-Anabaptists are similar to Anabaptists in their theology and practice because their vision of God and God’s kingdom are not aligned with a Christendom mentality, which assumes Christianity’s

21 Matt Hamsher, Executive Director of the Evana Network offers an alternative definition. In an interview with Anabaptist World, he defines “neo-Anabaptists” as “the more evangelically minded ones,” that is, people from Anabaptist backgrounds who advocate for evangelical efforts in the midst of their Anabaptist contexts (Huber 2019). This definition demonstrates the variability of Neo-Anabaptism, but the Mennonites I met in Lancaster County did not reference this definition, even though some of them are evangelically minded, so I will not consider it here.
superiority in all matters. But, Boyd cautions, Neo-Anabaptism “doesn’t look anything like traditional Anabaptism” (Boyd 2014). Stuart Murray does not use the term Neo-Anabaptist, but his book, The Naked Anabaptist, aligns with the increasing interest in Anabaptism outside of Anabaptist circles. Murray adopted the title from his friend Noel Moules, who said “‘the naked Anabaptist’” is defined as “‘Anabaptism stripped down to the bare essentials’” (Murray 2010, 15). In other words, these people are attracted to Anabaptist viewpoints but reject the “cultural baggage” with which it is associated. No religious identity can exist as completely “naked;” it must always be enfleshed and practiced, which is one of the key values of Anabaptism.

Anabaptists offer an internal critique of their spiritual tradition when they consider what Anabaptism would be like without centuries of practices around it, an effort to revitalize the church and offer it new garments. Murray was chair of the Anabaptist Network (now the Anabaptist Mennonite Network) in the United Kingdom. This network has distilled seven core convictions that Anabaptism offers to the post-Christendom world, which can be found in Appendix A, and which are explained more fully in Murray’s book (Murray 2010, 45–46; Anabaptist Mennonite Network 2021). These seven core convictions echo American Mennonite theologian Harold S. Bender and Anabaptist pastor Palmer Becker, who promoted the centrality of Jesus, the importance of a mutually supportive fellowship, and an ethic of nonviolence and reconciliation. These statements are also similar to some aspects of Anabaptism that Lancaster Mennonites value, including ideas of discipleship, social justice, and living simply.

People I interviewed mentioned Neo-Anabaptists because the views from outside historic Mennonite culture helped them to define what they value as Anabaptists, and aided them in reevaluating the Mennonite subcultures in which they were raised. Alan Klassen said that he met several people in seminary who were learning about Anabaptism for the first time. One person
told him, “I don't get you Mennonites. I feel like I'm moving towards embracing a lot of your Anabaptist values and beliefs, and I see you running the other way.” Alan learned from those people who did not come from Mennonite backgrounds. He reflected, “I think that they're doing our theology better than we are because they don't have the cultural trappings.” Stuart Murray found a similar trend in the United Kingdom. He writes that the emerging interest in Anabaptism in the United Kingdom is in stark contrast to “the lack of interest in the Anabaptist tradition among many North American Mennonites” (Murray 2010, 17). Les and Rosanna Peters, both committed Anabaptists from Mennonite families, expressed their appreciation for talented pastors and individuals who came to the church from outside Mennonite circles because they were attracted to Anabaptist theology. Les explained that these new pastors, like himself, appreciated the peace and justice aspects of Anabaptist theology, the idea that Jesus offered “shalom and the sense of wholeness of individuals.” Les and Rosanna enthusiastically welcomed individuals who did not have Mennonite heritage but who shared their Anabaptist values. They were willing to make space within their Mennonite circles for Neo-Anabaptists because they connect with them based on core convictions, not necessarily common culture.

Choosing Anabaptism

Even persons raised in an Anabaptist context revealed that, at some point in their life, they had to choose Anabaptism for themselves. Jacki Dietrich said that she experienced “a personal conviction for Anabaptism” in a high school history class. As the students learned about battle after battle, Jacki told me she thought, “This is pointless. Like, how much further ahead is society because of all this fighting?” Her search for an answer eventually led her to learn more about actively working for peace and seeking to resolve conflict through nonviolent means. Even though her family was part of a Mennonite church, Jacki made a choice to be an Anabaptist as a
young adult. Martin Long, in contrast, was converted to Anabaptism from outside Mennonite circles. He and his wife encountered people who handed them books to read, titles that were popular in the 1980s and 1990s. “So, we read *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy* and *The Upside-down Kingdom*. But [they] just introduced us to this whole theological world that we didn't really know anything about.” Martin and his wife quickly realized that these Anabaptist-leaning books offered answers to questions about “the relationships to wealth and poverty, to peace and war, to Christianity and people of other faiths” and other questions that their own Christian traditions could not answer satisfactorily. Eventually Martin and his family found their way into a Mennonite church and have been part of various Mennonite congregations ever since.

A few people discovered Anabaptism by critiquing American culture. At least three people explicitly stated that September 11, 2001, and subsequent events were instrumental in leading them toward Anabaptism within a Mennonite context. They were each at a point of transition in life, and they found themselves at variance with people in other American churches who advocated for violence as a form of retaliation. Dustin Penner reflected,

> My first foray into Anabaptism as a whole was the nonviolence aspect because 9/11 had just happened, and the Iraq War was beginning. I went to school, a conservative, evangelical college. As you can imagine then, during the Iraq War, I was one of a small group of people who did not think it was a good idea. And so, in some ways, understanding why I was against it was a matter of survival. It also helped me to kind of solidify and get a better understanding of Anabaptism. And then, you know, it just kind of goes from there. Like I started at nonviolence and then kind of went off from there.

Having converted to Anabaptism due to its nonviolent stance, Dustin struggled later when he entered a formal Mennonite congregation. “I identify with the theology, but this cultural stuff is kind of off-putting in a number of ways,” he confessed. Although he remains committed to a Mennonite congregation, Dustin also enjoys learning from Neo-Anabaptists, and he introduced
me to Greg Boyd’s work. He appreciates their engagement with the nonviolence, reconciliation, and love for one’s enemies that first drew Dustin to identify as an Anabaptist.

Other people were attracted to the active nonviolence that Anabaptists promote. Nate Evans spoke specifically about the theological reason why he appreciated the Anabaptist-Mennonite peace position. Like Dustin, Nate did not align with the dominant national response to September 11 that led United States forces into Afghanistan and Iraq. He felt dissociated from the church he was attending at the time where “so much of the rhetoric and the prayers and sermons essentially amounted to ‘God, make our bombs better than their bombs.’” By doing his own theological exploration, Nate explains how he moved toward Anabaptism:

And I was reading the Bible, especially the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount and hearing these sermons and prayers. And I was like, “There is just a disconnect here.” Like what I’m hearing in church and what Jesus actually said are two entirely different and irreconcilable things. And so, it was through that sort of reflection and exploration that I began to discover the theology of nonviolence, and Anabaptist distinctives, and the peace position. And all that sort of stuff that just sounded an awful lot closer to what Jesus actually said and what the rest of the New Testament teaches.

There are two aspects of Nate’s narrative that evince a personal conversion to Anabaptism. First, he mentions an interest in a peace theology, but, even before he reached that conclusion, he highlights the Sermon on the Mount, a compilation of Jesus’ interpretation of some of the ethical teachings from the Mosaic law and Hebrew prophets. This Christocentric reading of scripture demonstrates that Nate’s theological perspective was distinct from that of his fellow evangelical congregants before he was a committed Anabaptist. His response demonstrates that he was beginning to interpret his faith differently from others around him. Those who were raised within a Mennonite setting and those who were not each had to choose Anabaptism for themselves at some point. Though they all have different interpretations, all of them have decided to practice their Anabaptist leanings within a Mennonite context.
Listening for Common Ground

I have framed North American Mennonitism as a tradition aligned with Anabaptism, but that is not the only valid way to understand this Christian stream. Lancaster County Mennonite churches were transformed by the charismatic movement that swept through the region in the 1970s (Ruth 2001, 1108–9). Additionally, many congregations, especially those within LMC, are interested in encouraging Mennonites to regularly share the gospel with their neighbors and proclaim their Christian identity. My own interpretation of Mennonitism as Anabaptist comes partly from my understanding of the historical origins of Mennonitism and partly from information gleaned through interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Yet, I realize that the people I met were more likely to be Mennonites because they were Anabaptists, compared to others who were Mennonite by heritage and Anabaptist by default. For those I interviewed, the Anabaptist identity was primary, and their participation in a Mennonite church was one way they chose to live out that identity. Other Mennonites would downplay elements of Anabaptism, and emphasize its evangelical nature or its focus on local service. All of these different views offer faithful depictions of Mennonitism in Lancaster County, and these interpretations often overlapped with one another. Mennonitism fluctuates as people critique its current expressions and seek to express their personal convictions through the church. Therefore, the church takes various forms, but they are all accepted as Mennonite.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the progressive Mennonite churches in Lancaster County experienced a schism as LMC withdrew from MC USA, while ACC remained in the denomination. This decision satisfied the majority of LMC members, who were not pleased with MC USA’s congregational polity and its lack of discipline in specific circumstances. Yet, it also created pain for a few congregants who felt torn between LMC and
MC USA because they valued personal relationships in both groups, and appreciated some of the polities and values of each group. The division was painful, but it also forced people to clarify their values and solidify their interpretation of Mennonitism.

The institutional schism helped people I met align more clearly with the Anabaptist tradition. This Reformation-era movement had diverse origins but continues to impact the way people interpret Christianity today through its Christocentric emphasis, its teachings on nonviolence, and its practice of intentional fellowship. In this chapter, I have highlighted the constructive aspects of Anabaptism instead of its occasionally insular nature and the judgmental attitudes that it can produce. The positive elements take precedence because people do remain committed to Anabaptism within Mennonite churches and appreciate this theological tradition and the community it produces, no matter how frustrating it can be at times.

As people join Lancaster County congregations from different ethnic or religious backgrounds or from distant geographical regions, the culture of the Mennonite church is shifting, and people are redefining what it means to be Mennonite. With all of these adjustments, people are searching for peace. In withdrawing from MC USA, LMC wanted to be at peace to pursue its own interests and not be drawn into the conflicts within the denomination. Individuals and congregations who left LMC to join ACC found space to breathe in a conference that felt less restrictive and legalistic. Those who value the Anabaptist aspect of Mennonitism are also aware that the Mennonite church is a historic peace church, and they are distressed by the continued schism and ask, “Why does a peace church keep splitting?” Perhaps they have the question wrong. Possibly, they first need to understand the church and the values of its people. They could ask the question, “What does it mean to be at peace?” From their history, it seems
that being at peace includes conflict and continual reinterpretation and reshaping the church structures and practices and yet being faithful to who they think God is leading them to be.

I opened the chapter by introducing Rachel Huber as she was about to begin her “whole big story.” Rachel struggled during her last few years in LMC because she felt like there was no space for disagreement, and she could not discuss topics that were important to her. She was not at peace and did not feel like she was able to belong as a woman leader in LMC. We discussed what it was like to try to have conversations with people when there was disagreement. I asked, “What suggestions do you have for people who want to work through an issue with someone they disagree with?” Rachel answered, “I'm going to just speak out of my experiences.” Having lived through a time when her ideas were not welcome, Rachel offered these insights: “Listen to their story. And as you listen to their story, look for the footprints of God and begin there. I think when you begin there, you come to common ground first. And I think that's a good place to start.” I found it interesting that her advice was precisely what the members of the focus group said they valued about the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition: listening. Even if Rachel did not feel like people had listened to her, she still valued the practice. Her response displays forbearance. Even if she did not agree with people on every subject, Rachel was willing to search for common ground and to seek evidence of God’s work in each person’s life. Listening is a place to start to learn how to belong to one another, to belong to God, and to be at peace within yourself.
Chapter 2

Precarious Dance: The Individual and the Community

Introducing Belonging

As I perused congregational websites to learn more about the places and individuals I was studying, one website greeted me with scrolling pictures of people and the phrase, “Where you belong.” Early in 2021, the NPR podcast Rough Translation aired episodes covering people’s stories of belonging. It was a series, the host creatively explained, about “belonging or longing to just be” (Warner 2021). That same year, the United States Marine Corps recruited people by offering “a sense of belonging” (U.S. Marine Corps 2021). In a discussion about her vision for the future of Mennonite congregations, Ellen Eby-Groff declared, “I want people to belong to a community.” From these various sources, it appears that the subject of belonging is a culturally relevant topic within the twenty-first century United States. I unite this societal trend with anthropological inquiry and explore belonging as a precarious dance between individuals and their cultural milieu within the specific context of progressive Mennonite churches in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

Though it is a common byword at present, belonging is also widely defined. Belonging can be connected to intimate social relationships, to ownership, or to an affinity one has for a group or individual or circumstance. In this chapter, I explore belonging as a form of critique within a social group and emphasize the internalized, individual experience of belonging. As a feeling, belonging becomes personalized. Yet, without a larger community, the individual would have no sense of belonging. Therefore, belonging highlights the tenuous interaction between individuals and the social groups that touch a person’s life. As individuals consciously think about the community, they may critique its practices, its members, or their own sense of
connectedness within the group. In each instance, they offer interpretations of their own place and the place of others as legitimate and accepted participants in the collective. Critique may come from outside of a group, but it can also come internally and lead to more effective changes. Groups are heterogenous, and it is when people push up against the boundaries of difference near them that they begin to either critique or reinterpret their ideal of what the group should be and how people belong in the group.

In this chapter, I move from a theoretical discussion of defining belonging to its concrete application within a specific Christian community. First, I consider how belonging has been defined within anthropology and sociology. Next, I consider how belonging connects to people’s beliefs and their behaviors. I build upon that foundation and analyze two aspects of belonging within the context of Lancaster County Mennonite churches. One, belonging is a way of interpreting one’s sense of personhood in the midst of a group of people. Individuals can define the idea of community and then consider how their sense of self and their ideological priorities help them align with that ideal of peoplehood. Two, when the community fails to meet people’s expectations, their sense of belonging within the group can spur them to critique the group from within. Sometimes, these critiques bring structural reforms, as noted in chapter 3; other times they result in schisms and the formation of new communities, as I discussed in chapter 1. These new groups often have different priorities, which can result in dissimilar trajectories for the two communities. Lastly, I conclude with a brief consideration of nonbelonging as a corollary to belonging. Like the concept of yin and yang, belonging and nonbelonging complement one another, each embracing the other.
Sensing Belonging

Throughout this chapter, I define belonging as “a sense of affinity or connectedness with a particular group or within a specific situation with the expectation of reciprocal connection.” Belonging, by this understanding, is something that a person feels internally, but it is also a sensation generated by a social relationship, whether that means mutual interactions with other people or learning to relate to one’s self in a different way. Ayala Fader notes this dynamic tension between individual and group when she considers the ways in which Bobover Hasidic women are encouraged to be autonomous and monitor their own behavior. The women’s individual autonomy is based upon a responsibility to the larger Hasidic community and their role in perpetuating Jewish values (Fader 2009, 43–48). The women must personally decide to live by the group’s standards, but their decisions on what to adopt and how to behave also continuously modify the boundaries of the group, so that they do not appear too modern, like non-Hasidic women, or too ignorant of the contemporary world, like other Hasidic women nearby. All groups share something in common, but there is never complete homogeneity within the fellowship. Members are active in shaping and perpetuating the dynamics and standards of their community.

The study of belonging was influenced by early anthropological literature on personhood and identity (Dumont 1986; Fortes 1987, 122; Landsman 1998, 94; Mauss 1985, 22; Morgan 1997, 345–47) but has expanded beyond those concepts. Nations or organizations provide specific guidelines for citizenship or membership (Davie 1994; Simpson 2014; Shneiderman 2017; Winter and Short 1993). Once a group or nation is established or acknowledged, personhood, an individualized identity, emerges from or in reaction to that collective identity.
Within anthropology, belonging is often tied to political anthropology and analyzes the power dynamics within institutions and nations; however, membership does not guarantee belonging. Therefore, a study of belonging revises the concept of peoplehood and how persons relate to a group. Each individual has a different perspective on the group based on the individual’s sense of connectedness to the larger whole. Anthropologist Anthony Cohen writes about people from modest British towns who celebrate their small-town identity. Their sense of “belonging to locality” is a specific message about one’s self and not a statement about belonging to a larger region or a nation (Cohen 1982, 10). In the same vein, individuals who originate from Lancaster County, including Mennonites, often draw their sense of identity from the county, not from the state or the nation in which they reside. Each individual plays a role in shaping that regional identity. That is why I examine how people feel or react to the situations they are in, rather than explicitly discussing power dynamics that engender those conditions.

When belonging is internalized, it becomes a personal sensation, which does not always align with the standards set by a particular group. Much of the research on belonging emphasizes the group-oriented nature of belonging and the parameters that an institution or nation establishes for its members (Gammeltoft 2014, 60, 104; Geschiere 2009; Simpson 2014). Within the context of religion, emphasizing belonging through beliefs, church membership, or certain practices or rituals can mask the internal feelings of belonging that people experience and reveal the complexities of belonging in formal institutions (Day 2011, 194; Davie 1994; Egorova 2015, 498; Galman 2013, 427; Winter and Short 1993, 641, 648).

Religious adherents can experience nonbelonging even while performing the same actions or reciting the same principles as the rest of the community. When I interviewed Les Peters, he recalled pastoring a Mennonite congregation where people celebrated the Fourth of
July with more patriotic fervor than he preferred. Les said the congregation “wanted to sing a
series, a medley of patriotic songs, and it just was so out of sync with who I am. However, I
chose to respect who they were.” As the pastor, he institutionally belonged to the congregation,
but he recognized that he did not fit in with the overall character of the church. He formed deep
friendships, but eventually moved to another congregation that aligned more closely with his
personal values of nonresistance and peacemaking. He recognized that belonging was an internal
sensation as well as an external affirmation that one is part of a specific group.

There is no single factor that ensures belonging. A religious community, corporation, or
state establishes parameters for membership, which restrict people from belonging. But the
organization or society cannot create a sense of belonging for its members, which is why I
analyze belonging as a personal sensation. Anthropologist Miguel Diaz-Barriga defines
belonging as something that is “‘felt’ in everyday life” (2008, 137). Within the context of a
Christian institution, a person might be a church member but not experience belonging. At the
same time, a person may feel belonging within a specific congregation apart from formal
membership. Susanna Kreider told me her story about becoming a member in a Mennonite
congregation. She and her husband were looking for a church. She said, “we think we want to go
to a Mennonite church. We think that best reflects who we are.” When they agreed upon a
congregation, Susanna admitted, “I was slow to become a member.” She said it was well over
five years before she officially joined the church. Even though she agreed she intellectually and

22 There are variable definitions of “church.” It can be a physical building, as in “the red brick church.” It can refer
to a specific congregation and the people within that congregation, such as “Eastland Mennonite Church.” It can
refer to a specific denomination or network or a group united by a specific tradition. For example, “the Mennonite
church” does not refer to a specific organization but rather to numerous congregations connected by a common
heritage. Or it can be an ideological concept, “the essence of church” or “the church.” Throughout this work, I use
all four definitions of church and try to specify the meaning by context.
23 For this reason, I avoid the phrase “church member” unless a person’s membership status is relevant. In addition,
some progressive Mennonite congregations place less emphasis on formal membership for their attendees and may
instead promote an annual covenant process for all persons who attend.
culturally belonged in a Mennonite church, she resisted formalizing that connection. The institutional boundaries do not guarantee belonging because people may sense belonging apart from the formal membership standards.

In choosing to align themselves with a particular entity, individuals display intentionality, a willingness to be integrated with others. In her ethnography of selective reproduction in Vietnam, Tine Gammeltoft argues that belonging is tied to mutuality, to the ways in which social groupings influence people’s choices. In Hanoi, prospective parents had to respond to an anomalous pregnancy, but their choice “was less a question of what an individual prefers to do than a matter of with whom he or she belongs, a question of what demands are placed on him or her” from relatives, neighbors, and the nation (Gammeltoft 2014, 20). Gammeltoft’s examination of belonging is also tied to the political narratives of the state and ideas of who can be a legitimate or acceptable citizen. As others have done (Anderson 1991, 5, 6; Carsten 2004; Glosser 2003), Gammeltoft ties citizenship and belonging to kinship, where the state is conceived of as a family, and nationalism is built upon ties of an imagined family. Gammeltoft demonstrates that individual choices are constrained by their social environment, but there is also flexibility within that context. Personhood emerges from one’s identity among a people group, and belonging emerges from a person’s internal sense of connectedness with a social collective.

Belonging is a strategic political process where those with greater social power accept or reject individuals or specific aspects of identity. Belonging is based upon inequality, where some people are more fully accepted than other people. Sometimes the factors that encourage belonging are outside of a person’s control, such as ethnicity (Bettez 2010, 148, 149; Vega 2012, 199), physical ability (Landsman 1998, 95; Morgan 1997, 325–36, 343), place of birth (Egorova 2015, 495), governmental restrictions (Handman 2017, 317; Simpson 2014), or the surrounding
cultural and religious environment (Elisha 2017, 82; Engelke 2012, 159). These circumstances may result in legal, economic, or other disadvantages that discourage certain people from fully belonging to a group or nation. Those who feel marginalized can respond by contesting the limits of belonging. In a progressive American Mennonite context, constituents continually challenge each Mennonite conference’s stance on a variety of topics, including the standards for dress, affiliation with national networks, questions related to women in leadership and sexuality. In each case, those who are part of the churches influence the decisions the conference makes. Even if they do not agree with the final decision, individuals do have agency to affect the process because the conference is willing to hear their perspective. However, when conference policies do not align with individual priorities, a few Mennonites will experience nonbelonging.

Lastly, belonging only becomes noticeable when nonbelonging emerges. People who sense nonbelonging begin to critique their community and recognize the limits of belonging. Belonging is often unnoticed until a person determines that they are not fully aligned with their social collective. The sense of nonbelonging happens when people sense a lack of understanding or acknowledgement. Nonbelonging occurs when people are not accepted within a real or imagined community due to some aspect of their identity. People who do not meet specific criteria for citizenship (Geschiere 2009; Lukose 2005; Simpson 2014) or those who do not align with an expected racial (Bettez 2010, 160; Roland 2013, 414–15) or religious category (Egorova 2015, 499; Kaplan 2003, 90–91; Meer 2013, 389) may experience nonbelonging. Belonging and nonbelonging are co-dependent and one does not come into existence apart from the other.

**Belonging, Belief, And Behavior**

There is a complex interaction between belonging, belief, and behavior. Anthropological studies of religious groups historically focused on a group’s beliefs or its rituals in order to
understand the entire group, but considering belonging adds a third dimension to ways in which individuals engage with a religious fellowship. As cultural scientists, anthropologists have often studied people’s behaviors, the practices that are learned and reproduced within a culture. Behaviors are observed more easily than beliefs, but behaviors are also connected to beliefs. A person consuming the Eucharist does so with some belief that the material items have value and do something within the person. Some people believe that the transubstantiated bread and wine provide spiritual strength. Other people do not find any spiritual value in the elements, but they believe that the practice of Eucharist unites them to others in the congregation. They believe the behavior contributes to the social connections with people near them. Though the same ritual is interpreted differently, it reveals some belief the individual possesses and their sense of belonging either socially or spiritually.

**Belonging and Behaviors**

The relationship between belonging, belief, and behavior discloses the interplay between individuals and the communities around them. Cohen explains how people, including those in rural British towns, are aware of culture through the customs they have incorporated into their lifestyle. Traditions that have a long history are important not because of their antiquity but because there is something about them that has an enduring value in a local context (Cohen 1982, 5–6). The traditions have been crafted to suit the community, and the local people are united by their customs. Cohen’s findings reveal a distinct habitus among the townsfolk.

Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus is “a feel for the game” (1990, 66). It generates practices but also makes distinctions between the activities of a group (Bourdieu 1984, 170–72). In addition, habitus is historically constituted and arises out of particular social conditions (Bourdieu 1977, 78, 82), and it helps delineate the boundaries of each group. Anthropologist Brian Howell
explains the importance of behavior, not belief, in shaping a Baptist fellowship in the Philippines. Howell observes that people are less concerned about the finer points of Baptist doctrine, but they are consciously engaged in a “habitats of religious life” (2003, 235–36). Individuals experience the “constructed communities through key rituals and actions” (Howell 2003, 235). While individuals experience the community through behavior, they also determine which rituals are meaningful and should be passed on. In each setting, the players are involved in the game, but they also have a role in setting the boundaries of and rules for the game.

Among progressive Mennonites in Lancaster County, boundaries are established or ignored based on the type of relationships people have with other church members. Mennonite church organizations do offer options for formal church membership, but they are mostly imagined communities, ideas of fabricated unity among a disparate populace. Even if a person is a member of a local congregation, it does not mean that person shares a connection with the wider church conference or denomination. However, shared rituals, group activities, and regular meetings can create a sense of belonging as people interact and converse with and learn with one another. Referring to interactions between people in rural towns, Cohen writes, “such boundaries are not ‘natural’ phenomena: they are relational” (1982, 3). Since the borders are interactive, they shift as people alter their behavior or encounter a different community.

Dustin Penner, who is now a Mennonite pastor, told me of his first experience with Mennonites outside of his home church. He was part of a Mennonite congregation that was “Mennonite in name only.” The first time he and others from his congregation attended a denomination-wide convention, the song leaders announced the next song as “Six-oh-six.” Mystified, Dustin and his friends looked at each other and asked “What is six-oh-six?!” I laughed as Dustin related this experience because I had been in a very similar situation. During one
church service, while I was fumbling through a hymnal for the song announced, the congregation around me, without songbooks, spontaneously burst into four-part harmony singing a version of the doxology I had never heard before. Bewildered and feeling very out of place, I let everyone around me continue singing. It turns out that “606” is a marker of cultural capital.24

Along with surnames and other forms of knowledge, a familiarity with certain songs marks individuals as insiders in a particular culture, and that specific knowledge offers benefits to people who want to feel accepted within the culture. For me and for Dustin, both with different relationships to Mennonite institutions, our lack of knowledge of the “Mennonite national anthem” marked us as religious outsiders. The difference is that Dustin attended a Mennonite congregation. Institutionally, he belonged. But according to the relationships around him in that environment, he was outside the boundaries that had been constructed. For those of us with limited cultural knowledge, it was difficult to feel a sense of belonging with the people around us. In fact, our experiences with the physical community of other Mennonites made it evident that we did not belong in the community as we had imagined it.

Behaviors and other means of social and cultural capital can reveal the limits of belonging. In Lancaster County Mennonite culture, surnames are one form of social capital. According to Pierre Bourdieu’s seminal definition, social capital is the collected resources that may arise from “membership in a group” (2005, 101). Cultural capital, in contrast, is knowledge that is learned or obtained over time. Bourdieu points out that the social network may be defined by a common title, “the name of a family, a class, or a tribe, or of a school, a party, etc.” (Bourdieu 2005, 101). Social capital allows people to be accepted into a social network, gain

---

24 To make matters even more confusing, this particular version of the doxology was number 606 in the 1969 Mennonite hymnal, which is less commonly used. When the hymnal was updated in 1992, the beloved song became number 118. In the 2020 version of the Mennonite hymnal, it is number 70. However, it is colloquially known as “six-oh-six” and so anyone searching for this number in more recent hymnals will be quite lost, as I was.
trust from the group’s members, and engage with resources within the group. In some ways, I benefited from this dynamic because it gave me instantaneous rapport with people who valued local Mennonite names and who had the cultural capital, or acquired knowledge, to recognize those names. Practices such as sharing knowledge in common can help to unite people in a particular habitus. They are the actions needed to play the game appropriately.

Although social ties bring benefits, Alejandro Portes warns about the negative effects of social capital and cautions social scientists not to promote an “unmitigated celebration of community” (1998, 22). As a researcher, my knowledge of local history and some regional names was sometimes a hindrance because people assumed that I was familiar with Mennonite culture and church dynamics, even though I had many questions to ask. My social capital obscured my lack of cultural capital, the knowledge I wanted to gain from the social interactions. In this way, I felt like an outsider even when others thought I belonged within the Mennonite fellowship. Performing the same actions as the rest of the group or sharing some specialized knowledge does not guarantee belonging.

**Belonging and Beliefs**

People’s actions are tied to their beliefs. The action may be something as unpretentious as recycling a can because it is tied to a belief that humans can and should conserve their resources. The belief may also be tied to a person’s spiritual identity. Kelly Schwartzentruber was perplexed when she encountered Christians who resisted observing Earth Day because they thought it had no spiritual value. For Kelly, participating in Earth Day, as well as actions like recycling and welcoming refugees, were spiritual practices. She remarked, “I don't know how you can separate things and say, ‘Those are social justice issues,’ when I feel like that's following the Bible and that's believing the Bible.” All of Kelly’s actions for social justice or
environmental awareness grew out of her conviction that “the Bible is God’s inerrant word” which is interpreted “through the Holy Spirit today.” Kelly reveals that her spiritual beliefs are about more than considering the finer points of doctrine or discussions of dogma. Her Christian beliefs affect how she lives her life on a daily basis, even when her behaviors are not explicitly religious.

Focusing on belief enables us to examine not who one is but how one thinks about the world, so that we can then understand how that mindset can enhance a sense of belonging. People do not have power on their own to change their legal status or their ethnicity, though they may shift between multiple ethnic identities. But they do have the power to change their beliefs if they desire to belong in a different way or to a separate group of people. In this way, a desire for belonging motivates a change in belief. At other times, individuals hold on to their beliefs and prefer to challenge the boundaries of belonging. People have some agency in choosing which beliefs to embrace and which ones to release.

The understanding of belief in contemporary discourse has been shaped by Christianity as it developed into a formalized religion. At its inception, Christianity was not solely equated with belief, but belief became more prominent as Christianity moved beyond its Jewish origins. Belief is a complex term that has been privileged in studies of religion, but its frequent employment obscures the fact that religious identities are comprised of more than beliefs. Malcom Ruel argues that belief, which has become associated with religion and morality, has a distinctly Christian history. In Koine Greek, the verb *pisteuo* (πιστεύω) conveys a sense of trust or confidence, but it is also a relational term meaning that one has trust in another person or a divine being (Ruel 2008, 99). *Pisteuo* is variously translated as “believe in” or “entrust” or “have confidence in” (United Bible Societies 1993). As a noun, *pistis* (πίστις) carries the same meaning
of faith, trust, and belief, but it is often translated into English as “faith.” Ruel argues, *pistis* has an additional meaning in the epistles of being “converted to something.” It is in the New Testament, outside of the gospels, that people begin to be united through a set of beliefs (Ruel 2008, 100). It is through beliefs, not common culture or ancestry, that first-century Christians began to enter into fellowship together.

Ethnologist and philosopher Jean Pouillon reveals that belief can also refer to trust in a relationship. As an example, Pouillon says that when people say they believe in a friend, they mean that they place trust in that friend. They do not mean that they question the friend’s existence (Pouillon 2008, 91). It is significant to believe in—to trust—a friend, but questions of existence are inconsequential. Therefore, belief *is not* a big deal in Christianity and, simultaneously, belief *is* a big deal in Christianity. It is not important in terms of defining the religion, but it is relevant when considering how Christians relate to God. Tanya Luhrmann’s ethnography is replete with instances of how evangelical Christians learn to have confidence in God and to confide in God. Even in the midst of doubt, these Christians struggle more with trusting God than with questioning God’s reality (Luhrmann 2012, 278). Though I discuss various meanings of belief, I prefer this relational definition of belief as confidence in another being. In this sense, belief encompasses doubt, and it refers to an overall conviction that God is trustworthy and relatable.

Western-influenced scholars have usually defined religions by their beliefs, but this tendency presupposes a Western and Christian understanding of religion. In general, I define religion as an understanding of the world, undergirded by practices to advance a particular worldview and create a shared identity among people. That is, religion includes a community in which people share certain beliefs and behaviors, to various extents. Philosopher Richard King
posits that the term “religion” itself has a particular Christian history, as the term is used in
Western society. In the ancient Roman Empire, prior to Christianity, religio (now equated with
religion) was likely synonymous with traditio. Traditio referred to the rituals and traditions
people did to pay homage to the gods. Each family unit followed the ways of their ancestors and
so there was great variety in traditio. Early Christians, trying to unite people of disparate
heritage, had to separate religio and traditio so that people’s beliefs became more important than
the traditions of each family (R. King 1999, 35–36).

Over time, through the Protestant Reformation and into the Enlightenment era, the
Christian religion began to formally privilege orthodoxy (right belief) over orthopraxy (right
practice) (R. King 1999, 38; Saler 1987, 395; J. Z. Smith 1998, 271). Therefore, Christianity was
defined by codified beliefs, and people raised in a Christian context expected that all religions
would be based on a set of beliefs. While King indicates that, apart from Christianity, religion
may not exist (1999, 40), Jonathan Smith, a historian of religion, prefers to allow for numerous
ways to define religion. Smith argues that religion “is a term created by scholars for their
intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define” (1998, 281). In addition, anthropologist
Benson Saler is quick to point out that the antiquated Roman term religio eventually had as many
varied meanings in its original context as “religion” does in the contemporary societies
influenced by Roman language and traditions. The origins of the Latin religio are unclear, which
leads to various interpretations of the term. It is most likely that religio was associated with
feelings such as doubt, awe, or fear (Saler 1987, 396). People would then act in response to those
feelings, and beliefs were less important than they are in the Western world. Each of these
scholars indicate that both Christianity and contemporary Western society emerged together out
of the Roman Empire, and the ideas of the religion and of the society influenced each other.
Therefore, it is not surprising that Western sociologists and anthropologists historically privileged Christianity as a way to define religion (Durkheim 1995; Geertz 1973; Tylor 1958), while later anthropologists have challenged this singular focus on Christianity (Asad 2002; Needham 1972; Pouillon 2008).

Beliefs are part of religion, but religion also includes doubts, practices, reason, mystery, and many other means by which humans interact with one another and with the supernatural. In a study of Italian healers, Sabina Magliocco gives a fitting illustration of this incongruent coexistence of doubt and faith, reason and personal experience. She asked people in rural regions in Italy if they gave credence to the spells and charms that had been passed down to them. They responded, “It’s not true, but I believe in it” (Magliocco 2012, 6). Sometimes beliefs are about practice, not rationality. “Belief,” Magliocco asserts, “is not the opposite of reason; it is a state of conviction that is reached in a different way, with different evidence” (2012, 11–12).

Magliocco described her own experience with a group of modern Pagans where she practiced participatory consciousness, engaged her emotions, and suspended her rational beliefs in order to fully enter into the experience. She described how she met and learned from a cougar, the spirit guardian of the place (Magliocco 2012, 19–22). Though her experience was not rational, it taught her important lessons about the region and about the extent of her own ability to connect with the supernatural.

Belief is a form of knowledge that may be tested and contested. Richard King recounts a story from a German traveler in Bali who conversed with a Hindu man. The Balinese Hindu was not concerned about whether Prince Rama had lived on earth. He was well aware that a human

---

25 Ruel explains that the Latin fides (faith) carried the same early meaning as pists as trust or confidence. However, first Augustine and then others use fides to refer to the orthodox teachings of the church, as in “the Catholic faith” so that fides became less of “trust in” and more “alignment with the orthodox beliefs of.” Protestant writings more often discuss faith as a subjective experience, where a person takes beliefs as one’s own faith. (Ruel 2008, 103)
wrote the story of Prince Rama, but he asserted the story of Prince Rama was true, no matter its origin (R. King 1999, 39). The reality of the story did not lie in its historicity or authorship but in its ability to affect the lives of people in the present. So it is with beliefs about the reality of God. The relationship a person has with their beliefs impacts how their lives will be transformed by those beliefs.

Among Mennonites in Lancaster County, people emphasized the transformational and relational nature of belief. They were generally less concerned about orthodoxy, though they did diverge when discussing beliefs about specific topics. Often these beliefs came up naturally within the conversation, without any specific questions about beliefs. I divided the beliefs Mennonites discussed into two main categories: beliefs about practices and beliefs about relationships, either relationships with other people or with God. Some individuals also shared beliefs about themselves, and how their thoughts about themselves changed over time. I explore this idea further in chapter 5. For now, I focus on the ways in which Mennonites discussed beliefs about behaviors and beliefs about belonging to a larger group.

The larger category of belief expresses how people view relationships, including interpersonal, spiritual, and institutional relationships. These are beliefs about belonging. After a difficult time in the congregation, Dustin Penner was confident that God would continue to guide the congregation in the future, even though the future was uncertain. He confided, “God is still leading on there. We'll get there with God.” Dustin understood that the congregation, as a body, was in a relationship with God, and he believed in—trusted in—God to continue that connection.

During a time of contention with MC USA, Rachel Huber said that she and another pastor held to the same document as a guide for theology and practice, even if they disagreed on its application. “We both would agree with the Mennonite Confession of Faith,” she said. Rachel
realized that the *Confession* did not cover every issue and could be interpreted in various ways, but it was a helpful point to start the conversation when people had varying viewpoints. Josh Hollinger recognized the authority the *Confession of Faith* had for the Mennonite denomination, even though he did not agree with all sections as they were written. When talking to people from a different perspective, he told them, "I'm at a different place, but I respect the *Confession of Faith*. I respect the communal discernment that this is where the body's at.” Josh brings up another point that the Mennonite community, the church body, is also given authority on various matters. Rachel and Josh value institutional commitments, even if they are not in complete agreement with the rest of the body.

In a study of Great Britain following World War II, sociologist Grace Davie found that even though many British people identify as Christian, specifically as Anglican, they do not hold membership in a church or adhere to any regular Christian practices. Many in Britain, Davie claims, believe *without* belonging (1994). Others have latched onto this assertion and decided to further explore the connections between beliefs and belonging in a British context. Michael Winter and Christopher Short contend that people do believe *and* belong. The categories are not mutually exclusive. After doing extensive surveys and interviews in five rural areas in Great Britain, Winter and Short founded that people freely associated themselves with a specific religion, usually with the Church of England. And, though they did not regularly participate in church activities, they placed a high value upon the church and its clergy (Winter and Short 1993). Winter and Short suggest that people believe that Christianity is a religion that belongs in Great Britain due to its historically privileged position and long-term presence, whether or not they adhere to its religious teachings.
People’s beliefs reveal perspectives on who belongs. Abby Day plays upon Davie’s phrasing and argues that people believe in belonging. Day combines her ethnographic work in Yorkshire, England, with comparative surveys across the United Kingdom and the United States. Day finds that the majority of people hold an anthropocentric view of the world. A minority of people, whom she defines as theocentric, espoused a belief in God and talked about regular religious practices. Day says the majority of people were anthropocentric, which meant they discussed the prime importance of relationships with family and friends. Anthropocentrics believed in their relationships with people who were close to them, whether those people were living or dead. Instead of seeking input from religious or divine sources, anthropocentrics trusted in their relationships with other people to influence their morals, provide guidance, and give them a sense of belonging (Day 2011, 156–57, 168).

Belief and belonging are both complex concepts, and I emphasize what people believe about belonging. Believing in belonging, as Day defines it, is not unique to anthropocentrics, as she asserts. Like anthropocentrics, Mennonites believe in relationships with others, but they add in a relationship with God and talk about God as someone with whom they interact. Their religious beliefs are defined more by a relationship with God than by doctrines about God. The way Mennonites talked about God aligns with the earlier definition of pisteuo, in which beliefs about God express a trust in God, a confidence that comes from a relational interaction with God. Joyce Sangrey was able to build her trust in God throughout her life by interpreting events as the work of God. During times of transition, she reflected: “I knew that I did not open those doors by myself. The doors that opened at different times, I believed, it was intervention by God.” Edie Ebersole told a group of Mennonites that her relationship with God became stronger when her father did not support her career choice. “God was my real daddy,” she explained. “And so, there
was always that pull towards my real daddy.” The use of parental language expresses a deep connection to God as a being that becomes part of one’s familial connections, not a distant deity.

People’s beliefs about God influenced their interactions with other people. Shana Bushong believed that the way she related to other people was connected to her disposition toward God: “I think God can help us learn if we're open-minded enough. You know the Holy Spirit can guide and direct in that too. At least we can be open to how he may direct [us] and not feel so threatened by being with someone who is very different from us, you know. We can be hopefully secure enough in our God and his ability to have things in control.” Shana’s trust in God influenced the way she thought about interacting with other people.

What people believe about belonging is that belonging is based on intentional relationships with other people, even when there is disagreement. But because beliefs are relational, they can be tricky and lead to conflict. Just because a group of people have common beliefs does not always mean the people live out those beliefs in the same way. Norm and Janice Reimer had built relationships with Mennonites throughout the United States during their careers, and they appreciated formally maintaining those ties through MC USA. Therefore, Norm explained, “A reason we left is we wanted to stay connected with the denomination, Mennonite Church USA. That was a key point for us. We did not want to separate ourselves from the denomination.”

Some Mennonites prioritized remaining connected to church networks while others tried to express their thoughts about the larger tenets of their faith. Several people, including Nate Evans, used language about having Jesus as the “center” of one’s life and work. However, Nate was aware of the ambiguous nature of that discourse:

The language of Jesus being the center is important language, but it also is a convenient way to sidestep the difficult work of defining what exactly we mean by that. Because
someone might say, “Jesus is at the center of my faith and because of that I feel called to welcome and include all of God's people because that's what I believe Jesus would do.” Someone else might say, “Jesus is at the center of my faith and because of that I feel compelled to love all people by inviting them to live up to the high ethical standard of scripture, and I do that because I love Jesus.”

Nate continued to explain how belonging to a group that uses shared language does not mean that everyone shares the same ethical standards. Throughout my research it was apparent that people did not always realize that others in their congregation or denomination had different viewpoints until a specific conflict arose. Conflict is productive in helping people more clearly articulate vague language related to their values. Through that process, people clarify their beliefs about how others belong within their fellowship. Yet they also remain connected to people despite different interpretations of their beliefs. Mennonites in Lancaster County have learned that belonging does not happen automatically. It takes a lot of work, and it is an ongoing process.

Forming a sense of belonging is partially a subjective process for individuals, based upon their beliefs about themselves and about their social context. Therefore, I focus on people’s descriptions about their church experiences and examine how they narrate their beliefs about belonging. Anthropologist Susan Harding introduces the term “narrative belief,” whereby she invites the ethnographer to stand in the gap between belief and unbelief without promoting either side (2000, xii). Her fieldwork alongside Jerry Falwell and other Christian Fundamentalists emphasized the way individuals spoke about other people and about their religious convictions. Through “narrative belief,” she chose to live “between conscious belief and willful unbelief” (Harding 2000, xii). Narrative belief emphasizes the position of the ethnographer in understanding the beliefs of another group. Both Tanya Luhrmann and Sabina Magliocco write about how their interactions with a particular group shaped their experiences. Luhrmann wept
along with Evangelical women in a small group when they went through prayer techniques together (2012, 178), and Magliocco encountered a spirit guardian while in the midst of modern Pagans who all suspended their doubts for a time (2012, 19–22). For both of them, these experiences were normalized within that particular context and were useful in helping them explain how members of a particular group perceived the world.

Instead of focusing on the experience of the ethnographer, I turn attention to the ways in which Mennonites narrated their beliefs about belonging as if they were part of their normal life. Progressive Mennonites did not differentiate between belief and unbelief in matters of church and belonging. They were committed to the idea that church matters and that belonging within that church system is important. However, they were not in agreement on how one should belong or what priorities the church should emphasize. I examine narratives that discuss what people believe about belonging. In contrast to narrative belief, I analyze belonging narratives. Their stories reveal the training, experience, and instruction people received, which has shaped their current views of what is important to them and how they interpret their place within their community. Belonging narratives also shift over time as a person gains different life experience, learns different practices, and engages with new groups of people. The changing perspective leads a person to different conclusions. In the next section, I explore how the narratives Mennonites related were interpretations of their place in their present religious community.

**Family Matters, Church Matters**

*Individualized and Interpreted Belonging*

Individualized belonging is a process by which individuals interpret what the group tells them in ways that affect their own sense of belonging. People can either internalize and accept what their community teaches or they can challenge the existing structures. A group’s standards
for inclusion shape belonging, but an individual’s reactions to group systems create a personalized sense of belonging or nonbelonging. I examine how those critiques shape the nature of the progressive Mennonite community.

As individuals engage with society, the terms of belonging are constantly evolving. Societies are not homogeneous, and they are always shifting. Cohen highlighted this fluid nature of belonging by stating, “people become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries” (Cohen 1982, 3). He studied how British villagers increasingly interacted with others outside of their geographical home, and they became aware of the different ideas that existed among their neighbors or within the nation by standing at the borders (Cohen 1982, 1). Cohen’s observations indicate that groups of people are always evolving in their ideas and behaviors, especially when they come up against different perspectives.

As individuals have new experiences, their own personal boundaries are adjusted, and their perspective on belonging shifts. In an interview, Ellen Eby-Groff recalled living in a neighborhood where nearly every family had a different ethnic background. That experience expanded her personal borders and gave her a new sense of connectedness with others. Ellen reminisced about what she enjoyed: “The stories that I heard. The history that I heard. The culture. The food that we’ve eaten. The places that we visited. Different worship styles. Different ways of thinking. My life is so much richer. I don’t even know what I gave up because what I gained is so much more than what I gave up.” Ellen’s attitude evolved as she expanded her boundaries and gained a new sense of the richness that comes from including a wide variety of people in her life.

Additionally, belonging is a process of translation and interpretation, which grows out of its individualized nature. Translation happens when broader ideologies about the group are made
concrete in a local reality. Belonging is also a process of interpretation by which individuals consider what those concepts mean personally and adapt them to a specific context. Christianity itself has continually been translated and re-interpreted into new environments. There are various ways in which Christianity changes, including through the efforts of Christian missionaries (Comaroff and Comaroff 1986; 1991; Grimshaw 1983; Jacobs 1983) or through migration (Loewen and Nolt 2013; Prieto Valladares 2010). Christian expression is also altered when Christians critique the practices of other Christian groups (Handman 2015) or when they determine how the religion should be defined and enacted within their own social milieu (Burkhart 2016; 2023; Eriksen 2008; Howell 2003; Mayblin 2010; Robbins 2001). In many other ways, Christianity has been re-interpreted in new contexts since its inception as an adaptation of Judaism in the context of Roman imperialism.

Anabaptism offers one translation of Christianity, a version that emphasizes the life and teachings of Jesus and the right of each individual to choose to practice faith within the religious community. Yet Amish, Hutterities, Mennonites, and a plethora of other Anabaptist subgroups interpret those Anabaptist principles in very different ways through their discourse, beliefs, and behaviors. This section highlights how progressive Mennonite groups in Lancaster County offer various ways of believing and behaving to expand the church’s expression of belonging.

Conflicts at the borders of a group are often sites where people find their sense of belonging changing. Among progressive Mennonites, I consider how individuals or small groups contribute to changing how their communities define belonging. Emphasizing belonging enables one to explore how group adherents can offer different interpretations that serve as critiques of the larger assembly. When the group does not live up to a person’s idealized notion of the community, the disconnect can motivate a person to seek changes to the collective. In chapter 3,
I discuss how women were eventually ordained in LMC through the actions of people who wanted to overturn the status quo. Other times, individuals will be induced to leave the group, as I mentioned in chapter 1 in regard to how individuals left either LMC or MC USA to realign their priorities. Despite frustrations with church, negative personal interactions, and grief over conflicts, people remain committed to Mennonite institutions and the relationships that they have within those organizations, and they continue to seek belonging within these networks.

Church Matters

Church matters to Mennonites. They want an intentional fellowship where they honor their affinity with others. This is precisely Abby Day’s point when she argues that British citizens “believe in belonging” (2011, vi). They desire to be part of a larger group based on socially and emotionally meaningful relationships. However, Day points out that people desire to belong to others with whom they have a cherished connection and, therefore, in a historically Anglican context in Great Britain, most people do not belong to a formal church, which feels cold and impersonal. In contrast, I demonstrate that a number of Mennonites in Lancaster County want to belong to a formal religious organization because they find meaningful relationships there. Despite the chaos of church matters, what people I met call “church politics,” being involved in a local congregation does matter to them. I remember one informal conversation with a man in which we were reminiscing about a few people who left a congregation because they disagreed with something that happened. The man looked at me incredulously and said that church was family and “You don’t leave your family.” I’ll explore the idea of family in more depth, but his inability to fully comprehend why people left demonstrates that, for him, church was not a callous, bureaucratic organization but a network of intimate personal connections. Each person engaged with the formal church because it was part of their identity and because
they valued the space it provided for relationships with other people; they belonged to the Mennonite community.

*Interpreting Kinship*

In 2019, Atlantic Coast Conference’s spring assembly meeting featured time for congregations throughout the conference to share something from their specific context so that conference members could get to know one another better. One congregation compiled a video that asked people what they appreciated about that church fellowship. As each smiling face appeared on the screen, set against the backdrop of people scurrying in the midst of their Sunday morning activities, people continually said the congregation was like family to them. Sometimes they had to speak up over conversations in the background. Sometimes friends or youth from the congregation would pop into the frame and display a wide smile while the person continued speaking. In the midst of the Sunday morning bustle, these individuals on the screen appeared content and happy to be part of a group where they felt like a member of the family. Their description of their congregation highlights the nature of relational belonging, the sense of intimate connection in a social group. For those of us viewing this short video, most of the people appearing on the screen or moving in the background were strangers, individuals whom we had never met, but each person was important to the speaker because each person represented a personal relationship, a social connection. This way of framing church as a family indicates that church attendees desire close connections with other congregants. However, there are different definitions of family. First, I explore the nature of kinship to elucidate the various ways Mennonites belong within their church families.

Despite idealistic images of a nuclear family, family has never been a bounded or clearly defined category. Anthropologist Kath Weston defined family as a “contested concept” rather
than an institution. When individuals choose who belongs to their family networks, they betray that families are not reproducible models of domestic bliss with a male and female parent and 2.4 children (Weston 1997, 3). This designation applies equally well to churches. The church, as a global ideal and local iteration, is constantly contested and reinterpreted. There is no “nuclear church” since each fellowship is comprised of different people, operates with diverse priorities, and exists in a unique social context.

The various ways of defining and enacting family membership demonstrate that kinship is interpreted in multiple ways. Anthropologist David Schneider’s (1984) critique of kinship studies displays how an ethnographer’s perspective and theory shaped the way kinship was translated. Ethnographers wrote about kinship through the lens of their own culture or kinship experience. “Between the fieldwork and the monograph falls the shadow of translation. What is heard and seen is transformed by the field-worker” (Schneider 1984, 3). Translation and interpretation are different but related processes. Translation involves understanding the message in its original language or context and then moving that message into a new context. Through that process, the translator is involved in interpretation, the act of adjusting or transforming the message to fit better into the receiving culture. Just as language can be adapted, behaviors can be translated and interpreted. The process of translation and interpretation can be a critique of previous ways of living as practices are adjusted or discarded.

People in Lancaster County Mennonite congregations often spoke of the church as a family, but I came to realize that each person had a different interpretation of “family,” though it always had a positive connotation. People’s ideas were influenced by their experiences within a congregation and their own needs as individuals or family units. Historically, the majority of Mennonite congregations in Lancaster County were comprised of extended family networks. To
define church as family, for most Mennonites at the time, meant that the people in the congregation were biological relatives. ACC members say this family-centered dynamic began to change after World War II. Greater numbers of Mennonites from other locales moved into the county and started new congregations as a way of critiquing the existing tight-knit networks, from which they felt excluded (Rudy 2003, 6). These new congregations offered a different interpretation of church as family. The church became a place where people could rely upon one another and share resources and celebrate life events together without being related biologically. When Mennonites critique their religious structures and form new institutions, they reinterpret what they think church can be.

Now that I have considered the meaning of kinship, I will explore three main ways in which people described the church as a family. First, church as family was an actual extension of one’s biological family. Second, people referred to the church as a family as a place where they felt safe. Sometimes people sought a congregation separate from extended networks of biologically related family members in order to feel a greater sense of comfort. Lastly, church as family meant a community of people who would offer help to others. People could depend upon their church family for assistance, or members of a congregation would offer support to others in need. Church as family could mean biological kin, a supportive group, or a community of assistance. These definitions of family overlap and are not distinct classifications, but they are useful categories to understand how people can interpret the same concept in different ways.

*The Mennonite Game*

My own experience during fieldwork informed my understanding of church as family, and illuminated the distinction between biological families and families of choice. My father’s family has deep roots in the Mennonite culture of Lancaster County. As a result, I would often
meet distant relatives when I visited congregations throughout the region. Because I have an amateur interest in genealogy, I know the names of some of my ancestors. That knowledge enabled me to play “the Mennonite game,” a verbal sport with a stranger to determine how many mutual connections we can make within the first few minutes of our acquaintance. I met one of my paternal grandmother’s cousins at a particular congregation. When I returned a subsequent week, he immediately greeted me with “Hey cousin!”, and we entered into conversation again. For this man, our shared familial connection was the starting point for a deeper relationship, and I appreciated his willingness to engage in conversation beyond genealogical lineage. Dustin Penner did not grow up in Lancaster County. He highlighted the absurdity of the extent to which people will go to try and make a family association. When people would try to play the Mennonite game, Dustin conceded that the relationship was a stretch. “I mean there’s like a second uncle of mine who’s Mennonite in Colorado or something,” he joked. Making such a long-distance connection was not as important to him as getting to know the person in front of him on a more personal level.

Family names are important among many Mennonites in Lancaster County because they indicate where a person belongs and the people to whom one belongs in a spatial and relational sense. Surnames are a form of social capital, especially in a region where some Mennonites can trace their genealogies for several centuries. The names tie people to a particular ethnic heritage, since the first Mennonite settlers were of Swiss-German descent. While forms of social capital encourage belonging for some people, it can also be a means of excluding others. Alejandro Portes writes that “the same strong ties that bring benefits to members of a group commonly enable it to bar others from access” (1998, 15). Sofia Miller married a man from a historically Mennonite family. When they attended church, “little ladies in the Mennonite church would say,
‘Well, I bet you’re glad your last name isn’t Lopez anymore, and now it’s a good Mennonite name like Miller.’” Both she and her husband were shocked by people’s reception of her. To Sofía, the comments were not “blatantly derogatory, but it was very clear that, in their mind, I had somehow married up because I married a Mennonite.” By taking the name of her husband, a recognized regional Mennonite name, Sofía displayed her willingness to be accepted into Mennonite culture. However, the name did not guarantee belonging. Instead, it revealed the limits of kinship connections within Lancaster County Mennonite culture because, while the name benefitted her husband, it did not ensure Sofía’s seamless access into the church family.

Anabaptists are not the only ones who wrestle with ties between religion and ethnicity. At times, this connection can be hazardous, especially for Muslims in European or North American nations who are sometimes considered political adversaries. Political scientist Raymond Taras says that those Muslims who experience discrimination often believe that such experiences are related more to race and ethnic difference than to their religious identity. As evidence, even non-Muslims with phenotypic characteristics similar to Middle Easterners experience discrimination (Taras 2013). Sociologist Nasar Meer noticed a connection between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. Though the terminology indicates bias against religious groups, the discrimination is based upon racialized ideas. As minority groups in England, both Jews and Muslims face discrimination and are, therefore, considered separate races from the majority (Meer 2013).

Race is a socially constructed category that creates a hierarchy between people. Comparative religion scholar Steven Kaplan considers the Beta Israel, a Lost Tribe group from Ethiopia. Although others argue that Jews are not a racial category based on biological or phenotypical characteristics, Kaplan says that Jews have been socially defined as a racial category, based upon a specific social history. Others who say that Jews are not a distinct race
point to the fact that anyone can convert to Judaism. But, Kaplan says, they ignore the point that Jews who convert to other religions are still considered Jews. That is, Jewishness can never be lost (Kaplan 2003). In contrast, Anabaptists are not a racial category, though it was a tradition historically related to a few specific ethnic groups. Although this is changing as more Lancaster County Mennonites come from non-Swiss-German backgrounds, there are still people who place a higher value upon names with a long history among local Mennonites. However, the global Mennonite church is now much more ethnically diverse, and the names are changing.26

Family names become particularly salient for married women, who are expected to follow the dominant practice of taking their husband’s surname. It is one way in which people assert their own identities and adopt or challenge the borders of kinship placed around them. Kelly Swartzentruber decided to keep her patronym when she married. “I don’t know why,” she laughed. “It’s hard to spell. It’s really long. I just always liked my name.” Ellen Eby-Groff retains her surname as well as her husband’s surname because she does not want to be confused with other people in the area who have the same name. Duplicate names are a common occurrence in Lancaster County. Kelly and Ellen both come from Mennonite backgrounds, but their families were not originally from Lancaster County. Their decision to retain their patronyms is a way of asserting their own identity with a larger kinship network outside of the area. Sofia Miller, as I mentioned earlier, came from a non-Mennonite background. She found that some of the interconnected religious, ethnic, and cultural elements were more difficult to overcome than she had expected. Kelly and Ellen, in contrast, felt comfortable defying dominant

26 Historically, most Lancaster County Mennonite surnames were Swiss-German Mennonite names. Later “Russian Mennonites” who migrated to the area came with different names after having lived in Russia. More recently, the growing number of Mennonites in Lancaster County and throughout the United States do not have Germanic names. Referencing the regionally common last name of “Martin,” narrative historian John Ruth summarized the growing ethnic diversity among Lancaster County Mennonites in the latter twentieth century: “The great family of Martins was gaining spiritual siblings named Martinez and Martino” (Ruth 2001, 1123).
naming conventions because they already had “Mennonite” names, and were able to critique the cultural expectations from within. Their examples demonstrate that biological family connections are complex and affect the names people choose to use, and the names influence how people are accepted in each congregation.

**Church as a Safe Space**

Some Mennonites drew upon an idealistic concept of family as a group that evinced shared values in a safe space. Melody and Tanner Wiebe believed that church is not a building, a physical space that needs to be maintained. The essence of church, they say, is the way people live and relate to one another so that faith is carried by future generations. Melody offered her perspective on the congregation: “I feel like this church understands the essence of church because they’re a family, and they behave like a family. Like in both good and bad ways. They behave like a family.” They both went on to share examples of challenges and positive experiences they had had in the congregation. Mennonites, like other Anabaptists, prioritize the importance of forming intentional communities of people who share faith together. As I discussed in chapter 1, those communities can also be sources of conflict. Melody and Tanner recognized the joys and struggles that came from regarding church as family.

The people in the local church can also become kin either in lieu of or alongside of biologically-related extended family networks. Cora Meyer reflected upon her childhood experiences in her congregation: “It was a very warm and positive association, across the board. It was a place where I felt, as a child, I was loved and affirmed and also challenged.” Throughout her childhood, Ellen Eby-Groff said her relatives were outside of Lancaster County, “So,” she concluded, “church was really where we found our community.” Her parents were intentional about finding a congregation that shared many of their own values and where people were
willing to behave like family members, even if they were not biologically related. Sociologist Mignon Moore noticed a similar phenomenon among women of color in same-sex relationships in New York City. Moore noted that race, class, and gender were explicitly considered as individuals formed lesbian households and families. As women chose partners and included children in their families, their primary social relationships were with others in similar situations, not with biological family members. Though Black lesbian families were largely invisible within the African American community, Moore says that these families intentionally chose their own identity and created their own kinship connections (Moore 2011).

A church family gives people a place to belong. Vicki Peifer wanted to belong to a group where she felt a mutual connection: “I need some people to call my own. To say, ‘These are the people I’m meeting with.’ These are the people that would pray for me. I just assume, of course, those are your people. It doesn’t matter that I don’t know them all.” For Vicki, church was like a regular family reunion where a person might claim a connection with others, even if they did not know everyone’s name or the intimate details of their lives. When they decide to belong to the same congregation, people connect as spiritual kin.

By agreeing to connect with each other on a regular basis, people within a local congregation become kin by choice. Anthropologists have spent decades mapping kinship structures (Evans-Pritchard 1951; Malinowski 1929; Radcliffe-Brown and Forde 1950), outlining alternatives to biological kinship (Boddy 1993; Carsten 1997; Moore 2011; Stack 1975; Weston 1997), and debating the meaning and forms of kinship across cultures (Schneider 1984). The concept of fictive kin has become enshrined in legal discourse, which defines fictive kin as “an individual who is not related by birth, adoption, or marriage to a child, but who has an emotionally significant relationship with the child” (American Legislative Exchange Council
Social scientists prefer to speak of “families of choice,” which carries the same idea that individuals intentionally surround themselves with others who are mutually supportive and with whom they have emotionally significant relationships. In a focus group conversation, Rebecca Ward provided a helpful explanation of how one specific congregation became a family of choice to her immediate biological family. She and her husband and their children moved their residence and began looking for a congregation to attend. It was difficult to leave their former church. After attending the new congregation for a year, her children have been incorporated into children’s activities, and they sang with a children’s choir. Rebecca recalls marking one year at their new church home: “It was very meaningful for our family to be integrated so well, in just a year’s time. So, it was a very meaningful, significant show of how God carried us to our next church family.” Rebecca and her family chose the congregation, but the congregation has also chosen to accept them into their broader family.

**Church as a Family of Choice**

Families of choice are mutually supportive networks that meet an individual’s needs in a variety of ways. Carol Stack’s ethnography *All Our Kin* was influential in expanding the way social scientists thought about kinship networks. In response to urban poverty, members of a specific African American community often could not afford babysitters or new clothing for their children. Stack observed that neighbors helped each other by sharing clothes, food, or childcare services. At times they would even loan money to one another (Stack 1975). Without biological family members nearby, neighbors formed new families. Churches, including Mennonite churches, can serve this same familial function. Les and Rosanna Peters talked about how their congregation supported them when Rosanna’s father, who lived out of the area, died suddenly. Rosanna was overwhelmed by the congregation’s kindness: “They showed up at our
door the morning we were going to drive home. And they brought money. Cash. They handed us [cash]. And prayed for us.” Decades later, this memory is still vivid for Les and Rosanna. It is evidence that the financial and spiritual support people offered bonded the individuals together in an intentional and mutually supportive relationship.

When Mennonites of Lancaster County speak of their church group as family, they interpret the community as a group that provides spiritual, emotional, financial, and practical support. They reinforce the idea that kinship must be enacted, and others within the church can become family through their actions and attitudes, whether or not there is a biological connection. Within a single congregation, Janice Reimer explains, “We try to take care of our own people.” She elaborated by discussing how the congregation sent meals and found ways to support families facing crisis issues, such as cancer or a terminal illness. “So,” Janice concluded, “we have three families that really need care. And that’s important to us to meet those internal needs but also external needs.”

In another part of the county, Martin Long expressed the same sentiments about the people in the congregation he attends. “Theologically,” he said, “we’re an interesting mix.” People’s perspectives ranged from Fundamentalist to theologically very progressive. But all of them seemed to be united by their common commitment to aid one another. “If we know there’s a need,” Martin explained, “whether that’s internally or externally, people are going to step up across that spectrum.” Throughout my fieldwork, I have observed this balance between meeting needs within the Christian fellowship and its surrounding environs. I have seen the budgets for three different congregations, and each one contains a benevolent fund that is used to financially support people in the vicinity of the congregation who have a financial need. And it was not uncommon to visit a congregation and hear an announcement that a couple recently had a baby,
which was followed by instructions on how to sign up to provide meals to the family. Providing money or food is something that people would often expect from their biological family members, as others have noted (Carsten 1997; Stack 1975; Moore 2011). Within Mennonite communities, people become kin by practically enacting their care and commitment to one another.

Though people did not explicitly discuss belonging in their conversations about their church communities, it was evident that they formed meaningful relationships in their congregations. Church became an important place for social belonging. Whether it was through discovering mutual connections or feeling safe within the congregation or through reciprocal support, people interpreted church as a place where they gathered with family. The most meaningful relationships were not necessarily biological connections. Whether or not they had a regionally familiar surname, people found ways to belong in a Mennonite fellowship because they formed relationships with people who had common values, and they agreed that they wanted to be intentional about living out their faith together. Sofia Miller and her family left the first biologically tight-knit Mennonite congregation they had been in and eventually joined another Mennonite fellowship. There, they gained a different perspective. “We feel incredibly supported there,” Sofia reflected. Her children had been integrated into many of the activities in the congregation. She was surprised the congregation went “over and above the call of duty not only to tolerate but to help” a child who had special needs. Sofia was even surprised by the change in herself: “I’ve even found a few friends who come from Mennonite backgrounds who are my age. That has never happened.” Though she is still cautious because of her prior experiences, Sofia has learned to reinterpret the church as a family of choice, a place where people are willing to care about the individual people who attend. Each congregation offered
Sofia a different interpretation of Mennonite families, and, at least for now, she has found a congregation where she and her family can all belong.

By interpreting church in different ways, Mennonite individuals demonstrated that church mattered to them, but they also critiqued some ways people acted within the church. They valued church for the personal relationships they had and the encouragement they experienced. They also recognized that church could become a family clique and feel exclusive, especially for those who did not come from the same religious or cultural background or for those who did not have the social capital to understand the practices within the church. And, as families do, they disagreed with one another about what the church’s priorities and purpose should be. In the next section, I expand upon the familial tensions.

Critique of the Idealized Community

Community is one of the hallmarks of Anabaptism, but the community is often the site of conflict and critique as members promote or challenge the identity of the community. Each Anabaptist group has a nuanced interpretation of how an Anabaptist Christian should believe and behave. Mennonites carry this diversity of expression as part of their religious heritage. For this reason, Mennonites are not united under a single denomination. Instead, they form and reform denominational organizations at different times and for different purposes. In a related manner, anthropologist Courtney Handman describes how Guhu-Samane Christians in Papua New Guinea develop new Christian fellowships as a way to critique existing church practices. Among these Christians, the biblical translations to which people adhere, the congregations they attend, and the musical instruments they employ are all signs of people’s commitment to a particular way of thinking and acting. Handman argues that, “For Guhu-Samane speakers, critique of
Christian social groups is not a secular pursuit, nor is critique opposed to private religious practice. For them, social critique *is* Christian practice” (2015, 17).

Conflict comes about because people are concerned about the issues at hand. Because they are committed to their values and to their community, they begin to disagree about how the community should interpret or live out its intended purpose and mission. Interpretation involves practice as well as discourse. To interpret values means that people have shared principles but enact them in different ways. In a similar vein, Mennonites use their personal connections, ideological commitments, and institutional affiliations as a way to align themselves with the beliefs, practices, and culture of a particular Anabaptist community, and these factors produce heterogeneous expressions of Mennonite identity.

In this section, I turn from considering to whom people belong and examine to what people belong, and how they interpret the conditions for belonging. It is not uncommon for Mennonites or other religious groups to adjust to their historical setting and the current ideological environment. Historian Steve Nolt describes how new American and Canadian Mennonite institutions were founded in the latter 1800s to help Mennonites build an ideological identity instead of a singular ethnic identity. This movement helped Mennonite Christians clarify their distinctive values and unite disparate geographical fellowships (Nolt 1999). More recently, the missional church movement has influenced American Mennonites and changed the church as a result of people’s reactions to this movement.

In Lancaster County, Lancaster Mennonite Conference and Atlantic Coast Conference have taken a different approach to the missional church movement. Though missional church language is used more readily in LMC, the activities in each conference reveal that they align with a missional identity, even if that is not explicitly stated. For LMC, missional church
discourse is a sign of belonging. Within ACC, using missional church language is not a facet of belonging. This movement, which originated outside of Anabaptism, has been adopted by both conferences and translated into their local context. I use this example as a case study of intra-church critique. It demonstrates how Mennonites bring together their beliefs and their behaviors as two partners in the dance of belonging. It also reveals how people in each conference contribute to the distinctive identity of the conference, guided by the examples the leaders set.

**The Missional Church Movement**

Asking a person in Lancaster County to describe the missional church movement is like the parable of the three blind men and the elephant, in which each person accurately but only partially describes the large animal. The one who finds the elephant’s leg tells me that the missional church movement inspires them to create a simplified structure for their weekly church service. The one who encounters the trunk is inspired to be missional by inviting their neighbors to a woman’s Bible study. The third person, who feels the tail, says being missional is working to create activities for the local community so that they can learn about Christianity. In light of these divergent descriptions, I will first examine the missional church movement from a historical perspective before I delve into the specific iterations of the movement among Lancaster County’s progressive Mennonites.

For centuries, Christianity dominated the Western world, but, as that privileged position is waning, Christians have employed various methods to engage with a post-Christendom environment. Since Emperor Constantine’s reign over the entire Roman Empire in the fourth century CE, Christianity has been favored by Western political leaders and has become entwined with various cultures that emerged from the spread of the Roman Empire (Clapp 1996, 17; Murray 2004, 37; Newbigin 1995, 2–5). Christians in Europe and North America can no longer
expect that people will be familiar with the stories and teachings of Christianity nor that they will attend church regularly. Post-Christendom is the term for this shift in knowledge of and practices related to Christianity. Church planter Stuart Murray defines post-Christendom: “Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.” (2004, 19) This divorce of Christianity and state is a threat to some Christians, but other Christians, including some within LMC and ACC, interpret this transition as an opportunity to redefine and reinvigorate the Christian message and the role of the church (Guder 1998, 4; Hauerwas 1999; Murray 2004, 21).

The missional church movement is one model Christians use to reimagine the way Christianity and the church can function and be beneficial in a post-Christendom society. Other concepts for re-envisioning Christian churches include simple church, emerging/emergent church, total church, or deep church movements (Goheen 2010, 78; Rainer and Geiger 2011). Each of these models shares some overlapping emphases, but residents of Lancaster County, particularly in LMC congregations, overwhelmingly employed missional church language and concepts; therefore, that will be my main focus here. Lois Barrett is an Anabaptist theologian and scholar of missional ecclesiology. Her work evinces a close connection between historical Anabaptism and missional church efforts. In Treasure in Clay Jars, Barrett and her co-authors present the following definition: “A missional church is a church that is shaped by participating in God’s mission, which is to set things right in a broken, sinful world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world. Missional churches see themselves not so much sending, as being sent” (2004, x).
The missional church movement began in the late twentieth century, and its adherents espoused a new understanding of church as an institution and as an association of people.27 Lesslie Newbigin was a leading figure in forming the missional church movement in the last two decades of the twentieth century. He returned to his home in Great Britain after decades as a missionary in India. He realized that people in England were as unfamiliar with Christianity as people in India, but that churches continued to maintain their former programs and practices without realizing the cultural context had shifted (Keller 2009). Newbigin called for churches to actively engage in mission in their own social milieu (Newbigin 1995, 1–2), dismantling the former division between the Christian West and the non-Christian rest (Goheen 2010, 69).

Instead of sending missionaries from a home church base, a missional church re-envisions itself as a participant in *missio Dei*, where each person is sent out to actively participate in the mission of God (Guder 1998, 4–5). The missional movement values the church as an organization that enables people to share the gospel (Goheen 2010, 72–73; Lemons 2008, 15; Keller 2008; Newbigin 1994). The church then disciples people in a contextually appropriate manner. The church is also reflexive and aware of its own history of privilege (Goheen 2010, 75). It understands the surrounding cultural narratives and incarnates itself into the culture (Goheen 2010, 75; Keller 2001; Lemons 2008, 22), but also acts as a contrast community that offers an alternative worldview (Goheen 2010, 82–83; Keller 2001; Lemons 2008, 22; Newbigin 1994). One of the most significant hallmarks of the movement is that faith is translated into public practice, with no distinction between secular and sacred (Goheen 2010, 76; Keller 2001).

27 Anthropology, a child of European colonialism, also took a reflexive turn around this same time (Behar 1990; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988; Geertz 1988; Rosaldo 1993). Robbins (2003; 2006) has pointed out how anthropology and Christianity share a lot in common, and the movement toward reflexivity in both anthropology and Christian mission at this time reflect a step in the maturation process in both fields as European colonialism declined through the twentieth century. A reflexive viewpoint encourages ethnographers and missionaries to consider the historical influences that have shaped them. It invites them to have a willingness to learn from and listen to other viewpoints, instead of speaking for others as bearers of an objective, superior perspective.
Instead of creating boundaries between who is in the church and who is out, the missional church movement encourages Christians to blur the borders of belonging.

In the following examples, progressive Mennonites make missional ecclesiology visible by adjusting their church services, understanding the needs in their neighborhood, and building relationships that move toward a more just society. While visiting LMC congregations, interviewing LMC pastors, and attending LMC church-wide annual conferences, I often heard about the missional church movement or about being a missional church. It is clear that LMC is intentional about forming its identity as a missional community. In contrast, missional church discourse was virtually absent in ACC. One former LMC (now ACC) pastor had read Alan Hirsch’s *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (2006) when it was published, but gave me a puzzled look when I asked if “being missional” was a current priority for the congregation. The language had not taken hold in that congregation. Discourse surrounding a missional identity was not openly discussed as a priority in ACC as I visited its member congregations and attended its annual conferences. However, this does not mean that missional values are absent in ACC, as I demonstrate below. Rather, it means that ACC congregations have been engaged in missional behaviors without intentionally framing their actions as missional church activities and unifying the conference under that framework. Those who wanted to practice missional values could find space to belong in both conferences, but the missional church language created a greater sense of shared identity within LMC.

LMC and its member congregations endorse missional engagement, which encourages people to become more involved in their local communities and promotes spiritual growth beyond traditional church settings. Kelly Swartzentruber reflected upon how the missional mindset became part of their congregational ethos. A former pastor cautioned, “If we serve the
congregation’s needs, if that’s what our main focus is, we will spend 90% of our energy and time doing that, and we will never reach anybody else. Or, we can start looking out.” From that point, that congregation started initiatives within the neighborhood. “And,” Kelly shares, “it’s been an amazing change.” In another Mennonite fellowship, the pastors decided to remove some liturgy and extra elements on a Sunday morning that required too much maintenance. They preferred a simple, more flexible order of service.

Melody Wiebe said that in their congregation, they learned that being a missional church “is that you no longer invite people to a Sunday morning service. It's not about filling a church or a church service. Instead, it's about sending people out from in the church to reach out to their neighborhoods or their networks.” Melody’s friends and coworkers were surprised to learn she was a pastor because she was not inviting them to church and did not fit their stereotype of who a pastor should be. Kelly, Melody, and Tanner all attend LMC congregations and used the phrases “missional church” or “being missional” throughout the interviews and gave examples of their congregation’s missional efforts. They each display the idea that a missional attitude challenges them to think about belonging differently. They are no longer thinking about how they can attract people to the church and keep them within the congregation. Instead, they are thinking about how their congregation, as a whole, belongs to a wider community. With that perspective, they are more intentional about belonging as Christians in their local neighborhoods and towns.

Though less likely to voice missional priorities, ACC congregants were also engaged in promoting the gospel in their local communities through the church. Pastor and author Tim Keller says part of being a missional community means the church will “promote a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak” (2001, 3). In light
of this explanation, the following examples from ACC congregations demonstrate missional living. At one ACC spring assembly, there was time for different congregations to share what they had been doing the past year. Miriam Eckman recalled what people shared at that meeting. One Lancaster city congregation had a program where they watched kids before and after school if parents had to go to work early or stay late. A larger ACC congregation did a summer music camp that was very popular with children. Outside of Lancaster County, a Mennonite congregation in Baltimore rented out a separate building for people who were refugees in need of housing. In Manhattan, the Mennonite fellowship had a gardening program so children could learn about how food is grown. “There’s just lots of things,” Miriam concluded. “And they just happen.” She is grateful that the conference was willing to support each congregation in its various endeavors. These examples demonstrate that ACC congregants, like LMC constituents, were attempting to belong as Christians in their neighborhoods.

There were also ways in which both conferences engaged in missional activities together, displaying a shared value of practicing their faith even if their discourse differed. One Lancaster city congregation hosted weekly meals for people who did not have stable housing, and members of LMC and ACC congregations took turns preparing the meals. Several different LMC and ACC congregations had hosted refugee families through a local resettlement agency, and some congregations were now comprised of former refugee families. Although none of these activities are exclusively Anabaptist or unique to the missional church movement, they do evince an effort among Mennonites to proclaim the gospel in their local contexts even as they support others around the world who desire to share the gospel as formal missionaries.

The missional church concept is a dance between verbally proclaiming the gospel and enacting the gospel in a particular cultural and geographical environment. While individuals told
me they valued Anabaptism for its emphasis on living out faith, they realized that the community of faith was also vital. No one could run a childcare program or provide meals to people in need if they worked alone. Missiologist David Bosch defines an “anabaptist” model of the relationship between church and culture: “Here the primary task of the church is simply to be the church, the true community of committed believers which, by its very existence and example, becomes a challenge to society and the state” (Bosch 1993, 92). The community working together for a greater spiritual and social goal is important in an Anabaptist-Mennonite context. Although the missional church movement formally began in Europe, it has been translated into the American context and indigenized in Mennonite churches as another way in which faith is lived out in daily practice.

LMC and ACC have each translated the missional church concept in similar ways, by caring for the practical needs in their neighborhood and by talking about their faith beyond the doors of the church. Yet they discuss their work in different ways. LMC constituents explicitly use missional church discourse to explain their activities, and LMC leaders use this language in their addresses to the conference. The leaders teach missional church terms and priorities. They believe that their missional identity is a way to be faithful Mennonites, and they explain that they are sharing the gospel through their missional behavior. Using similar language increases a sense of belonging and shared purpose for people within LMC. Those in ACC rarely used the term missional church as I observed them over the course of a year, but they seemed to be united by a shared idea that the church should be an active and visible representation of God in the world, the same values that people in LMC expressed. Instead of being united by a common language or vision from their leadership, ACC congregations were united by the knowledge that they were all seeking to live out and interpret the Missio Dei in their own way. In each conference, missional
church activity was important because it was a way for those within the church to connect with those outside the church. It was one way for church members to create a shared identity and enhance their sense of belonging within the conference. It was also a way for congregants to think about how they belonged to the wider community and begin to connect with people in new and meaningful ways outside of a formal church context.

*Sacrifices for Belonging*

Belonging is not always positive because creating a group produces borders for the group, which enhance connections for members while more clearly excluding others. Sociologist Samuel Stroope found a directly proportional relationship between one’s sense of belonging and a commitment to core values. Using statistical data from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, Stroope concluded that Christians with more traditional beliefs, by which he meant a literal interpretation of the Bible, were more likely to feel like they belonged in groups that firmly defined their core values. He also concluded that groups with firm principles tended to be polarizing and have the potential to contribute to a greater sense of belonging for a few people while also generating a greater sense of alienation for others (Stroope 2011, 582). This alienation, or nonbelonging, is the sensation of not being accepted within a nation, family, religious organization, or any other group or imagined community. In chapter 3, I will elaborate upon this aspect of nonbelonging and discuss how a few people in LMC who wanted women to be credentialed church leaders created space for themselves to belong in the conference after a long period of marginalization. However, in the process of making one subset of people feel more accepted, others experienced greater dissonance with the group. Belonging, in this case, appears to be a limited commodity, constantly in flux between various populations, so that nonbelonging is also continuously shifting.
Belonging comes with a cost, and people often must sacrifice connections with one group in order to belong to another entity. Tine Gammeltoft considers loss as “the shadow side of belonging,” an aspect that is not often discussed but which is present in all situations that she encountered in her fieldwork in Vietnam (Gammeltoft 2014, 226). Prospective parents in Vietnam are hampered by the specter of Agent Orange, which can cause birth defects. If a prenatal screening points to an anomaly, the parents are encouraged to choose to terminate the pregnancy so they do not put an undue burden on their nation or their families. When a couple chooses to release a child and act as conscientious family members and responsible citizens, they also lose the opportunity to become parents (Gammeltoft 2014, 231, 234). This triad of state discourse, social connections, and loss emphasizes the relational aspect of belonging because people choose to connect with the nation and with their existing family members instead of relating to a potential child. Gammeltoft argues that belonging is a choice, but she also accepts that choosing to belong in one group necessitates the conscious release of another identity.

In a religious context, the losses involved in belonging can be regarded as sacrifices. The term “sacrifice” has ritual connotations of giving an offering to a deity to acknowledge divine providence over humanity. Sometimes when people are able to choose to belong in different ways, relinquishing belonging in one group is not viewed as a negative loss but rather as a sacrificial gain, an offering to God indicating a person’s piety, which is intended to spur a person toward greater holiness. The sacrifice is positive because it adds to a person’s spiritual and personal condition.

The loss is intended to lead to greater rewards in the future. Susanna Kreider was a young girl in the 1960s and 1970s when some American Mennonite churches began to loosen clothing restrictions for church members. When her friends cut their hair, Susanna was not sure how to
respond since not all people in the church fully approved of the changes. She did not want to compliment her friends because that would be endorsing their behavior, even though she thought the new style suited them. She also did not do short term missions trips like her friends because she thought they were inappropriate. “I always felt kind of odd. Kind of like a martyr,” Susanna told me. She hesitated to describe herself as a martyr but assured herself that it was the right term for her attitude of the time. Her sacrifice in not following her peers’ behaviors displayed her obedience to the church authorities who were her spiritual guides. Instead of regretting her choices at the time, Susanna said that she now has more sympathy for conservative Mennonites today who struggle to let go of behaviors such as plain dress requirements. Her sacrifice at the time has given her greater compassion in the present.

Sacrifices are choices individuals make, but the options are always conditioned by the cultural context, which, in this setting, is a modern Mennonite milieu. Mennonites in Lancaster County have continuously adapted to their social environment. They adopted plain dress in the early 1900s and refused to have radios. They framed their actions as a sacrifice meant to separate them from the worldly distractions of excessive consumerism or outside influences. In the twenty-first century, forgoing a radio is no longer as much of a sacrifice since technologies have changed, but Mennonites have debated other practices which would affect their spiritual and cultural standing. In the 1980s, Lancaster Mennonite Conference began having formal conversations about credentialing women as leaders in the church. People have also had to adjust

---

28 A few Anabaptist families have a history of retelling the story of early Anabaptists who were martyred for their faith. Some people find this litany of gruesome narratives disconcerting. Others find it inspirational. Clint Neff found comfort in naming his ancestors listed in the Martyr’s Mirror, a seventeenth century Dutch Mennonite record of people persecuted for being Anabaptists. “Martyr” remains a term with layered connotations in Anabaptist communities.
to smaller-scale changes, such as whether to place a piano on the stage. Or they have made financial decisions about paying pastors instead of having pastors volunteer their time.

As conditions changed, people had to decide where they were going to belong. As long as the status quo was upheld, most people did not consider the importance of belonging. When the environment was altered, the balance shifted and those who once were fully incorporated found themselves on the margins of their religious community. Most of the time, they could choose to accept the new changes and belong again, reject the changes and enhance feelings of nonbelonging, or find a new church fellowship that reinforced their former way of belonging. Each time, the transition involved loss, either loss of personal relationships or an institutional connection or a loss of identity as Mennonites sought a way to belong in the new environment.

**Belonging and Nonbelonging**

Belonging and nonbelonging are codependent, each relying upon the other for existence. I have argued that even though belonging is socially conditioned and contained, it is most salient as an individualized sensation. Belonging is formed as individuals develop their beliefs and perform behaviors within a community, but sometimes the beliefs and behaviors can lead a person to feel alienated if there is tension within the group. In understanding a person’s religious experience, belonging is just as important as considering beliefs or behaviors.

Lancaster County progressive Mennonite groups continue to uphold the church as an institution vitally important to their spiritual and social lives, to the point of describing church as a caring and supportive family. Unfortunately, the church does not live up to the vision of an idealized community where all people feel accepted and encouraged. Individuals and groups critique congregations, conferences, and denominations for the failure to adhere to their ideals. Sometimes the critique arises because people have different interpretations of what the church’s
priorities should be, or they employ different discourse to discuss their priorities. Sometimes nonbelonging occurs even when groups like LMC and ACC are performing the same behaviors but are using different discourse. While LMC discusses its efforts as being missional, ACC frames its actions in terms of social justice. Both conferences are forming small groups for spiritual fellowship, welcoming refugees, and feeding those who do not have a consistent food source, but their language differs. Though their approaches vary, they are each finding new ways to belong as Christians within their towns and neighborhoods.

In sum, belonging is an individual’s interpretation of their place within the community. The quest for belonging changes the individual and the community. As the individual takes a step, the community follows, but then turns and takes another step, changing the direction of the dance. The partners follow one another, moving together and apart, waiting to see if they make it to the end or if they will need to change partners in the precarious work of belonging.
Chapter 3

Validating Women:

Critiquing the Church and Offering Credentials to Mennonite Women

Men and Women in the Church

A woman walked to the front of a Mennonite church in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The people seated in the pews gave the occasional cough, shuffled papers, and hushed children. It was the usual muted bustle that was typical in many regional Mennonite congregations when people were transitioning to sit through a sermon. As a member of the congregation’s leadership team, she had been asked and agreed to give the sermon that Sunday morning. While the rest of the people looked forward expectantly, a young man seated in the back stood up, turned his back to the speaker, and walked out of the church. It was his way of protesting that a woman had been asked to be the main speaker on a Sunday morning. Instead of staying home that morning, the man had purposely attended church. He listened to the announcements, joined in the songs, and heard a biblical passage read aloud before choosing that precise moment to exit the church. He could not share the same physical space with a woman who was speaking to the congregation on a Sunday morning, a role that should belong exclusively to men. The image of his retreating back remains in the woman’s memory. Despite the rest of the congregation’s willingness to listen, the man gave a clear message that this person, as a woman, did not belong in front of the church.

In this instance, the woman and man were both critiquing their Mennonite congregation, but they did so with different interpretations about the ways women could be integrated into the church. The woman was acting upon the leadership team’s decision to have men and women leaders give a message on Sunday mornings. Their position, which the woman enacted, was that both men and women should be allowed to preach, which critiqued the congregation’s custom of
only allowing men to preach. The man who walked out upheld the congregation’s traditional view that only men have the spiritual authority to preach. His departure was a critique of the leadership team’s stance, but his choice to walk out in the middle of a service instead of bringing his concerns to the team before that Sunday made his critique appear like a personal criticism of the woman.

Both individuals participated in critical Christianity by engaging in different practices, which displayed their ideas of how people should be involved in the congregation. Courtney Handman describes the members of the church she studied as remnant people who constantly critique church and society and seek to reform the church through their evaluations (Handman 2015, 58). In this case, the disagreement within this particular congregation did not lead to a rupture between congregants. However, it did make the church leaders more aware of how strongly this man held his convictions. As Handman points out, Christian critique, even if it results in schism, is meant to be productive and to reform the church, to make it a more contextually appropriate example of a Christian community. This congregation, headed by a male pastor, was careful to announce when a woman would be speaking to the congregation, though that did not happen often due to the nature of changing leadership structures. In this way, the female speaker and the male congregant were both able to express their opinions and remain in the congregation.

Handman mostly focuses on Christian critiques at the congregational level, but I demonstrate the cyclical nature of critique and how it moves between individuals and the Christian political structures that surround church attendees. Mennonites, as Anabaptists, have a long history of critiquing and changing their institutions, so that the structures and practices of the church are always shifting. Each time the changes occur, individual Mennonites have to
readjust to altered policies or practices. At times, a critique of the church structure appears to be a personal critique, as it was for the woman preaching that Sunday morning. For example, when LMC loosened its twentieth century policies on dress and technology, it retained its restrictions on women’s roles and voices in the church. A few Mennonite women took the critiques personally because they felt God was calling them to be church leaders, but their congregations did not welcome them as pastors or teachers.

These critiques are not only institutional; they are taken personally by individual Mennonites who feel unaccepted in the church for various reasons. The woman in the opening vignette thought the man’s retreat was a sign that she was personally unwelcome. His decision to participate in all of the congregation’s other activities that morning demonstrated that he was willing to be part of the congregation. His criticism appeared to be aimed directly at her, a sign that she did not belong in that position. In a focus group conversation with Mennonites from multiple congregations, Rebecca Ward said that shame kept her from having deeper conversations about the Bible. When fellow Christians would disagree with her biblical interpretation, Rebecca internalized those emotions. If others rejected her interpretation of scripture, Rebecca heard the message, “I’m invalid”. Both Rebecca and the woman who gave the sermon faced disapproval, and they felt that their ideas and personhood were invalidated. Their experiences demonstrate the way the church’s structure and people’s personal attitudes have focused more attention on restricting women’s voices in Mennonite churches due to their gender.

Mennonite men and women have been personally affected by the way the Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) has organized roles and relationships among its affiliates.29 In this chapter, I focus specifically on interactions among men and women in LMC and use historical

---

29 Unless noted, gender should be understood as a binary (man/woman) category within this context since that is the way most, though not all, participants used gendered terms.
and ethnographic data to explore three ways LMC has classified social relationships among its constituents. ACC also experienced these same trends, though at different times. I focus on LMC because the majority of people who engaged in my research came from LMC.

First, I examine Mennonite nonconformity in the twentieth-century North American churches as a practice that defined the lives of all Mennonites. During this era, gender distinctions were less important than promoting an identity distinct from American society. Second, I consider how gender became more salient as nonconformity lessened and church members began to critique LMC’s gendered divisions in the last decades of the twentieth century, which led to changes in church practice and polity. Lastly, I analyze how contemporary LMC constituents are learning to recognize people’s gifts apart from their gender and using those gifts to meet the church’s goals. From this perspective, people’s gifts are more important than their gender for serving the church.

Through each of these phases, Mennonites have shifted the way they understand gender, the relationships between fellow churchgoers, and the roles of adherents in relation to the conference. This chapter is about gender, but it is, more precisely, about how Mennonite congregations formed, reformed, and re-reformed their positions in American society and how those changes impacted constituents’ considerations of gender.

Nonconformity and the “Rules and Discipline”

For Lancaster County Mennonites, the beginning of the twentieth century through the late 1960s was an era of visible nonconformity. All church members were united by their practices of adopting conservative clothing and limiting their use of technology, practices that demonstrated their institutional and behavioral unity with one another and their distinction from their surrounding society. Mennonites were visibly separated from their neighbors by their “plain
dress” (Ruth 2001, 808, 842–43). Both men and women wore solid-color clothing without any jewelry or adornments. Women wore cape dresses that had long sleeves and high collars; the cape was an extra piece of loose-fitting fabric over the bodice. They covered their heads with netted bonnets or head scarves. Men wore suits with coats that buttoned up to the neckline with no necktie, and they were not permitted to wear a mustache (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 1962, 19–20; Bender and Wenger 1956; J. P. Graybill, n.d.; Sharp 2014).

With this history in mind, I led intergenerational Sunday morning classes in four congregations, and I took along material items as props to spark conversation. In each case, people who were middle-aged or older would look at the neckties or rings I had brought and talk about a time when the church restricted the clothing or jewelry they could wear. Their understanding of the Mennonite church in the present has been shaped by their own personal history and experience in Lancaster County. Those who were raised in county Mennonite congregations remember when church and life were governed by the “Rules and Discipline,” a document detailing the lifestyle expectations for conference members. Others in the combined Sunday school classes who had a different history listened as others spoke about their experiences.

The “Rules and Discipline” documents produced by various Mennonite conferences were sincere attempts by Mennonite leaders to help their constituents define orthopraxy by regulating economic and social activities and the roles church members could hold within the church and society. They represent a shared commitment by all church members to make faith a lifestyle that was separate from, but which could positively impact, their social environment. During the same era, Mennonites throughout the United States and Canada also emphasized nonconformity and nonresistance (Ruth 2001, 842–43; Bender 1956; Hershberger, Crous, and Burkholder 1989).
Beyond LMC, other conferences, including ACC’s predecessor, enforced their own “Rules and Discipline” among their constituents, which defined dress codes and behaviors for Mennonites in and out of religious contexts (Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference 1942; Ohio and Eastern Conference 1938; Virginia Mennonite Conference 1930). The “Rules and Disciplines” helped Mennonites vet distracting social and cultural influences. The leaders wanted church members to focus on living a faithful lifestyle instead of pursuing the latest fashions or wasting their time on self-serving activities. The regulations served to unite people more closely together as a distinct community. Each person knew there were consequences for not abiding by the rules, and many of them conformed to the conference’s standards for a time.

At this time, Pennsylvania Mennonites were similar to observant Jews and Muslims who positioned themselves in between the non-religious society and their co-religionists who do not interpret the principles and practices of their faith in the same way. Anthropologist Ayala Fader describes how Bobover Hasidic women describe themselves as “with it” but not “modern” (Fader 2009, 121). In this way, they reinforce their moral belief that there is a divide between Jews and goyim (Gentiles), those who do not have godly souls and are not as concerned with proper behavior (Fader 2009, 14). The Bobover Hasidic women also contrast themselves with other Hasidim who are less fashionable or not as fluent in English and therefore are not “with it.” (Fader 2009, 131–35). By carefully regulating their dress, language, and behavior, these women are able to perform a religious identity that they consider more virtuous than nearby lifestyles. In a similar manner, anthropologist Esra Özyürek explains how German women who convert to Islam adopt a double-consciousness as they relate to ethnic Germans and non-German Muslims. They think that Turkish Muslims are steeped in cultural practices that are un-Islamic, and German Muslim women want to free their religion from those cultural bonds (Özyürek 2015,
40). They also want other Germans to realize that Islam aligns with foundational German philosophers and Enlightenment principles (Özyürek 2015, 32–33). Özyürek borrows the term “double-consciousness” from W. E. B. DuBois to define the way German Muslim converts understand themselves. They can be both fully German and faithful Muslims. There is a “twoness” to their nature, and they are aware of themselves both as German and as Muslim even though others do not unite those identities (Özyürek 2015, 7).

Bobover Hasidic women, German Muslim women, and Lancaster County Mennonites are all Janus-faced to some extent, performing a faith-based lifestyle with one face toward their surrounding society and the other face aimed at correcting what they see as the errors of co-religionists. In order to form a separate identity, each group critiques others who share their religion or who have a common national identity. In a sense, all of these groups are nonconforming. Bobover Hasidic women who are “with it, not modern,” German Muslim women with their double-consciousness, and Mennonites with their plain dress all refuse to conform to stereotypical ideas of insulated or suppressed religious figures. Instead, they critically engage with their contemporary societies by choosing to conform to some practices and rejecting elements that they consider purely secular or detrimental to their spiritual health.

**Plain Critique**

As a young girl in a Mennonite conference in central Pennsylvania, poet Julia Kasdorf equated the conservative Mennonite lifestyle with greater piety. Her perspective changed when her great-aunt passed along a ring as a family heirloom and revealed, “We weren’t always plain” (Kasdorf 2002, 313). The same was true for LMC Mennonites. Mennonites were calling for plain dress through the 1880s and these practices became codified by several church districts around 1910 (Ruth 2001, 741–43). Before this time, Mennonites dressed “fancy” like their neighbors,
yet they later chose to critique the extravagance of American society by adopting the “plain”
garb and otherwise modifying their own lifestyles. The movement toward plain dress and simple
living was an intentional effort to reform the Mennonite church as a group that consciously
distinguished itself from the consumerism of American society and the concern that other
Christians were not promoting biblical values of service and generosity.

Today, over half a century later, Mennonites have a more critical view of the
nonconforming practices, but that period was also an era where Mennonite members agreed to
live in unity even if they did not all agree with the leaders’ decisions. At first, I thought it was
strange that during interviews Mennonites referenced the nonconformity decades of the 1900s,
but then I realized they were trying to explain to me how history shapes the present. They
criticized LMC’s present governance structure, but they were also grateful they were not under
some of the authoritarian bishops of the 1960s.

Though they did not always agree with the past practices, contemporary Mennonites
realized that the former leaders were attempting to promote distinct Mennonite values through
the nonconforming practices. In separate conversations, Joyce Sangrey and Isaac Watson
connected the Mennonite peace position with nonconformity. Isaac said, “And nonviolence I
think begins with nonconformity.” Each of them recognized that when the Mennonite leaders
promoted nonconformity, they also helped to explain and reinforce some foundational
Anabaptist ideas like peace practices. Though they did not appreciate the way the church
enforced its policies, they did appreciate the intentional focus on a Mennonite identity.

Another lesson from the nonconformity era is that even though Mennonites outwardly
appeared the same to non-Mennonites, there was internal tension, and people found ways to
resist the church’s standards in subtle and direct ways. Most of the people I interviewed have
living memories of the latter half of the twentieth century. By that time, clothing restrictions had loosened more for men than for women, which is why women’s head coverings and clothing take up much of the conversations today. Pearl Gehman’s father had lived through the Mennonite church’s changing perspectives on nonconformity at the beginning of the twentieth century. She describes her father as discerning. He would not have sanctioned having a woman speak in church, but neither did he see the need for the plain clothes as they were. As a leader in the church, he was required to wear a frock coat with a tail, but despised the coat. “Oh! he hated that,” Pearl explained. “And again, he said, ‘There's no purpose for this anymore. The purpose was for mounting horses. And we don't mount horses anymore!’” Though Pearl’s father outwardly yielded to the regulations, inwardly he regarded them as unnecessary.

With humor in her voice, Cora Meyer remembers questioning the regulations about dress at an early age due to her mother’s behavior:

I remember as a child laughing at my mom on the way home from church taking her covering off and pulling her skirt up to get cooled off in the summer. And I'd be like, “Why did we do this? Why do we put that thing on and the instant we're in the car, we take it off?” And it definitely, to me, felt like there’s something not right about how we're doing this.

Cora realized that the efforts to promote Anabaptist values by keeping Mennonites separate from society were hindering people or making them uncomfortable instead of enhancing their spirituality.

It was not only lay church members who pushed the church’s boundaries. In the midst of a focus group conversation, Elvin Thomas told the story of a prominent Mennonite pastor, theologian, and speaker who did not strictly adhere to the church’s expectations. As Elvin told the story, the pastor, Myron Augsburger, “had two different kinds of suits to wear depended on where he preached. That was his flexibility to the culture that he was going into. They wouldn’t
let him in the pulpit if he got up there with a tie on.” This example demonstrates that not all Mennonite groups agreed with or enforced the same practices. Augsburger would have traveled widely and would have understood the variability among Mennonite groups. His ministry overlapped the time when restrictions on dress and cultural separation were weakening. All of the Mennonites I met who had lived through LMC’s “Rules and Discipline” era experienced a change as leaders stopped enforcing the regulations, especially after a conservative element left LMC in 1968 to form a separate Mennonite network (B. Graybill 1998, 252). The groups of conservative Mennonites retained the plain dress, drove dark-colored vehicles or had no cars, and were characterized by minimal interaction with the non-Mennonite world. The Mennonites who did not hold onto these restrictions were later classified as progressive Mennonites. LMC emerged as a progressive group because it no longer enforced the practices of visible separation from the world.

**More Than Gender**

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, LMC churches were not primarily concerned about dividing people based on their gender. Their efforts were concentrated on having all members conform to a plain or simple lifestyle that clearly identified church members as people distinct from their surrounding community. Both men and women were expected to speak truthfully, spend money honestly, care for church members, and forgo coercion or violence against another person (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 1968). In this sense, there were significant similarities between men and women. Each one was called to abide by the same moral standards. It is necessary to emphasize here that even though men and women had different social roles, they were not defined by their differences.
Challenging the assumptions of early feminist anthropology, Maya Mayblin demonstrated that gender is not primarily a divisive category among Catholic villagers in Brazil. In Latin America, studies of gender usually portray women as pious and domestic and men as macho and rebellious, but Mayblin says people in one Brazilian village focus more on what they have in common and not on where they are separated. Themes of morality and suffering pepper her ethnography to demonstrate that “instead of difference being an organizing principle of moral and religious life, it is the presumed unity, the fundamental identity of adults as moral persons (whatever their sex)” that defines social relationships (Mayblin 2010, 8). Even though men and women have different moral standards and experience different forms of suffering, all married adults are united by the expectation that they will live moral lives. Men and women will be accepted and redeemed through their patient suffering (Mayblin 2010, 11, 73, 180). For people in this Catholic village, their separation from God was a greater concern than the division of genders (Mayblin 2010, 34).

Mayblin’s ethnography of a Brazilian Catholic community revealed that gender distinctions do not have to be equated with a gendered hierarchy. Her insights align well with what I learned from Mennonites. Even though many people discussed how men and women were treated differently during LMC’s era of nonconformity, their main concern was how the Bishop Board dominated the church. The difference between lay members and the bishops was more pertinent than the difference between men and women. Gender was not a primary concern, but it would soon become a contentious issue in American Mennonite churches, including LMC.

Gender Revealed

In the twentieth century, American cultural shifts regarding gender and sexuality affected the way LMC constituents regarded women’s roles in the church and in society. As American
society was experiencing the first wave of feminist concerns and women’s suffrage, the Mennonite churches in Lancaster County were enacting stricter behavioral codes on its members. The concerns of the outside world had not yet visibly penetrated the boundaries of LMC. But as the second wave of feminist analysis bubbled to the surface during the national turbulence of the 1960s, Mennonites joined in efforts for greater economic and social equality for women, in contextually appropriate ways. While other American women were discarding their bras and high heels (Rampton 2008), Lancaster County Mennonite women responded by discarding their regulated “dark footwear” and cutting their hair and removing their head coverings (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 1968, 21; Ruth 2001, 1077). At the same time, men were trading their collarless frock coats for lapel coats and ties (Ruth 2001, 1077). Though the changes in the church may have been different for men and women, the national cultural adjustments rippled down into the church in apparent ways, and gender inequalities became a greater concern for Pennsylvania Mennonites.

LMC had been led by male leaders since its inception, but conflict arose when a few people began to advocate for including females as church leaders. As gender roles changed in American society, gender became a more salient feature in the relationships among Mennonites. The collective group felt itself stretched in opposing directions, following trends within American culture, where some people advocated for gender equality and others preferred the collective stability of the status quo. This pull between different viewpoints is similar to the way Kniss described Mennonite conflicts as existing on intersecting axes that form four quadrants, whereby Mennonites, situated in one quadrant, are sometimes drawn in opposing directions depending on what is happening in American society, indicated by the other quadrants (Kniss 1997, 130). In chapter 1, I used Kniss’ model to explain LMC’s withdrawal from MC USA, but
it also helps explain why Lancaster County Mennonites experienced tensions and changing expectations within the 1960s.

Engendering Hierarchy

As a youth, Rachel Huber mentioned to her parents, “You know, if I were a boy, I would probably go into seminary, become a pastor.” Their response was gentle, but they essentially told her that, because she is a female, that was not an option for her so she should choose something else. When Rachel was a young girl, only men were given credentials for leadership in LMC congregations, but later, the policies of the conference shifted and Rachel was credentialed as a pastor in LMC. In addition, other women have been licensed and ordained as deaconesses, chaplains, associate or lead pastors, and other roles which confer spiritual authority and political authority within the conference. Church conflicts can occur at an institutional level, as Kniss explains, but these tensions directly impact individuals. Therefore, I weave stories of Mennonite men and women into the following timeline of the institutional conflicts and the changes within LMC’s polity regarding women in church leadership.

Women in LMC were active within their congregations, but the conference operated under a system and theology of male headship, which it interpreted as a hierarchy of men over women. The theology of this system will be discussed in chapter 5, but the practical implications were that women were not allowed to teach men or hold leadership positions over men in the congregation. Susanna Kreider said that in her congregation women could be “Sunday school teachers. Maybe they would lead singing. Maybe. Headed up Bible school or something like that for Vacation Bible School. Anything with kids.” People in the congregations accepted that women could lead children, but they were not considered capable of spiritually leading men.

---

30 Credentials confirm that the conference recognizes a person as a spiritual leader and gives the person the right to vote in conference decisions. I explain the licensing and ordination below.
In the early 1980s, Norm Reimer clearly stated, “women were not given the privilege of being licensed or ordained at that point, at least as pastors.” In addition, Norm recalled, “women were not permitted to preach or to even get behind the pulpit.” Their labor was vital in maintaining the life of the congregation, and their work with children meant that they were raising up the next generation of Mennonites within the church, but they were relegated to those limited roles. A few women felt confined by the stained-glass ceiling. The stained-glass ceiling refers to the challenges women face in reaching the highest levels of church leadership. The phrase was derived from the “invisible and artificial” glass ceiling women face in the secular workplace (Stanley 2001, 85).  

It is an indication that Mennonites have been more closely aligned with American culture than they like to think, because they agree that male leadership is preferable in both religious and secular spheres.

Within LMC, the people advocating for credentialing women were a minority in the conference, but their concerns created tensions in many congregations. Martin Long pastored a Mennonite congregation in the early 1980s, but, before he arrived, the congregation had discussed whether or not they would be open to hiring a female pastor. Martin told me about the situation: “And that became this big conversation, process thing that apparently didn't go well. Created a lot of hurt feelings. A bunch of people left.” Martin was hired as the pastor, but he admitted that he was not willing to enforce male headship, as some people expected. In fact, he directly challenged the position that only men could preach. He acknowledged, “I had asked a woman to preach on a Sunday.” He thought she was a talented public speaker who would have good information to share with the congregation, but not all of the congregants agreed. “Well,”

---

31 In 1993 Susie C. Stanley credited Christie Smith Stevens with coining the phrase but offers no reference, nor is there any additional written record of the phrase’s origin, though it has been adopted by a range of American Christians.
Martin continued, “then she called me and told me that some of the ‘brethren’ had asked her not to speak because she's a woman. And if she preached, they just couldn't come.” As a result, Martin preached that Sunday, but he talked with the church board and directly addressed the conflict on Sunday morning. After that, he said, the tensions eased, and the congregation began to recognize and affirm the roles women had and could have in the church. He also realized that some people from the congregation had been hurt by the transition because not everyone agreed. There was no way to please everyone.

Martin’s story, and many similar narratives that people shared, reveal that gender had become a prominent feature in defining interpersonal and political relationships within LMC by the 1980s. The conference was no longer operating under the strict control of the bishops that was outlined in the earlier “Rules and Discipline.” Since the authority of the bishops was waning, church attendees began to consider other people who had the interest and ability to take leadership roles in their congregations. Several women appeared who had gifts of leadership and teaching and who were interested in church leadership, and a few people wanted to officially recognize their talents. However, it became clear that many Mennonites were not comfortable giving women the same privileges that had been reserved for men. The distinction between who could lead the church was made solely on the basis of gender. Gender became a more prominent way to distinguish church members as the progressive Mennonite congregations set aside their nonconformity practices throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

*Chips in the Stained-Glass Ceiling*

During the 1980s, the Bishop Board of LMC received requests to credential women in various congregations. These petitions directly contradicted the conference’s polity of offering credentials only to men. The first chink in the stained-glass ceiling came in 1984. According to
the December 20, 1984, Bishop Board minutes, the LMC bishops dispensed “a certificate for ministerial services” to a woman, Mercedes Gonzalez, who was giving leadership to a new LMC congregation in New York City (Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005). This was a new type of credential. Up to this point, no bishops had made a formal application to present ministerial credentials to a woman (Adams 2009, 65), and it seems the bishops created a special certificate in order to fulfill the request. Located in New York City in a Spanish-speaking congregation, Gonzalez held a marginal position in LMC, and, based on what I heard from other Mennonites, it may have been easier for her congregation to push the boundaries of LMC’s regulations about women’s roles in churches.

Outside the central hub of LMC, Mennonite women have had more prominent roles in their congregations. Rachel Huber reflects on her time as a member of a small church plant.\(^{32}\) Even though it was an LMC congregation, there were fewer restrictions on women because it was a church on the figurative margins on the conference. She recalled, “women did every role except for pastor because it was an outreach church, and we had to have help.” The size of the congregation and its status as a church plant meant that it was not held to the same standards as other congregations. Mel Newswanger had a similar experience. During a group meeting, he explained his perspective: “I was raised in a small church. We needed everybody. And gender is not important when you need everybody. And it only becomes an issue when you have plenty, for me.” In a way, the distinction between churches on the margins and churches at the center benefitted women and minority populations in the peripheral congregations, who had more opportunities to be involved in the local church. When LMC first began to license women as deaconesses, three of the first five women (1987-1990) were from congregations outside

---

\(^{32}\) Church planting is the process of starting or “planting” a new congregation. It often includes a few people from an established congregation who work together with new attendees to form and establish a new congregation.
Lancaster County (Adams 2009, 186). Although formal policy changes only came when the tensions erupted in LMC’s epicenter, it is necessary to recognize Mercedes Gonzalez and other women who challenged LMC’s polities.

Women in LMC faced both systemic discrimination and interpersonal prejudice in their efforts to change conference policies and allow women to be ordained. In both MC USA and LMC, individuals can be licensed toward a specific ministry, such as a deacon or a chaplain. Or, individuals may request to be licensed toward ordination (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 2016; MC USA 2018). Ordination is an official recognition of a person’s ongoing leadership in the life of the church, and it is considered a covenant between the church and the individual (MC USA 2018). A person must first be licensed toward ordination for at least two years as a probationary period before being ordained. Both licensed and ordained individuals constitute the credentialed leaders of a church body. These distinctions are important because they demonstrate systemic limitations for women in LMC. Mercedes Gonzalez was granted a certificate in 1984 because there was no option to license her, and the conference was not willing to change its policies.

Through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the Bishop Board of Lancaster Conference collected data on the role of women in the church. They also formed multiple committees to specifically study perspectives on women’s leadership in churches (Adams 2009, 62, 64, 71, 79). Finally, according to the August 20, 1999, Bishop Board minutes, the male credentialed leaders in LMC made their first polity change and agreed to license women for specific ministry, with a vote to follow in September (Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005). That decision also came with a five-year moratorium during which LMC would not publicly discuss ordaining women, according to the September 10, 1999, minutes (Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005).
In the time after 1999, women in LMC were in a liminal state. Even though a few women were performing pastoral duties, they could not be licensed toward ordination or ordained in LMC. However, their roles and gifts and desires demonstrated that they were doing much more work in the church than the ordinary lay leader. The provision of a “license for specific ministry” did not satisfy LMC members. At first, this special license was for women serving as deaconesses in their congregations or as chaplains in other settings. Even though men who were licensed could apply for ordination, that option was not open to women.

Women had been given a license, but it was a different category of license than what men received. In her congregation, Joyce Sangrey was licensed as a deaconess at the same time a man was licensed as a deacon. When their credentials were reviewed after a year, the man had the option to request to be ordained as a deacon, but he decided to keep his license because it was clear that Joyce, as a woman, would not be asked if she wanted to be ordained, even though they were performing identical roles. Breathing a sigh, Joyce says, “I thanked him profusely for honoring that lack of integrity between the two of us.” This memory highlighted the systemic boundaries placed around women, boundaries that were slowly being removed. Later, LMC offered women a license for specific ministry as pastors in their congregations. Men would have been offered a license toward ordination. The license for specific ministry left no room for advancement. Joyce and I discussed this license for pastoral ministry as we reviewed the history of LMC’s decisions about women in leadership. “How is that different from ordination?” I asked. “It's not,” Joyce said. “But it was the conference's way of demoting women. To satisfy the people that didn't think we should be serving as pastors.” Joyce felt that the conference was acting without integrity, intentionally demeaning women who were doing the same work as men.
Despite the five-year moratorium, the Bishop Board could find no rest because congregations continued to apply for exemptions to recognize women as pastors in their locales. According to the May 1, 2001, Bishop Board minutes, two congregations in New York City requested that their female pastors be credentialed “with a license for specific ministry” because they “have been serving as lead pastors in their congregations for a number of years” (Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005). Since there was no provision to license women toward ordination, Mercedes Gonzales and Ruth Wenger, who served separate congregations, were each given a license for specific ministry as lead pastors (Adams 2009, 94).

By the end of that year, the pressure to recognize women as pastors was coming from within Lancaster County. On December 4, 2001, the bishops recorded that the Blossom Hill congregation requested that Lancaster Conference transfer their incoming female pastor’s ordination credentials from Virginia Mennonite Conference (Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005).33 Instead of accepting her ordination credentials, on January 29, 2002, the LMC Bishop Board decided to ask if Virginia Conference would “hold this credential” while the pastor served an LMC congregation since the credential did not “fall within the guidelines for credentialing women in LMC” (Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005).34

For the next seven years, various area conferences throughout the United States retained ordination credentials for women who entered Lancaster Conference (Adams 2009, 191–92). During that time, four congregations requested a license for specific ministry for their solo female lead pastors. In several other congregations, women received a license for specific

---

33 This practice is in keeping with the Confession of Faith, Article 15, in which a footnote indicates: “Ordination is normally transferable from one congregation or conference assignment to another” (Mennonite Church USA 1995).

34 Since LMC refused to accept the transfer of the pastor’s ordination credentials because they did not accept women as pastors, they asked VMC to keep the pastor’s credentials. In this way, the pastor’s credentials did not lapse, and she was accountable to a regional conference. VMC would retain her credentials until LMC was ready to accept them.
ministry as associate pastor or co-pastor (Adams 2009, 190–91). In 2006, after more book studies and presentations by subcommittees, the Bishop Board voted again on whether to permit ordaining women (Adams 2009, 101). The vote fell one percent shy of the required two-thirds majority, as recorded in the January 19, 2007, Bishop Board minutes (Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005).

The climax came in 2007. One of the congregations in Lancaster District, one of the many districts comprising Lancaster Conference, announced its intention to ordain a female pastor. Since only conferences could issue credentials, this was an unprecedented move by an LMC district. The LMC Assistant Moderator met with members of the Lancaster District in an amiable meeting on May 1, 2007, where he reported to the Executive Committee that the district leaders do not want to leave the conference or act in rebellion but only “follow God’s missional call for their congregations,” which they cannot do with the recent vote (Bishop Board Minutes, 2006-2019). The Lancaster District was responding to God, a greater authority than the authority of the Bishop Board. Both the district and the Bishop Board respected the divine authority. Lancaster District was determined in its course of action. Elizabeth Nissley was ordained by Lancaster District in June 2007, with the district holding her credentials (Adams 2009, 104).

Susanna Kreider was attending a congregation where Elizabeth Nissley came to give a sermon one Sunday. She recalls her first impression of Elizabeth: “I was like, ‘It's okay if a woman comes, but she doesn't need to be making a point of the fact that ‘I'm a woman and don't you forget it!’’ I couldn't reconcile why some people shouldn't be called to ministry just because of their gender. I could no longer reconcile that. But nor did I want somebody who was militant about it. And she passed muster, in my mind.” Susanna’s reaction demonstrated that members of the congregations that called women were not doing it specifically to defy the Bishop Board’s
ruling. The women who were being called as pastors were not “angry women,” as some LMC constituents feared, an observation that was recorded in the October 7, 1992, Bishop Board minutes (Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005). Each group was trying to be faithful to its understanding of God’s intentions for the church and for each individual. That same year, an ordained man, recognizing what Joyce Sangrey called a “lack of integrity,” requested that the bishops revoke his ordination credentials and provide him with a license for specific ministry, in solidarity with women who could not be ordained. It never came about because the Bishop Board realized it did not have the authority to do that. Instead, the pastor was assigned to a task force to consider the meaning of ordination (Adams 2009, 102).

Though Elizabeth Nissley was the first woman ordained within a Lancaster Conference congregation, this moment would not have occurred if other men and women had not challenged the gender norms and the established structures of the church before her. Women’s ordination was a well-worn subject in LMC Bishop Board minutes through the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005, Bishop Board Minutes, 2006-2019). Mercedes Gonzalez’s pastoral leadership was recognized in 1984. Within LMC, not only did women pastors of color have different experiences from the white female pastors within Lancaster County, but their actions helped to pave the way for white females to follow.

As anthropologist Chandra Mohanty addressed, the experiences of women of color are distinct from the concerns of white women. Due to their specific histories and the political restrictions imposed on them, third world feminists have focused on very specific locations and written about the way women live in each location (Mohanty 1991, 10). Lila Abu-Lughod takes a similar tactic in writing an “ethnography of the particular.” She recognizes the danger of making generalizations and allows particular voices to be heard, voices which may even contain
internal contradictions (Abu-Lughod 1991, 149, 155). In writing about women, mostly white women, who did become pastors, this ethnography lacks the voices of women of color and women who did not want to be pastors. However, it is important to note that the experiences of these unnamed women affected those who are mentioned in this dissertation. Their experiences are part of the particular conditions that inspired and challenged women who did eventually become credentialed as Mennonite leaders. The hindrances that women like Mercedes Gonzalez and Elizabeth Nissley faced did not stop them from exercising their gifts until they were finally recognized by the church institution.

In January 2008, Lancaster District, under Bishop Linford King, ordained Janet Breneman in its second unauthorized ordination (Adams 2009, 107). On February 2, 2008, the Executive Committee of the Bishop Board realized it had to take decisive action and moved to discipline the Lancaster District bishop who had effected both ordinations (Bishop Board Minutes, 2006-2019). But the discipline never happened. As they reviewed their decision-making process, the Bishop Board realized the weaknesses that existed. They decided to pass off credentialing decisions to the recently formed Credentialing Commission. Free from credentialing decisions, the Bishop Board could work toward reconciliation. In the summer of 2008, the bishops resolved their differences with Lancaster District and with Bishop Linford King (Adams 2009, 108–9). On August 22, 2008, they also agreed to accept the two unauthorized ordinations and accept the transfer of ordination credentials into LMC from other area conferences (Bishop Board Minutes, 2006-2019). The September 19, 2008, Bishop Board minutes record that Julia Fisher was licensed toward ordination in Lancaster Conference on August 24, 2008, the first woman to receive this distinction (Bishop Board Minutes, 2006-2019).
The abrupt change in polity after decades of debate about ordaining women surprised the constituents in LMC. Some people decided they could no longer align with the conference, and they left their congregations. Even those who had been advocating for women’s ordination were stunned. Joyce summed it up well, “I really did not think that I would be serving as a pastor or ordained in my lifetime. I really did not think that there was any chance of that happening.” As surprising as the change in polity was, it also included a proviso that women could not hold a position as bishop, the highest station within LMC.

The restriction on women as bishops remained until December 2021, when the LMC Bishop Board affirmed that women can serve as members of bishop teams (Schrag 2022). In a move reminiscent of the way the Bishop Board granted a certificate to Mercedes Gonzalez in New York City, the first two Mennonite women bishops are women of color who are members of districts outside of Pennsylvania. Hyacinth Banks Stevens is part of the New York City District and has been functioning in a bishop role since 2016. The polity shift is a formal recognition of her position on a bishop team. On January 15, 2022, the Southeast District delegates affirmed Juanita Nuñez as a member of their bishop team (Schrag 2022). Though I did not interview Mennonites after this announcement, I expect that many female leaders who left LMC in 2017 would have been shocked, but pleased, by this change in polity. When a large number of white ordained women left LMC in 2017, several people I interviewed feared that LMC would lose its momentum in recognizing women in leadership. However, this created more space for women of color to be recognized as leaders. As Dustin Penner said, “from what it sounds like, the places that are pushing the boundaries now with women in leadership are the
Racial/Ethnic groups. So, I’ll be kind of curious to see what happens and wins out there.” His prediction proved to be correct.

Mennonites who believed and acted upon the belief that women could and should be ordained were not taking those steps to align themselves more closely with American culture for the sake of being like the surrounding society. They were influenced by American conversations about gender and sexuality, but they were not challenging patriarchal norms simply to defy patriarchy. Rather, they believed that patriarchal structures and attitudes created blinders that did not allow Christians to see the fullness of God expressed through different sexes. By understanding their actions as moving toward greater piety, these Mennonites changed the existing norms and political organization of the church. Similarly, when Mahmood met Egyptian women of the mosque movement, she realized that their activities had political consequences, but the women’s primary motivation was to revitalize Islam. The Egyptians women’s efforts at social and cultural reform also influenced the nation since families and religious communities were transformed by their practices (Mahmood 2005, 34–35).

In their effort toward piety, women also become agents of change. As noted above, German women who convert to Islam have a double-consciousness (Özyürek 2015, 7). They create and inhabit a new category of German Muslim women, one that is assertive and rational and not patriarchal and that seeks the good of “the Ummah” (Özyürek 2015, 39–41). Similarly, Mennonites who champion female pastors must create a new category within the institution. Women can now belong as women and as pastors. In this new category, women pastors and their allies are responsible for defining what it means to be a female pastor in a progressive Mennonite

---

35 The Church Member Profile projects use the term “Racial/Ethic” for Mennonite Church USA groups that are not of Western European or specifically Germanic descent. The term was chosen by the members of Racial/Ethnic groups (Kanagy 2007, 12, 21). Mennonite Church USA has a similar nomenclature, using “Racial Ethnic groups” for member groups of the Racial Ethnic Council (MC USA 2020).
church. The women who do become pastors are distinguished from other women by their job, but they asserted that they were just as sincere as stay-at-home mothers and other Mennonite women in their desire to serve God as faithfully as possible.

**Affirmed But Not Accepted**

Even though the majority of voices in my study wanted women in leadership, their personal experiences indicate that the people they knew in LMC did not share their view. Nearly every woman I interviewed said that they faced negative reactions to their active congregational leadership. Kelly Schwartzentruber remembered the first time she preached in her congregation, which has a male pastor. Several people, including friends, spoke to her afterward and said it was fine if she preached once, but they would not want it to be a regular practice because they were not comfortable with a woman in the pulpit. Ellen Eby-Groff’s friend invited her and her husband, Lou, over for dinner. After the meal, the friend opened the Bible and read passage after passage that indicated women should not be leaders in the church. Ellen was unprepared and could not give a thorough rebuttal. She has heard the same arguments repeated since then and has done her own study and learned how to respond thoroughly.

Sometimes the impediments to leadership positions were less direct. Kelly Schwartzentruber reflected, “I can't think I've ever heard it said, ‘Women have certain roles in the church, and they don't have certain roles in the church.’ But the way it played out, it was very clear.” Their views align with Mennonites throughout the United States. Among Mennonites on the East Coast in 2006, 52% of LMC and MC USA members favored ordaining women, but 58% of people preferred to have a man as the lead pastor (Kanagy 2007, 77–78). Even though opinions have changed from the late 1980s in favor of women, a slight majority of church members continue to favor male leadership in the highest positions in the church.
Mennonites, like those Kelly knew, just assumed that women could not hold formal leadership positions in congregations or church organizations. In contrast, none of the men I interviewed reported facing any disapproval based on their gender.

The number of credentialed women is growing within LMC, but most women do not appear to be interested in having leadership roles in their congregations or within church institutions. Amy Watson recounted a casual conversation she had with a group of friends. She was telling the other women what she had learned about aspects of God that are associated with a maternal nature: “And they didn't really see why it mattered. Like ‘Why does it really matter?’ It's like, ‘I don't feel called to be a pastor. I like being a wife and a mom. So, why does it matter?’” This response from Amy’s friends was typical of many women in LMC who were content in their position and did not understand why other women cannot enjoy their traditional familial roles in the same way. Amy was not one to push boundaries, but she was also open to enabling women to have greater roles within the church. She thought of her children and wanted to make sure they were allowed to hold any position if they had the gifts. Speaking of her daughters, she explained, “I don’t want them to grow up feeling like they can't be who God called them to be.” For Amy, recognizing God’s work in people’s lives was more important than making distinctions or rules based on gender.

There is not a gendered differentiation among those who oppose women in leadership. As Amy’s example demonstrates, not all Mennonite women think it is good to credential other women. In a focused group conversation, several men and women shared that within their own congregations, women were sometimes more opposed than men to having women in church leadership. Often this opposition came from women like Amy’s friends who are content in their roles as wives and mothers and did not understand why other women would want to have a
greater role in the church. As the group wrestled with these different opinions, it became clear that each one was trying to understand why the church was restricting roles based on gender when God was gifting men and women as leaders and calling men and women to public leadership roles. The tensions within the Mennonite church through the latter twentieth century to the present reveal that gender is significant in considering church leadership roles.

**The Gift of Integrity**

“Everybody I have met is so sincerely eager for male and female to use their gifts as they're called. And that has been really good. Because if it hadn't been like that, I'm not sure I would continue with it,” Kelly Swartzentruber confided when we were discussing her experiences with leadership in Mennonite contexts. Her fellow congregants hesitated to have a woman preach, but when she attended a training for church leaders, Kelly found a warm welcome. There, she was surprised to find that people were more interested in her gifts than her gender, and they affirmed her desire for pastoral leadership. This unanticipated positive reception was the motivation she needed to continue exploring a pastoring role. Kelly’s words explained how some LMC constituents placed less emphasis on people’s gender and instead focused on the gifts people brought to the church. As a result, they organized social and political roles in the church based on gifts, not gender or conformity to the Bishop Board’s standards for dress and lifestyle. When progressive Mennonites discussed gifts, they affirmed that not allowing people to use their gifts was a way of limiting God.

**The Gift Giver**

The Mennonites I met believed that the gifts each person has originated with God, and using their gifts was an act of dedication to God. When I began interviewing Mennonites about the roles of women in the church, I did not expect to learn about their understanding of gifts. But
I realized that their concepts of themselves, their interactions with others, and their relationship with God were all organized around the idea that God gifted and called people. That understanding guided how Mennonites discussed the roles people could have in the church. If gifts came from God, then they did not want to hinder God. In a group conversation, Eva Thomas shared that she thought women could be leaders in the church if they had gifts for leadership. She told us, “One of my favorite verses is 1 Peter 4:10: ‘Each one should use whatever gifts he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.’” Eva explained that the Mennonite church should welcome anyone who had gifts to share, just as people in the early church were instructed to use their gifts.

In a different group meeting, Pearl Gehman also talked about how gifts came directly from God. She asserted, “I think God's expectations and requests of us are in line with the gifts that God has given.” Eva and Pearl were both certain that gifts originated with God and were meant to be used wherever they were needed. Pearl went on to explain that she thought the gifts God provided aligned with the call God gave each person. I analyze Mennonite individuals’ ideas of calling in chapter 4, but gifts often aided people in recognizing and confirming a call that they felt. Not everyone had a specific call, but Mennonites affirmed that each person received God-given gifts.

Some Christian groups talk about discovering spiritual gifts and some American psychologists and educators designate persons as gifted, but Mennonites discussed gifts as talents to be honed and used in service to God and to others. The gifts were not inherently spiritual nor important only for their spiritual value. The persons who received the gifts were not
distinguished by exceptional ability. Rather, Mennonites viewed gifts as talents that could be offered to others, in the same way that one might offer a present to a friend to commemorate the friendship. In addition, Mennonites believed any person could be given gifts, whereas gifted persons, clinically speaking, are limited within the general population. Mennonites taught that God-given gifts were abundant, but each person had different gifts and possessed the gifts in various measures.

Mennonites agreed with other Christians that gifts came from God, but, in our conversations, people rarely discussed spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts, some Christians believe, are given to Christians “to perform specific tasks beyond the realm of their own human skill and ability” and were distinguished from natural talents (Sanford 2021). The list of specific spiritual gifts is compiled from several references in the epistles, such as Ephesians 4:11-12, “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (NRSV). Some Mennonites would use spiritual gifts inventories to learn about their spiritual gifts, but most of the people who interacted with me discussed gifts using a different definition. They agreed that gifts were generally given “for building up the body of Christ,” but they did not separate their tasks as sacred or profane. Instead, they believed that any talent a person had, from running the church’s audio/visual equipment to teaching preschool, was a gift from God to be used in service to others, whether in the church or out of the church.

In his classic essay on gifts, sociologist Marcel Mauss proposed that members of a group have the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate what has

---

36 For different ideas of giftedness within psychology and American educational systems, see Joseph Renzulli and Sally Reis (Renzulli 1978; Reis and Renzulli 1982), and works by Kazimierz Dabrowski (Dabrowski 1964; Dabrowski and Piechowski 1977) and those influenced by his work (Mendaglio and Tillier 2006; Piechowski 2013).

37 Other texts include Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30.
been given (1950, 17). Mennonites recognized these three obligations, but they framed the movement of giving, receiving, and reciprocating the gift as an interaction between themselves, God, and other people. In conversation, Mennonites spoke of God as the one who gave gifts, and they were the recipients. In order to reciprocate, they needed to use their gifts. Mennonites shared the idea that they should use their gifts to “pay it forward.” By enacting the talent God had given them, they were assisting others in the church and indirectly reciprocating to the gift giver.

Using their gifts became a challenge for some women when the community around them did not accept their gifts or limited the ways in which they could enact their gifts. The group became an important factor in understanding the gift. Mauss described gifts as a social covenant that binds parties together. Within this total system, Mauss viewed individuals as participants within a communal system of exchange and return (1950, 6, 88). According to Mary Douglas’s foreword, “The theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity” (Mauss 1950, xiii). Although Mauss and Douglas thought that gifts “enhance solidarity” between groups, to use Douglas’s phrase (Mauss 1950, x), it is also possible for the movement of gifts to create discord within a group when not everyone acts according to the same idea of exchange.

Within a religious community, a refusal to exchange gifts can hinder the sense of solidarity. Mauss described several examples in which giving a gift is equivalent to giving a part of one’s self, of giving power to another person, even giving part of one’s soul (Mauss 1950, 12, 46). When Mennonite women could not fully use their gifts, they felt like they were personally rejected. Some women even struggled to receive the gift, but when they began to think of gifts in terms of obligations, they were more willing to accept what they had been given. Women who thought of their obligation to the gift giver, God, were ready to defy their church policies and use
their gifts. They no longer felt obligated to follow the church’s human standards because they were acting in service to God.

In this way, Mennonites could also argue that not accepting women’s gifts was equivalent to not accepting God. This perspective could help women overcome a sense of personal inadequacy since the gift was no longer about them, but about God. Mennonite views and activities reflect the pious behaviors of nonliberal Muslim women whose efforts in their homes had political implications for the Islamization of Egyptian society (Mahmood 2005, 2–5). In each instance, the system of exchange and social relationships was tied to the political and religious structures of the society. These intertwined elements were part of total systems of exchange, and a shift in one area led to changes within the whole system.

**Gifts and Service in the Church**

The abundance of gifts enhanced the church because each individual contributed to a fuller understanding of God, and each person felt welcomed to participate in the congregation in a way that suited their interests. Lou Groff was thinking practically when he told a group of Mennonites why he thought women should be church leaders: “Well, if you limit it to just men then you only have half the population, roughly. And if you’re accepting of women in leadership, as pastors, then that doubles your pool. It doubles the amount of available workers. Mathematics.” Rebecca Ward agreed and jumped into the conversation after Lou’s statement: “Along with that, gender balance also balances our image of God. So, if all the leaders and decision-makers of our faith are one gender, we can tend to focus on the attributes of God that align with those genders. And we see that God created both genders to work together. So, when we limit to only one of those genders being our voices in the church, that can really influence what we learn and hear as people.” For each of them, utilizing people based on gifts rather than
gender meant that, pragmatically, there were more people to enrich “the body of Christ,” but it also meant that those who were already following Christ could have a more complete understanding of God, beyond their own individual perspective. Through this group conversation, participants indicated that ignoring or extinguishing people’s gifts actually harmed the church and hindered individuals’ understanding of and relationship with God.

While I met a number of Mennonites who advocated for giving roles in the church based on people’s gifts, they also recognized that many Mennonites continued to use gender as a basis for assigning church positions, and they critiqued this attitude and its effect upon church attendees. When Martin Long and his family began attending a Lancaster County Mennonite congregation, they quickly learned that women were not welcome as church leaders:

We were not prepared for that. I think that really caught us by surprise because it didn’t compute. It was like: “What? There’s this hierarchy that says that because you’re a woman, you can’t, and because you’re a man, you can, even if the woman is smarter and better prepared and gifted and blah, blah?” I don’t think we were prepared for how that hit us emotionally. We really struggled with that.

Martin and his family were shocked and uncertain how to respond because they did not understand why people with gifts should not be allowed to use them.

Others became angry when women’s roles were restricted. Rachel Huber spoke about a group of married couples she knew where both husband and wife were involved in formal church ministry. During the time when LMC was withdrawing from MC USA, and it became apparent that the conference would not advocate for women in leadership, Rachel said, “It was hard for the men. They got very angry. To see their wives treated this way. They dealt with more anger.” She meant that the men were angrier than the women. The women experienced abandonment and, like Martin, were more shocked and immobilized for a time. When Rachel and her family transitioned to an ACC congregation, she was aware that her husband was ready to leave LMC
even more than she was. The church’s stance on limiting women based on their gender sometimes forced men into positions that did not suit them, and it created emotional turmoil for men and women who were distressed that women’s gifts were being suppressed.

Some Mennonites so thoroughly accepted the idea that each person should be welcome to use their gifts in church that they had a difficult time understanding why women were restricted based on their gender. Lou Groff thought the only reason women were not church leaders was because men were “afraid of losing their power.” Ellen Eby-Groff called this mindset a “scarcity mentality.” Under this approach, power is limited and must be conserved and preserved by those who hold it. A number of Mennonites reiterated the notion that power is scarce, when I asked about gendered leadership roles. They had been told that if women held leadership positions in the church, they would rob men of their right to lead. In a focus group discussion on women as pastors, Rebecca Ward chimed in: “I heard the argument that strong women weaken men. That if the woman takes a leadership position, it gives an excuse to the men to not be in their rightful place.” Elvin Thomas and Mel Newswanger immediately affirmed that they had heard the same sentiments.

This argument about a man’s “rightful place” is based on a theory of headship, wherein the man is given the right to take prominence over women in home and in the church. In the 1950s, theologian Charles Ryrie promoted the idea of male headship, but he conceded that if no men were available to do certain work, “it is better to do the work with qualified women—even though it is not ideal—than to sit back and do nothing simply because there are no men. However, women must be cautioned against continuing such work after there are trained men available for the job” (1958, 80). His ideas are echoed in Mennonite congregations today. Under the rule of headship, men were viewed as protectors, as if women were delicate creatures that
had to be safeguarded and guided by men. However, the argument that men can be weakened and threatened by women evinces an underlying idea that men were fragile, and their masculinity has to be supported by women who act unseen to preserve an appearance of male dominance. In reality, the idea of headship does not strengthen men; rather, it makes them more vulnerable to feeling threatened whenever anyone presents a contrary viewpoint.

A few Mennonites offered a different idea of power as servanthood, not as headship or as a male-dominated enterprise. In a focus group considering women in leadership, Amy Watson had thoughts about how Mennonites discussed leadership: “When we talk about what is leadership according to the Bible and according to Jesus’s example, it was being a servant. So, we’re arguing over who's going to be the servant. And so, like, it’s kind of funny.” Other group members affirmed Amy’s words, which reenforced the concept that leaders should not dominate their followers but rather encourage them. Mennonites in LMC criticized the authoritarian nature of the Bishop Board in the first half of the twentieth century who strictly enforced rules for church members and disciplined those who were noncompliant. However, when the bishops’ power shifted, the concept of leadership did not change. Instead, all men gained dominance over all women, instead of a few bishops holding power over all church members. Amy and others in the group wanted a form of leadership where all people would seek to serve others, not dominate others. The role of a leader is to serve the interests of others and to empower them, not to serve themselves and build up their own power.

**Nurturing Gifts**

Like individual Mennonites who must be empowered, gifts must be honed and encouraged, not dominated. When people are encouraged to practice their gifts, they get better at what they do, and others can benefit from their talents. Miriam Eckman displayed this attitude
when she discussed the role she thought a church leader should have: “I believe strongly that each congregation has people [with] gifts already present in the congregation. And so sometimes it’s just walking alongside a congregation to find those gifts and resources that can help a congregation do what they need to do.” In his book *Outliers*, author Malcolm Gladwell made the point that exceptional athletes and technological innovators were not naturally destined for greatness. Rather, those exceptional people had a few more opportunities than others or had the right training at the right time to propel them to create something no one else had invented before (Gladwell 2008). That is, their innate talents were refined and trained and nurtured in a way that became beneficial to others who watched the sports games or who used the technology they invented. His specific examples demonstrated the value that comes to society when people’s interests and talents were affirmed and carefully guided. If pastors can offer leadership that advances the gifts of people within their congregations, they will not likely produce the next Bill Gates or Billy Graham, but they will positively transform the individuals and the congregation.

Some Mennonites opposed to women in leadership changed their minds when they saw the gifts that women brought to their congregation and recognized the positive impact on their own lives. Norm Reimer remembered how his congregation slowly began inviting women to speak to the congregation. “So gently, we took step by step until women were given the invitation to exercise their gifts as the Spirit of God gifted them.” Not everyone in the congregation appreciated hearing from women, but the congregants did eventually hire a female pastor. Martin Long recounted a similar experience where a particular woman pastor won the hearts of the congregation: “Even people who theologically said they had a problem with it, they loved [her]. And they wanted [her] to visit. And they wanted [her] to participate in their celebrations. And so, we were fortunate in that [she] was just the kind of person that, in addition
to all of her pastoral gifts, she just generated this enormous warmth. Sort of elicited that in people.” Norm and Martin highlighted that even though their congregations resisted the idea of a woman pastor, once they experienced a woman in leadership, they began to recognize and value the gifts the women brought and welcomed the women as their pastors. Whether they shifted their theology immediately was not as significant as their behavior toward their pastor.

**The Heart of God**

When people’s gifts are undervalued, the body of Christ lacks an important component. The Mennonites I met were not desperately searching for a new organizational model to overturn inequalities between men and women. Rather, they sincerely recognized the gifts both men and women shared and could not understand why the church did not utilize all of the gifts at its disposal. In addition, the assertion that people’s gifts came from God meant that people were ignoring or hindering God’s work if they did not allow others to use their gifts. Amy Watson stated this perspective in our focus group. “But I think from the very beginning my sense was that women not being allowed to be pastors broke the heart of God. And that was just like an underlying feeling that I had for a long time.” In recognizing, affirming, and valuing women’s gifts in all areas of the church, Mennonites believed that they were enhancing the body of Christ, gaining personal benefit from the gifts others shared, and drawing nearer to the heart of God.

Classifying people according to their gifts is one way for the Mennonite conference to align its policies with existing practices. Progressive Mennonites in Lancaster County are shifting from a gender-based classification model to a position where people’s gifts take precedence. For some LMC constituents, gender continues to be the primary consideration when affirming people to specific roles in the church, just as it was in the late 1900s. During that time, Joyce Sangrey, quoted above, noted a “lack of integrity” when another deacon was eligible for
ordination and she was not, even though they had the same function within the congregation. LMC women were eventually enabled to be ordained as pastors, but they could not be bishops. Only recently has this policy changed to align with practice. Hyacinth Stevens has been serving as part of the New York City bishop team since 2016, but she was not recognized as a bishop. The conference’s December 2021 decision to recognize women as bishops on bishop teams formalized her role. LMC moderator Keith Weaver echoed Joyce’s earlier words when he explained the recent resolution to welcome Stevens and other women as bishops: “How can LMC say one thing (only men as bishops) and do another? That lacks integrity” (Schrag 2022). By filling church roles based on gifts, not on gender, Mennonites are gifting integrity to men and women to serve in areas where they have the most interest and talent.

**Critiquing Belonging**

I conclude by examining three facets of nonbelonging that were present within progressive Mennonite churches of Lancaster County because people critique the church when they feel like they do not belong in some way. I will discuss the connection between nonbelonging and power, the communal nature of nonbelonging, and the way in which nonbelonging can become internalized. First, nonbelonging is political. Those who hold power in a society can establish and enforce the boundaries for belonging, and this can lead to nonbelonging for those who do not measure up to set standards. Through the “Rules and Discipline” and through its constitution, LMC’s Bishop Board defined expectations for church members as well as legal standards for the board itself. At first, the principle of nonconformity guided LMC’s members. Church members who did not wear the appropriate attire or who were too “worldly” experienced nonbelonging. Some who disagreed with the policies internally
sensed they did not belong. For nearly three-quarters of the twentieth century, nonconformity was a greater concern than gender equality and guided the behavior of all church members.

But once the cultural milieu shifted, LMC’s constituents raised greater concern about the inequalities between men’s and women’s roles in the church. Those who advocated for acknowledging women’s gifts as leaders wanted women to be licensed and ordained and recognized for their leadership skills. Their voices were a minority among the traditional Mennonites in Lancaster County, and they felt like they did not belong within their own conference. LMC’s polity also communicated to women that they did not belong in the church in the same way as men. Until 1999, when women were granted a license for specific ministry, there was no formal provision for women to be recognized as leaders in LMC. It was not until LMC amended its polity in 2008 that women were able to be ordained. It again revised its policies in December 2021, slowly chipping away at the stained-glass ceiling. Two women were affirmed as bishops alongside male bishops on two separate bishop teams (Schrag 2022).

The 2008 decision to have a male Bishop Board was a concession to LMC members and congregations who did not think women should be ordained. For them, the decision to change LMC’s polity to ordain women created a sense of nonbelonging. Here is an opportunity for future research to determine how the 2021 decision to include female bishops will affect these member congregations who do not think women should be ordained as pastors or bishops. By changing its polity, LMC shifted the balance of belonging toward those who wanted women to be ordained and take roles as bishops. In doing so, it opened up space for nonbelonging among those who opposed the move. While belonging is fluid and contextual, it is also limited and available to some at the expense of others, so that each person is continually shifting between
belonging and nonbelonging. Those who belong feel empowered because their ideas take precedence, but nonbelonging can feel disempowering.

Second, nonbelonging is a communal process, just as belonging involves interaction between the individual and the social group. Even when LMC’s polity changed, not all LMC members were willing to accept women in leadership roles. Some women who later took formal leadership roles in the church admitted that they did not think they would ever be pastors. They recognized their gifts for leadership, but the institutions they belonged to did not allow women to lead adult men within the church. Even when the polity had shifted, people’s perspectives on gender roles remained unmoved. Women who were pastors or who found other avenues for leadership in their congregations reported that congregation members would tell them directly that they did not approve of credentialing women. Or they would remind the female pastors not to be too aggressive with their position. Joyce Sangrey says people in her congregation were glad she was “not pushing” an agenda for women’s equality in the church.

In this way, women could belong as credentialed leaders according to LMC’s polity, but they experienced nonbelonging from the larger Mennonite population. The balance between belonging and nonbelonging displays how women pastors held a tenuous position in LMC, balancing between their individual aspirations and the community’s expectations. When women challenged that sense of nonbelonging, they changed the church structures and the attitudes of fellow Mennonites. Some people recognized the gifts women had and were more willing to accept women as pastors. The individual and community are interrelated: the group sets the standards for its members, but individuals can critique the collective and bring about change.

Third, nonbelonging is experienced as personal and can become internalized. A group establishes the norms for its members, but those who do not follow those norms might think they
are personally defective. The sense of nonbelonging that some people internalized was generated by a failure to meet the group’s standards. Social scientific research on stigma demonstrates that social expectations affect people’s behavior and relationships. The collective unit determines the conditions for behavior and belonging (Ablon 1981, 5; Link and Phelan 2001, 367). Those who do not meet those standards are stigmatized. A succinct definition of stigma that is sufficient for this discussion is: “stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998, 505). This experience of devaluation may lead a person to characterize their position in the group in terms of nonbelonging.

Belonging does not only mean that a person feels connected to a group, but that the person also feels affirmed and accepted within the group. As I define in chapter 2, belonging includes an expectation that there will be a reciprocal connection. When a person feels an affinity toward a group, if there is no corresponding relationship, the person can experience nonbelonging. The nonbelonging person is not necessarily stigmatized unless they have a view or condition which is disregarded among the group.

Women who wanted to be pastors experienced both nonbelonging and stigmatization. As a result, many women also felt shame for their desire to serve as church leaders. Several Mennonite women recognized how the feeling of devaluation created a sense of shame that impacted their lives. They introduced me to Brené Brown’s research on shame and vulnerability, which gave them the language with which to discuss their experiences as women within the church. Broadly defined, in Brown’s words, “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (Brown 2007, 5). Shame distorts a person’s perception and emphasizes the negative aspects of
one’s self and others. In the beginning of this chapter, I introduced Rebecca Ward who felt she was invalid when other Christians disagreed with her thoughts on biblical interpretation, shame occurs when people internalize the message that because they are not aligned with others, they are somehow individually deficient and, therefore, not fully welcome.\textsuperscript{38}

When a person internalizes the sense of nonbelonging, it can lead to feelings of inadequacy or shame. Shame, sociologist Erving Goffman wrote, could arise “from the individual’s perception” that a personal attribute is “a defiling thing to possess” (1963, 7). Goffman argued that shame arose from stigma, and stigma was based on personal identity, the idea that a person can be separated from others in a group (1963, 57). As I mentioned in chapter 1, it was the study of identity that also enabled the study of belonging. If the group was the unit of study, then individual experiences were less important. However, belonging became important when social scientists examined how differentiated individuals related to the whole community.

The feelings of shame that women often mentioned arose from the Mennonite church culture that they were in, which had long communicated that women should be subordinated to men’s leadership. These teachings led women to feel like they were discreditable persons who needed to hide their status as pastors and church leaders. Goffman explains that discredited persons have a visible defect that is socially stigmatized (1963, 4–5, 41). Discreditable persons, in contrast, have some characteristic of differentness that could be stigmatized if it was known

\textsuperscript{38} These interviews directly contradict Goffman’s uniformed statement that “Mennonites, Gypsies, shameless scoundrels, and very orthodox Jews” disregard the stigmas that wider society places upon them (1963, 6). Mennonites do select which social norms they will follow. Sometimes their choices distinguish them from American society, such as the time when some men chose to be conscientious objectors. Other times, their choices align them with American society, such as when area conferences decided to credential women as leaders. In each case, Mennonites are not wholly disregarding American society’s ideas. Rather, they are evaluating which societal elements they will adopt, aware that their decisions could devalue them or create a stigma either from Americans or from others within the Mennonite church.
(Goffman 1963, 42, 91). Even Mennonite women who did not directly speak about shame experienced the challenge of knowing when and how to disclose information about themselves.

When Jacki spoke at LMC assembly meetings, she felt like many people turned to stare at her. She sensed that their “body language would sort of tense” and people spoke in hushed tones trying to figure out her identity instead of paying attention to what she was saying. She thought that LMC members conveyed a “suspiciousness of the female voice.” Though Jacki did not say she felt ashamed or felt a need to remain quiet, she also did not feel like she was welcome as a woman pastor in LMC. Her position was discreditable, and it was part of the reason she chose to affiliate with ACC. In that conference, she felt like she was accepted as a woman pastor and could enjoy more collegial relationships with other church leaders. Psychiatrist and anthropologist Arthur Kleinman and anthropologist Rachel Hall-Clifford affirm that stigma affects behavior, as other researchers have shown, but they argue it also affects social relationships (2009, 418). Jacki did not modify her behavior dramatically by silencing her voice in LMC assemblies, but she did change her social network by joining ACC. In ACC, she does not feel like her voice is suspect or stigmatized, which allows for greater levels of trust in and collaboration with other pastors both within and outside of assembly meetings.

The power differentials between men and women in Mennonite organizations were part of the reason why women felt a greater resistance when they challenged existing norms. Sociologists Bruce Link and Jo Phelan unequivocally stated that “it takes power to stigmatize,” but power is often overlooked (2001, 375). The social stigma women experienced led them to internalize feelings of shame. Rachel Huber’s experience below provides an example of how power shapes stigma and limits the options women have in deciding where to belong. Before LMC formally withdrew from MC USA, the leaders discussed the idea of creating two branches.
within the same conference. When Rachel heard about the idea, she discussed the concept with some of the bishops around her: “‘I wouldn't have a choice of which to be a part of,’ I said, ‘Because you wouldn't accept me.’ They did not disagree with me.” Though this conference division never came to fruition, Rachel clearly understood that one section of the conference would be open to women in ministry while the other section would not allow women in ministry. Even though Rachel was in conversation with the bishops, she did not have any power to decide the conference’s policies. By presenting an idea of two conference branches with different standards for each division, the conference would have taken away Rachel’s power to choose how she would be incorporated into the conference.

If the conference had been divided, it would have further stigmatized those who wanted women to be in church ministry by making it the focal point of or one of the main reasons for the division. Men do not have to disclose their thoughts about women in ministry in order to join a congregation that would not allow women to be pastors. Men who do want women to be in ministry may feel uncomfortable trying to manage when to disclose the discreditable information, but they do not directly experience the stigma and consequent shame unless they reveal that information.

Rachel’s time in LMC demonstrates how an institution determines the conditions for belonging, and it also determines how individuals should act within the group. Although more recent studies on stigma give evidence for how society sets the norms for persons to follow, the research also reveals that change is possible (Ablon 1981, 8; Kleinman and Hall-Clifford 2009, 418). The impetus for change can come when individuals experience nonbelonging within a group and seek to change the conditions of the group.
Nonbelonging can arise from feelings of internalized shame or it can come from the efforts of persons attempting to conceal the ideas or behaviors that are not sanctioned by the group. When a person senses a lack of belonging, it can also lead to feelings of shame or a desire to hide attributes of one’s self in order to connect more closely to the group. Link and Phelan optimistically believe that some stigmas can be eliminated. First, the change must be multifaceted and multilevel. Second, it must address the underlying cause of the stigma (Link and Phelan 2001, 381). Overcoming stigma does not guarantee belonging, but it could help people feel a greater sense of connection and acceptance. Throughout this dissertation, I write about several ways in which Mennonite men and women changed the structures and mindsets of people in their congregations and networks. By focusing on the gifts people bring to the church, they were advocating for a conceptual change in how leadership positions were imparted. Congregants also discussed the theological justifications for women in ministry. Instead of focusing on their differences, they found a common source from which to discuss their varying ideas with other Mennonites. By emphasizing theological views and promoting God-given gifts, some Mennonites were seeking to address a few of the underlying causes of the stigma.

The changes in each congregation came about slowly and at various levels. Women who had previously only taught children were invited to teach an adult Sunday school class. Women gave sermons first from beside the pulpit, then from behind the pulpit. They were invited to co-pastor with their husbands or take positions as associate pastors under male leadership. Later, some of those women became lead pastors or solo pastors. In 2022, LMC ordained its first women bishops, so that women are now at all levels of leadership within LMC. Through these multifaceted and multilevel tactics, Mennonites have reduced the stigma for women in church leadership. These ideological changes resulted in polity and structural changes that have also
created a greater sense of belonging for women and their allies. In this way, the sense of nonbelonging and the experiences of shame motivated individuals to see macro-level changes that will impact belonging for others in the future.

Joyce Sangrey said she has been learning a lot about grace lately. Grace is “somebody in a power position, reaching down to elevate the status of somebody.” Joyce used Jesus as the greatest example of grace and discussed Jesus’ death as the ultimate example of shame. She quoted the biblical author of Hebrews to say that Jesus “‘endured the cross, scorning its shame.’ Scorning its shame. The word scorning means, literally, to think down upon.” For Joyce, shame was overcome by Jesus’s vulnerability. By taking on shame and turning it into an act of grace, Jesus allowed weakness to be turned into strength. Instead of a community where people are judged and shamed, Joyce imagines the church as a place where all people can be vulnerable and find grace and acceptance.

Critical interpretation is the process by which people forge new paths for belonging, by recognizing that their ways of thinking may no longer be relevant to their current context. As the social and religious environments shift, ideas need to be reinterpreted. The values and beliefs may be relevant and important, but are not rendered appropriately for life in the present moment. Over time, LMC leaders and members have held a variety of interpretations about what it means to be “in the world but not of it,” and these explanations were modified as the cultural milieu shifted. Mennonites have criticized the nonconformity standards, challenged the practice of male headship and gendered divisions, and it is likely they will eventually critique the attention to gifts. But, for now, Mennonites have reinterpreted their idea of how social and political relationships should be structured in the church, and they emphasize gifts as a way to organize church roles.
In concluding, I offer Joyce Sangrey’s words about grace, which is the ultimate gift that God gave to humanity. Through Jesus’s vulnerability, God offered grace and forgiveness to all people: “Jesus died on the cross so our sins could be forgiven. But it was more than for the forgiveness of sins. It was so that we would also extend grace, the same grace that we were given, to others.” This chapter is a recognition that Mennonitism, and Christianity in general, continue today precisely because individuals have been committed to sharing and living out the message of God’s grace. Mennonites recognize that they have not done this perfectly and that conflict has caused pain within the church and made them less influential to those outside the church. As their environment changed, Mennonites have had to critique and reinterpret their existing ways of living and interacting, to be a vulnerable yet adaptable community of faith. In doing so, they needed to remember to extend grace to themselves and to one another.
Chapter 4

The Quest of the Called:

Exploring Calling and Gifts Among Mennonite Leaders

“The only Christian work is good work well done. Let the Church see to it that the workers are Christian people and do their work well, as to God: then all the work will be Christian work, whether it is church embroidery, or sewage farming.”

—Dorothy L. Sayers

The Staff

Beth Keener was sitting on the couch, her planner and notebook neatly perched on her lap while she listened to Lindsey Kane, whose manila folder wobbled and threatened to spill its stash of notes every time she moved her hands to speak expressively. Nate Evans was sitting in a separate chair, doodling on a notepad. Kathy Denlinger ushered me into the room before she sat down with her folder that contained a checklist of items to address during the meeting with the staff at Eastland Mennonite Church. Colette Thiessen bustled in after us, carrying a hefty planner that, once opened, looked like a graffiti artist was experimenting with cubism. Words scrawled diagonally, vertically, and horizontally across the page collided with each other and turned to run in another direction on the page. The words appeared in a variety of colors, punctuated by variegated highlighting, with Post-It notes and other papers obscuring parts of the messages and adding square angles to the free-flowing word forms.

Sitting among everyone, seeking security in a scrappy notebook and favorite pen, I felt excitement and trepidation, like a young child being invited to sit at the adult’s table for the first time. I was well-acquainted with the staff members of Eastland Mennonite Church after six months in the congregation, but I had never attended a staff meeting and felt like an intruder bursting into a secret council. But there was no reason to worry. Staff meetings at Eastland Mennonite Church were not formal affairs, and people chatted about personal and professional matters. Questions about an upcoming youth event mingled with polite inquiries about personal activities over the weekend. Although most of the staff members had come to the meeting from their separate offices or were, like me, stopping at the church in between other activities, it was clear that there was confidence and camaraderie among them.

The meeting officially began when the lead pastor, Nate Evans, addressed the person on his right and asked if she would start. Kathy Denlinger, the church administrator, commenced her update by informing everyone that children who were playing in the church during the week had made a small hole in the wall. She had already informed the proper person who could patch the drywall. So much for worrying about invading a confidential meeting, I mused.

I had attended staff meetings at other congregations and knew them to be a mixture of banal details of church maintenance and sincere discussions of church attendee’s personal lives, and Eastland Mennonite Church appeared to be no different. In my notes, the conversation appears pointed and orderly, with each person successively giving an update on any information pertaining to their role in the congregation. In reality, it was more like watching a yo-yo, as one person held the string and began with some topic, and then the conversation bounced around irregularly to the other staff members before hurtling back to the person holding the string. The entire game was repeated when the string was passed to the next person, and they began the yo-
yo cycle of conversation all over again. Some topics were mundane. (When do we offer a church mailbox to the family that has been attending regularly for the past few weeks?) Other discussions produced furrowed brows and several practical suggestions. (How do we help a church member whose wife is struggling with memory loss?) The group also had no trouble bringing humor into the conversation. (While discussing how to help a church attendee “get a membership,” another staff member asked if the church was now charging fees for membership.40 Someone else suggested the membership process would be more entertaining if they swore people into the church with a Bible and a flag. For a staff opposed to religious nationalism, the uncharacteristic image brought a lot of laughter, which was the intent.)

During these meetings, it became apparent that each staff person had a good relationship with other staff members, trusted them, and relied upon the wisdom and advice of the others. About three months after I first began attending staff meetings, they were discussing who would cover the lead pastor’s responsibilities while he was out of town. People were assigned to address property issues, staff issues, legal issues, and any sudden death in the congregation. Drolly recognizing the pains taken to cover many contingencies, someone then raised the question of what would happen if the church burned down. Nate looked unconcerned and said he trusted Beth’s judgment. Beth, the Minister of Congregational Care, looked a little less confident, apparently preferring funeral planning to firefighting. No one else seemed concerned, and the conversation meandered down other paths. The exchange was evidence that the staff members were able to recognize the talents each person carried, and they were willing to allow others to work where they had ability. There was trust between all of the staff members as well as security in their own roles that allowed them to work well together.

40 The typical phrasing is “to become a member” since membership is something one chooses; it is offered freely, not purchased.
Gifts and Calling

This chapter explores the spiritual, personal, and practical implications of recognizing an individual’s gifts and empowering the person to use their gifts. Gifts are defined as abilities or talents a person possesses that are partially innate in a person and yet must be developed over time, just as a gifted musician has an initial interest in music and yet must practice often.41 Personal gifts are closely aligned with one’s calling, the role or characteristics a person feels compelled to embody. Often, people’s gifts are evident before they are called to a ministry vocation or specific role, but they may not be fully realized until people step into the position they were called to fulfill. In fact, there may be external and internal factors that hinder people from answering a call, despite their gifts. I began by introducing the staff members of Eastland Mennonite Church to offer a picture of the healthy work environment that comes when individuals are empowered to confidently use their gifts so that they can also appreciate the talents others possess. However, such harmony between call and gifts is often lacking.

As I explained in chapter 3, recognizing and encouraging gifts is an alternative model of church leadership, one that allows individuals to take on a role based on their talents, apart from gender, ethnicity, age, or experience. In a Christian tradition built upon teachings about the priesthood of all believers, Anabaptists recognize that each person has something to contribute to the spiritual body. However, American Mennonites are less egalitarian than their earliest spiritual forebears and, even if they recognize gifts, might limit the exercise of those gifts to particular roles. This limitation becomes apparent especially when people feel called in a way that is not supported by the institution of the church. Because the call can be a contentious process, people often gain a greater understanding of their own talents and their resilience as they wrestle with

41 Chapter 3 contains a more detailed exploration of gifts.
the call. Yet the call is not only a personal process; it includes the community’s discernment. Together, the person and the community must recognize a call, and the response shapes both the one called and those around that person.

The interplay between call and gifts involves a long negotiation between personal, communal, and institutional factors. When a person’s calling and gifts are aligned, affirmed by the community, and enacted, it can lead to personal satisfaction and professional proficiency. To explore this connection, I will begin by offering various definitions of what it means to receive a “call” or to “feel called” to something. As soon as people discussed their call, they immediately followed with examples of how they faced resistance to fulfill the call. The resistance came from their own internal qualms, their social environment, and, occasionally, from institutional forces that hindered their call. However, people also named individuals who became allies and advocates—either knowingly or unknowingly—as they sought to implement their call. Next, I consider the stages of what I will define as people’s “call narratives” and explore the four-step process pastors and leaders followed in order to fulfill their calling. Lastly, I return to the staff members of Eastland Mennonite Church and examine how their callings were experienced and expressed in different ways.

The Call: “God was pretty unrelenting”42

Defining the Call

Jacki Dietrich

Christa: When you say "the call," what do you mean by "the call"?

Jacki: Oh, a call to ministry and pastoring as a vocation. It's not just a career. It can't be. The choice to live out faith and lead others in living out faith. And sensing empowerment from God to do that.

42 Interview with Rachel Huber
**Kelly Swartzentruber**
Christa: What do you mean by “a calling”?
Kelly: The word I would use to answer that would be when something really resonates. So, when somebody—when they say something that I've been thinking, and it just really resonates with me. Or something that I haven't been able to articulate, but it's a feeling, and somebody puts words to it.

**Lou Groff**
Christa: You had used the word "called". What do you mean by "called"?
Lou: Everybody has a spirit that we can listen to. So, I think it's listening to God's spirit within us, as far as the call, the nudge, the feeling of direction. And so, it's that feeling of being drawn to, not pushed to, but drawn to.

"The call" is a widely-used term among Christian pastors and lay persons, but it is not well-defined. I think part of the reason for the variability is that one’s call is partially dependent on a personal sensation and the reaction of the surrounding community. Thus, it differs depending on the person and their social environment. When I asked Martin Long, a Mennonite pastor, why he responded to what he said was a call, he reflected, “I just felt this tug to go [to seminary]. And I had no idea why. It felt like I was being compelled to.” According to each of these credentialed Mennonite leaders or those who have explored a call, the call is variously a vocation, a choice, a feeling of being compelled or drawn to something. The call is something that resonates within a person, reverberating to the core of one’s being. During interviews with Mennonite leaders and church staff, I would ask how they came to their current role. For many people, this question elicited a response that I term a “call narrative,” an explanation of how the person felt compelled by a force greater than themselves to take on that role. By comparing these call narratives, I offer a definition of a call that includes four conditions, which will be explained in detail: a call is a deep sense of being guided in a particular direction, it is affirmed by others, it is accepted by the one receiving the call, and it is then enacted.
A call is not a person’s destiny, and it can change or shift over time as a person gains new experiences. A call may start out leading a person to a temporary job, and then turn into a vocational calling later. There is a difference between “a call” and “the call.” For those who spoke about “the call,” it tended to be more of a vocational calling, aimed specifically at pastoral ministry for the people I interviewed. But not everyone who was a pastor spoke of a vocational call. Other people spoke generally about “a call” or “feeling called,” which was equated with recognizing the voice of God in their lives. In our group conversation about the call, Pearl Gehman gave a general overview of a call: “Well, I think, just the basic call is to be obedient to whatever God calls you to.” She laughed with the group as she struggled to define a call without using the term in the definition. Then she found more solid ground: “God wants us to be listening to the Spirit's voice. Whether that comes to us through other people, or to us through the scripture, or through the still small voice, or circumstances, or a combination of all of the above, maybe more.” Pearl described the general call for all people who sought guidance from God.

In my focus group conversation about calling, several of the participants were in retirement, and they were often the ones who understood their call less as a vocation and more as a lifestyle. Alma Neff offered, “Well, I think in retrospect, even though I didn't realize it at the time, that God called me to be a nurse.” She explained that her life had been a “varied experience” as she went from being a nurse to teaching others to inspecting doctor’s offices. Her later roles grew out of her initial response to God to be a nurse. There is a difference, the group agreed, between a specific call from God to a certain role and a general call to all people to follow God in all areas of their lives. Though the two calls might overlap, the rest of this chapter will focus more on the specific roles Mennonite individuals took in church leadership after they received “the call.”
Four Stages of “The Call”

There are four main stages of the call that can be elicited through people’s personal experiences. Not every person experiences all of these stages, and the personal sense of call may be muted in Christian traditions where the communal call and institutional recognition take precedence. Even among Mennonites, who do sometimes recognize that God calls persons, there are people serving in the church who did not have a strong personal call, and that is acceptable. Not everyone senses a call for their role. The role might aid them in accepting a call in the future, or it could be a space where they can use their gifts and have others affirm their gifts, even if they are never called. However, for those people who sense a personal calling, their response comes in stages. First, they must understand the divine nature of the call, as a call from a source outside of themselves. Second, people question the call, which leads them to test the call both internally and externally. For some, this is an easy process, but all Mennonite leaders mentioned receiving affirmation from other people, such as friends, family members, authority figures, or church representatives who assured them that they have the abilities to answer the call. Third, people must personally accept that God is calling them and no longer resist the call, if they had been hesitating. Lastly, they take steps to respond to God’s call.

Rachel Huber’s call narrative helped me understand the stages of a specific call and, after her description, I began to see the same elements in other people’s accounts. When I asked Rachel to define her call, she had a long response that included various experiences throughout her life where she sensed that God was calling her to be involved in church ministry. When she was a teenager, Rachel had the opportunity to share in front of the church about activities the youth had done. Rachel remembers, “And one of the ladies—who did not grow up Mennonite—told Dad that I would make a good preacher.” Although Rachel spoke of her formal call coming
later, after high school, the fact that a woman’s offhand comment during her childhood stuck with her shows that Rachel was interested in pastoral ministry from a young age. However, her desire was always checked by the reminder that women could not be pastors in Lancaster Mennonite Conference congregations. She said that she had no examples in her life of female pastors. Women were song leaders, missionaries, and Sunday school teachers but never pastors. As a result of the institutional restrictions and lack of social examples, Rachel suppressed her inner impression that she should be pursuing pastoral ministry.

From the way Rachel composed her call narrative, it seemed like the call was very clear, but her examples demonstrate that it is only clear in retrospect. While others recognized her care for them and for the church, they did not all name those qualities as pastoral gifts. Even though she was pursuing a different degree in college, Rachel remained committed to the institutional church, though she resisted fully accepting the call she felt.

I found myself doing leadership types of roles: youth leaders, Sunday School teaching. And I think that the growth and the ministry of the church always mattered to me. It's unrelenting! When God is calling you, he doesn't leave you alone. You know, as much as I was resistant, it would just come back again and come back again. Whenever I exercised those gifts, it was so tremendously life-giving that it was just something that I couldn't ignore. I think it’s hard to identify it completely. Your thoughts continue to turn there. People say things and ideas come and it just keeps—. Yeah, God was pretty unrelenting until I finally caved. I had to get over a lot of fear of being rejected by people who were important to me and my community.

Rachel was certain that God was drawing her to pastoral ministry, but she felt like she could not take on that role. However, God did not relent in drawing her to work that she could not envision for herself. To be clear, Rachel enjoyed teaching and studying scripture and providing pastoral care; therefore, God was not calling her to do work for which she was ill-equipped. Instead, the most difficult challenge Rachel faced was overcoming her own insecurities about herself. All the
other people I met who talked about resisting a call did so because they did not feel qualified or able to do the job. They did not resist because they devalued the work.

Rachel continued her story by explaining that she had to test the call before she could fully accept it. After doing a lot of personal study and talking with other people, Rachel finally decided that God really was calling her, a woman, to pastoral ministry. Because “God was pretty unrelenting,” Rachel finally yielded and was able to find peace. She concluded her call narrative with a brief summary of how she then enrolled in a seminary and was hired as a pastor at the congregation she was attending. For Rachel, her personal acceptance of the divine call was the last hurdle in enabling her to be a pastor since her congregation had already recognized her gifts.

The gradual process of exploring and testing the call is analogous to falling in love. In an ethnography focused on embodiment and subjectivity in a Mexican active-life convent, Rebecca Lester joined an incoming group of postulants as they tried to understand their place in Mexican society. The women learned that understanding their vocation was a new way of knowing, a new way of understanding themselves and their relationship to God and to their society. Sister Margarita explained to Lester that knowing one was chosen for a religious vocation was like knowing one was in love. It is a feeling that comes gradually and one day you realize you are in love, but it is not clear when or how it began. You cannot describe why you are in love, but you know that the person is different from others, and that person is a good match for you. The feeling cannot be explained, but it is a way of knowing that differs from other ways of knowing (Lester 2005, 19). In the same way, Rachel’s call led her to a different way of knowing, but it was the knowledge that God was pursuing her, as a lover might pursue a beloved. Rachel had to change her theology and ways of thinking about church structure, but that new knowledge was
not actually her call. The call was knowing deeply that God was unrelentingly drawing her toward a specific vocation and deeper understanding of herself.

**Called by Whom?**

The first criterion for a personal call is that a person has a sense of being guided by an outside force toward a particular goal. For each person, God was the external being who prompted them to pursue a particular path. In a focus group meeting intended to understand the idea of call, Edie Ebersole, a retired nurse, told the group that her own call began when she was a teenager, and her family did not approve of her desire to pursue higher education. However, she did attend school and did not regret her decision. One other group member, Mel Newswanger, asked her: “Your calling was always there?” Edie replied, “That never left. Yeah, in the midst of the teenage restlessness of, ‘How's this gonna work out?’ The calling did not leave. There was that inner nudging that stayed there.” Each person was clear that the call came from outside of themselves. Often, people initially resisted the call, but it persisted within them in some form. In each narrative of a person’s call, they continually referred to God’s guidance or work in their own lives. It was clear that anytime people spoke of a calling, God was the source of that calling.

Each person was clear that God initiated the call, but there was also a communal process of discernment in accepting the call. The interaction between the supernatural and the human community helped to clarify the call the individual received, but it also determined the extent to which a person could enact the call. Anthropological studies of shamanism highlight the role of the collective in the call process. Mircea Eliade’s seminal study of shamanism aligns shamans with mystics, those who are set apart from others “by the intensity of their own religious experience” (Eliade 1964, 8). Shamans go through a process in which they determine that they have been chosen by a particular spirit who guides them (Eliade 1964, 13). Then they must be
trained in some form (Eliade 1964, 13, 14). Those who do not complete training are not considered shamans. In fact, a society may decide that a person is not capable of being a shaman (Wolf 1990, 426). Or the society might influence shamans to adjust their practices, so that shamans become more mobile or experts in a particular skill that is in high demand (Kendall 1996). In each of these instances, the religious and social community plays a large role in determining whether a person is called and how the call should be enacted. However, they do not explain what happens when communities disagree about the calling.

Since shamans are often part-time religious specialists who practice their skills only when called upon; they are not enmeshed in the institutional layers and formal credentialing processes that most American Mennonite pastors face. What happens when communities disagree, such as when a congregation wants a woman as a pastor, but the conference refuses to credential a woman? In each case, the community clearly has a role in the call process, but the woman who feels called may not enact the call, depending on which group has more power over her. In these instances, it was important for men and women to declare that God called individuals. Therefore, some congregations took action in opposition to the conference’s policies because they appealed to a higher authority. Knowing who is initiating the call can influence how individuals and their communities respond to the call.

**Called To What?**

It is necessary to first clarify what people are called to before considering the second criterion of a call, affirmation from others. When people received a call, it often fell into one of three categories: a vocational call, a lifestyle call, or a call to fill a role for a certain period of time. These categories could overlap, but I want to be clear that it was not only pastors or credentialed church leaders who received a call. Others within the Mennonite church
experienced the same cycle of external guidance, communal confirmation, and personal acceptance in their roles as missionaries, nurses, teachers, and chaplains.

The call a person receives can be a vocation or it can be a calling to a specific role for a short period of time. Jacki Dietrich, quoted above, was unique in interpreting the call solely as a vocation. In her situation it was appropriate for her to equate her own call with her vocation as a pastor in an institutional church. In fact, most of the people who were in a pastoral role in the present interpreted the call as an invitation to be a pastor. For them, the call is equated with their vocation. Colette Thiessen, while working as Eastland Mennonite Church’s Director of Children and Youth, wrestled to define her calling: “I am called to ministry, just not vocationally. I just never felt that. I never felt like, ‘Oh! It's my calling to be working at a church.’ Really, I've liked it. But, I'm a teacher.” Her gifts for teaching enabled her to do her job well, but Colette was clear that her vocational calling was in a formal education setting. While Jacki was content to continue pastoring for a long time, Colette was willing to use her teaching gifts in one congregation, but she was also open to using those gifts in another setting in the future. For her, the call to a specific role was not a life-long calling to the church.

It is not unusual for people in a religious profession to understand their calling as a vocation that would encompass their life’s work. Among the postulants at the Siervas, the women must first discern their call. In line with the teaching of the Catholic Church, the women believe that each person has a vocation given by God, a path that God has offered that is the most beneficial if one chooses to take it. No one is forced to take the path; each person can choose to follow God’s calling or ignore it and follow their own ambitions (Lester 2005, 7). The sisters at the Siervas taught the postulants that a calling from God is very personal and must be worked out in dialogue with God. They were aware that not all of the postulants would continue to their
perpetual vows. “According to the sisters, no amount of formation will make a good nun of the woman who does not truly have a vocation, a divine call” (Lester 2005, 91). Lester reiterates the divine origin of the call, but then equates the call with vocation. However, the Mennonites of Lancaster County expressed a much broader understanding of call. For some, it was equated with a vocation, but, for others, it was a way of living their life, of dialoguing with God through whatever role they held at a particular time.

Lastly, people could be called to a specific lifestyle, which might lead them to different jobs or careers over time. Susanna Kreider worked as a nurse before becoming a hospital chaplain, and she can see how the two roles are connected.

When I was a nurse, I really remember helping families be with their loved ones and how wonderful it was just to watch their anxiety come down as I helped them understand what was going on. And I'm like, ‘That was my early cue.’ I just so remember thinking, ‘Oh, this is so cool! Just to help families in this crisis.’ Clueless, at the time, that I would ever think about doing chaplaincy. I didn't even know it was a thing!

Despite holding different roles, Susanna says that a call persisted throughout her life. “I think I had been seeking for a long time to figure out what I wanted to do and didn't know what that meant. And the call is this knowing. It's knowing like here.” She pointed to her gut before continuing to explain the call: “I just know I belong here. It fits me. I get energy from it. I thoroughly enjoy it.” For Susanna, the call was satisfying and fulfilling because it assured her that no matter what role she held, she could help people in the midst of a crisis situation. She felt like she had been designed to fit the role.

A call is not a person’s destiny, and it can change or shift over time as a person gains new experiences. A call may start out leading a person to a temporary job, and then turn into a vocational calling later. Or a person may not experience a specific call but rather emphasize being called to follow God wherever that leads throughout life.
Affirmed by Others

A second criterion for understanding a call is receiving affirmation from other people or encouragement from unexpected sources. Although people said that the call formally came from God, each person also recognized that the call would require them to perform a specific role within their social context; therefore, they needed communal support to accept the call. Edie Ebersole told our focus group that she had felt an inner call for several years to do something more than teach in public school, as she was doing at the time. For a few years, other people had been encouraging her to become an overseas missionary. Then one day, “the public high school principal came to me and said, ‘I see you as a person who would make a good overseas mission worker.’ And that night, I went home and said, ‘God, have you told everybody?’” Her story elicited loud laughter from the entire group. But it was a cathartic laughter from others who had experienced the same tension of questioning an inner call from God and being surprised upon hearing that call voiced aloud by other people.

When people sense a call from God, they do not always know where it is leading, and other people can help guide them in a specific direction. Jacki Dietrich attended seminary because she loved learning about biblical interpretation, but, she admitted, “I didn't think about being a pastor, actually, until seminary. And the seminary professors really encouraged me to go in the route of pastoring. And as I learned more about what pastoring is, like the variety of roles that the pastor plays, all appealed to me.” Jacki said that her seminary professors made her feel empowered as a young leader, and she was interested in serving the church in a variety of ways. Edie’s story reveals her surprise at hearing her internal desires voiced aloud by another person. In contrast, Jacki did not realize how much she was drawn toward pastoral ministry until her professors explained the role to her. In each case, external sources affirmed and helped to clarify
the call that each individual had. Most progressive Mennonite congregations have a vetting process for their pastors before they are hired by a congregation and credentialed by the conference. Through this process, potential pastors have to explain their call from God, and these formal processes are one more source of external affirmation since they must be confirmed by official Mennonite organizations.

**Who, Me?**

One of the most significant hindrances people faced came from their own insecurities that led them to resist the call. Anna Mary Stauffer said that when the call came, she directly refused: “And I'm like, ‘No, no, God, you've got the wrong person.’” Anna Mary’s call came in a private and personal way, and was very direct, unlike the subtle nudge that many others experienced. While she was reading the Bible as part of her personal study, Anna Mary said what she was reading “just lifted off the page.” Tears flowed freely, she said, because “I realized this was a message for my congregation.” Anna Mary had no doubt that she was supposed to speak and that God had directed her in what she was to say. Nor did she mention a fear of public speaking. Instead, she was dumbfounded that God had chosen her to speak. She prepared for a spiritual fight against God: “And I'm like scared out of my wits. And so, I start fasting, and praying, and begging God to change His mind.” However, as Rachel learned, God does not relent, and perhaps is even more persistent when individuals question their own adequacy for the task. Through various signs and conversations with other people Anna Mary finally came to a place of “believing that it was going to happen because it was so incredibly clear.” And so, she preached and waited for God to lead her further.

Later in our focus group conversation, Pearl Gehman acknowledged, “For a long time, I fought with God about public speaking.” After multiple phone calls from various places
requesting speaking engagements, Pearl finally said, “‘God, if you really want me to do this, I will do it because I'm committed to obeying you. But, if so, you are responsible.’” After committing her words to God, Pearl said, “when I was presenting, it felt as if somebody else was responsible,” and she was glad that she had obeyed God. There are several parallels within their narratives. Anna Mary and Pearl directly argued with God about whether or not they should speak. Both of them had the experience that God was guiding them as they spoke because, as Anna Mary said, the message “just lifted off the page.” The words were their own, but the message was God’s. Both of them thought that their first speaking engagement would be their last, but opportunities have continued to come to them. Each woman framed their response to the call as an act of obedience. Not everyone spoke of their reaction in terms of obedience or disobedience, but that was salient for Pearl and Anna Mary. Lester and the Siervas postulants learned, “It is not enough for God to call one to the religious life […] One must answer this call with decisive action” (2005, 92). Pearl and Anna Mary also equated the call with obedient action. Even though God called people, it was up to each individual to decide how to respond.

The contrast between Anna Mary and Pearl could help explicate how “performative behavior” leads to a particular “inward disposition” (Mahmood 2005, 157). Mahmood argues that, for nonliberal Muslim women, “action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them” (2005, 157). Anna Mary is currently experiencing a disconnect between her feelings and her behavior. She is performing as a pastor, but she does not feel like a pastor. Indeed, she has been taught that women cannot be pastors. However, her desire to serve God, her piety, is greater than her feelings of inadequacy. Pearl once had the same dissonance Anna Mary is experiencing, but her repeated behavior created feelings of confidence in herself, and they also created feelings
of a deeper trust in and commitment to God. These women were not challenging church norms for their own sake but because they wanted to follow where they thought God was leading them.

The main difference between them was their view of the call in the present. Anna Mary, a middle-aged woman, was clearly discomforted by her call and unsure of where it would lead, especially because she was in a congregation that was hesitant to have a woman pastor. Pearl, now in her retirement years, could reflect back upon her call without any distress. I imagine Anna Mary as a snapshot of a younger Pearl. Pearl has become comfortable speaking to audiences and letting God be responsible for the result. The roles Anna Mary will have in the future have not yet come into focus. Comparing the two women is a reminder that a person’s perception of the call changes over time and depends upon the individual’s reaction to the call.

**The Call and the Quest**

Exploring the call narratives in greater depth reveals the determination of each individual to complete the quest that began with the unexpected call. When I thought of the call narratives in this way, I found parallels to the structure of magic tales, where an unlikely hero is propelled into a quest, hindered by some and aided by others, and finally achieves what was previously lacking. In broad strokes, folklorist Vladimir Propp outlines the morphology of magic tales as a sequence where the hero is introduced, receives an interdiction, faces a villain, is sent to overcome some sort of lack or need, acquires magical help, engages with and defeats the villain, and finally enjoys the reward (Propp 1968, 26–65). The quest changes the hero, either by having the hero return home in an altered state or by having the hero obtain a new status by marrying a princess or receiving a large fortune. In each call narrative, Mennonite individuals shared about unexpectedly embarking on a quest as they tried to figure out where the call was leading them. It was not a journey they had intended to start, much as the fictional Jack never intended to obtain
magic beans that grew into a beanstalk, but each person who was called was compelled to see the call through to the end.

Magic tales and call narratives are different genres, and I could have used any story form with a protagonist, antagonist, and resolution, but I chose the magic tale as a comparison for two salient features: the interdiction and the donor sequence. The interdiction is a prohibition against some action, which could either be a direct command or a weaker suggestion (Propp 1968, 26–27). In magic tales, the interdiction is always violated, which propels the story forward (Propp 1968, 27). For women in Lancaster County Mennonite congregations, the interdiction kept them out of church leadership positions and prohibited credentialing.

In magic tales, the hero meets a donor who, in some way, provides or directs the hero to a magical agent that allows the hero to complete the task (Propp 1968, 39–50). Peter Gilet, who simplified Propp’s complicated structure, describes the Helper as a character “who forms a bond of some sort with the hero and who aids her/him in the adventures s/he will undergo” (Gilet 1998, 55). There were parallels to this story framework within the call narratives for women who talked about how God directly called them. Besides the unexpected quest-like nature of their journey to accept the call, they faced opposition from different sources, found strength in the fact that the call persisted in their lives, received encouragement from others, and were finally able to find ways into church leadership, to accomplish the quest that they had been led into. I use this rough outline of interdiction, interaction with the helper, and change in status to describe the process of being called by God to a certain task.

The Interdiction and Violation

Like any magic tale, there is an interdiction which creates tensions and propels the story forward. The hero violates the interdiction; otherwise, there would not be a story to tell. For
Mennonite constituents who wanted women to be pastors, the interdiction was a clear institutional prohibition against offering credentials to women. Often, family, friends, or other church members repeated this ban to remind women that they should not pursue pastoring as a vocation. Though both men and women struggled to accept the call when it came, the challenge was even greater for women because of the gendered restrictions.

Despite the prohibition against speaking, progressive Mennonites found ways for women to answer their call and violate the interdiction. Since gifts are often evident before a call is expressed, people were given opportunities to use their talents early in life before they entered a certain vocation or answered a later call. Women were especially vocal about how people in their congregations recognized their speaking talents or leadership abilities, often from a young age, and welcomed their participation. Rachel, Jacki, Pearl, Joyce, Cora, Kelly, and Ellen all discussed their long-term involvement in church, from sharing a youth report to coordinating drama teams to leading worship to participation in many different congregational committees.

Gilet says that his magic tale functions are more fluid than the original structure Propp proposed. Gilet writes, “my Functions tend to overlap and not to form a neat sequence of mutually exclusive events, being interwoven in the actual stories and often simultaneous with each other” (Gilet 1998, 57). Likewise, it was not uncommon for pastors, men or women, to speak of opposition in some arena while speaking of receiving simultaneous encouragement from another source. The various stages of the call narrative sometimes overlap and double back. Likewise, the interdiction and its violation were not necessarily separate but were woven together throughout people’s accounts.
Facing Opposition

Violating the interdiction leads the character into a new, often unexpected, phase. Here, within a magic tale, the character must face opposition, either an ogre or dragon or hostile humans. For women in LMC, the antagonists were less magical and less direct in their opposition. The next section of the call narrative includes adversaries that directly hindered people in answering their call. However, it was possible for people to face hostility from several different sources. In magic tales, the opposition often threw the characters into contact with the adversary. For example, Hansel’s and Gretel’s lives were threatened by their mother or stepmother, so they were sent into the woods where they met the witch. For women in LMC, the opposition did not always direct them to the adversary, but it did challenge them to think of their call differently. The following excerpts from interviews with Cora Meyer and Rachel Huber illustrate the insidious nature of long-standing gendered hierarchies within the conference.

Cora Meyer tells a story of one of her last meetings with LMC credentialed leaders before the conference withdrew from the denomination. It was a large gathering of approximately 250 people, and, with no empirical data, Cora estimated it was “95% men.” She entered the meeting venue and prepared to settle in for the assembly.

And I went to a table and introduced myself, said hello to the gentlemen that were there. Put my things down, my notebook and my pocketbook, and walked away to go get coffee. And I came back to the table just as the meeting was starting, and someone was sitting in my seat—a man. And the whole table was filled with men. I walked over to the table and realized he was sitting in my seat with my pocketbook. And no one even acknowledged that, “Oh, he sat down in your seat. Sorry, here.” Like, no one even looked at me. And I stood there so baffled. And I said, “Excuse me. I should get my things here.” And I picked up my things from in front of all of the table and went and sat in the back at an empty table.

She laughed at how ridiculous and uncomfortable the experience had been. But then she concluded her story, “What is it? Am I like some kind of pariah that you can't even look at?”
Cora set this story up as “a really minor, little, trivial thing,” but the fact that it sticks in her mind and defines her experience with a large group of LMC credentialed leaders is a significant reflection of the fact that the conference, as a whole, was not able to support its female leaders. The other people in the room, who represented LMC, made Cora, a credentialed woman, feel like a social pariah.

It was not uncommon for women to talk about working harder than men to find a sense of belonging and acceptance in LMC. Rachel Huber had an experience that was similar to Cora’s interaction with LMC leaders. Rachel was invited to be part of a conference committee. As the committee met for the first time, they began by choosing a chairperson. One man went around the table, asking each person (all men), if they were willing to chair the meeting. Several people refused, and then Rachel said it was her turn to be asked, but the man leading the proceedings acted as if she did not exist and continued to the person on the other side of her. Rachel was appalled: “To be totally skipped over as if I was no good!” Years later, after the committee had dissolved, Rachel confronted the person about how he had acted. He was incredulous and had not been consciously aware that he ignored her.

Rachel did not hold anything against that person in particular but realized his actions grew out of a larger organizational framework that did not value women’s leadership abilities as highly as men’s gifts. “I think there's a colossal lack of awareness,” Rachel told me. “Self-awareness but institutional awareness. I'm not angry about it in that I am bitter. I just think it's so sad. It's frustrating, and it's sad.” The residual effect of LMC’s long history of silencing women affected each person differently, but the negative posture toward women in leadership persists within the conference system, and it is those attitudes that continue to hinder people as they pursue leadership opportunities.
Interaction with the Adversary

In a magic tale sequence the protagonist meets with an antagonist who directly opposes the hero’s task, and the hero must struggle against this rival force in order to accomplish the quest. The antagonist takes on visible forms, such as a giant who craves human flesh or a witch with selfish motives. But for people who are called to formal and credentialed leadership roles in progressive Mennonite congregations, the adversaries are often less visible. Sometimes the adversary takes a physical form, such as a congregation collecting paper ballots and directly voting against a specific person as a pastor. But more often the adversity people encountered was unseen. It could have been an undercurrent of opposition to women as church leaders, as people stated earlier. Or the adversarial attitude could have been internal. People who recounted their call narratives repeatedly described how they faced their own internal resistance before they expressed their calling outwardly. Here is one major point where the comparison to the magic tale breaks down. Unlike the two-dimensional characters in the tales, humans are much more complex and repeatedly questioned their calling and the quest they had been sent on.

In the progressive Mennonite context, the interaction with the adversary often happens internally before the individual takes any action, and this was true for men and women I met. Alan Klassen was initially repelled by the idea of pastoral ministry. As a young adult, his mother asked what he would do with his life, and he did not have a clear answer. “My mother said,

43 Vladimir Propp uses the term “villain” to describe one who directly opposes the hero (1968, 27), but Peter Gilet’s use of the term “the adversary” is more pertinent (1998, 56) and less forceful, removing the suggestion of evil or personal malice toward the hero. It also aligns more closely with Jewish theology. The Hebrew ha-satan is transliterated into Greek as ha satanas. It is rendered into English as Satan. The Hebrew and Greek terms, often used with the definite article (ha) mean “the adversary,” that is, one who is adversarial toward God or God’s intentions. Though no one mentioned a spiritual figure opposing their call, the thoughts or actions of those who opposed a call from God, including people’s own internal hesitations, are as important as if they had faced personified adversity. Like ha-satan or ha satanas, the adversary in magic tales personifies the internal resistance and the external hindrances people faced in their response to a call from God.
‘Well, if you can't find a job, why don't you be a minister?’ That was not what Alan was expecting, and then even more surprising conversations occurred.

Within the next 36 hours, my pastor asked me that question, and then one of my best friends did too. And so, three of the most significant people in my life within about a 36-hour period affirmed my call to the ministry. The first thing I did then was run the other way. It took me about a year and a half before I finally said, “Okay Lord, what do you want me to do with my life?” I had a group of four people that sat down with me and helped me discern my call to ministry. And were very affirming. And that's what really launched me into this direction.

From his current vantage point as a full-time pastor, Alan can tell the story of his call, his resistance, and his acceptance after receiving encouragement from people in his life whom he trusted, including some authority figures who knew him well.

Edie Ebersole shared earlier that she was called to overseas missions after time working at a public school. However, before she decided to go that direction, she faced resistance from her family and from her own uncertainty. Edie’s father was not pleased with her Christian pursuits: “He saw me as a black sheep because I was too involved in my church, so he opposed anything spiritual, which was a real obstacle.” She continued, “Besides, we were not allowed to have high school. So, personally I knew that I could never do overseas missions because I didn't have an upper-level education.” Her family’s resistance and her own lack of advanced education made Edie feel like she was not adequate, but others supported her, and she was eventually able to pursue mission work.

Lydia Lefever was part of the Leadership Team in her congregation, and each member of the team was asked to do a sermon. She was so nervous she could not sit still the morning she was to preach. But, she admitted, “after a while it got to be kind of fun. And I did enjoy it after X number of years. This is my personal feeling. I think God calls us to do something we enjoy to do. Because I think if I wouldn't enjoy what I'm doing, then, it would not be a very good feeling.
between me and God.” Despite her initial resistance, the opportunity Lydia had changed her perspective on her own abilities and created a deeper connection to God as she learned to enjoy what God was confident she could do.

**Interaction with the Helper**

One characteristic of magic tales is that no hero achieves the end goal without aid, and this was an oft-repeated theme within all the stories I heard about how Mennonite individuals felt called. Propp explains how the hero always receives a magical agent or meets a helper that is essential for completing the task at hand (1968, 39). In magic tales, helpers can take the form of fairy godmothers, giants, dwarves, and others who possess supernatural powers. Among people in Mennonite congregations, helpers took the forms of children, friends, mentors, partners, parents, pastors, professors, supervisors, strangers, and many others who encountered these individuals and left an impression upon them with a positive result. Each individual who discussed receiving a call also mentioned numerous individuals who encouraged and aided in answering the call, and I will present a few examples below.

Female pastors in LMC were often not acknowledged as pastors, and their presence was overlooked even more during the few years that LMC was preparing to withdraw from MC USA. Melody Wiebe referred to Tanner as an ally because he not only supported her exploration of pastoring, but he actively spoke up to remind others that Melody was a pastor, and to acknowledge that women can be pastors. “And that's been really good for me,” Melody commented, “because I don't want to have to speak up and say about myself, ‘Oh, by the way, I'm also the pastor.’” Cora Meyer named specific pastors who had aided in developing her and her husband as leaders. Cora described her husband as “gifted for leadership,” and recognized that they worked well together in various church positions. She reflected upon how one pastor
“continued to just help open doors for both [my husband] and I to experience different leadership roles.” Especially in the church, it was important for men and women to have mentors or leaders who recognized their talents and provided an arena for them to contribute to the work that was happening.

Although I talked to most people after they had answered a personal and formal call to church ministry, most of them would not have responded to that call if they had not seen other people, especially women, embodying the type of leader they felt called to be. Since not every person had a visible example of women using their gifts, some women delayed responding to a call until later in life, after they had met others who were doing the type of work they wanted to do. Susanna Kreider’s journey to seminary and chaplaincy was a long process. One of her main supporters was a female pastor she met later in life. Susanna said, “I saw her modeling what it was to be a woman in leadership.” Before that interaction, Susanna wanted to accept a woman as a pastor, but she struggled with the idea because it did not fit into her world of experience. However, her comfort level changed only after being mentored by a woman pastor.

Family members could be substantial sources of encouragement for people interested in church ministry. Amy Watson said that her husband enjoys studying the Bible, but he’s also very good at listening to her if she challenges a particular way of interpreting the Bible. He has encouraged her to listen to God’s spirit within her as she studies the Bible. Although Amy is not in formal church ministry, her husband’s interactions with her reveal that he respects her spiritual insight, which is what happens in other marriage partnerships where husbands support their wives in their leadership roles. Pearl Gehman spoke of her husband’s reaction as she explored church leadership roles: “I don’t think he was ever threatened by me. Quite the opposite, you
know, he was very encouraging and affirming.” In each of these instances, family members supported women as they violated the conventions of male-only leadership.

Despite the adversities, the tears, the rejections, and the relational conflicts people experienced, they continued to pursue their call, and, when they did, they encountered people who were openly grateful for their work. Tanner Wiebe mentioned that he thinks it is important for young girls to know that Melody is a pastor. Melody piped in to say that during a pastoral appreciation Sunday, one child spoke up to say she loves Melody.44 “That was like the best moment ever! That was so sweet,” Melody laughed. Expressing thankfulness to others is mutually beneficial. Melody was buoyed by the girl’s gratitude, but Melody was also an inspiration to the girl, making her feel loved and affirmed as a child. Colette Thiessen knew that it was unusual for people to be recognized regularly for their work, but one thing she appreciated about her congregation was the gratitude people expressed: “I do get a lot of words of affirmation from people. People are very, very kind to me as far as knowing that it took a lot of work to pull this off. That’s a nice place to work, as far as having a job where you get affirmed pretty regularly.” The regular encouragement reminded people that they had been called to their role, and that members of the community continued to affirm their calling.

Altered Status

The final function of magic tales is the hero’s change in status after the journey to another realm, which parallels the ways Mennonites embrace their call from God and take action based upon that call. Gilet uses the term “the Other World” to refer to the new situation the hero enters as the tale progresses. He then offers the following lesson from these tales: “the effect of their

44 The United States recognizes Clergy Appreciation Day on the second Sunday in October, which is set aside as Clergy Appreciation Month. Not every congregation takes this time to express gratitude to their pastors and staff members, but many of them do.
narrative is not to integrate the normal and the other in any permanent way. It is rather to transform the normal by an intrusion of the Other” (Gilet 1998, 133). This statement is an apt description of the changes wrought within Mennonite congregations and organizations when God calls individuals who seem to be unlikely candidates for pastoral ministry, due to institutional restrictions or other factors. However, that call and the journey people take to answer that call “transform the normal” so that new perspectives are brought into the church and former practices and regulations are reinterpreted to welcome more people as church leaders.

Those who are called by God to specific roles change their personhood and status in the church as they enter a new phase of belonging. People who accept their call also accept themselves as people capable of enacting the call that God gave them, even though they initially hesitated and doubted their own abilities. After acting upon the call, they become church leaders in some capacity, which changes their status within the congregation, and they belong as leaders, no longer as lay members. Gilet compares folk tales to initiation rituals, which often invert the normal order of society and return the initiand home with a new status (1998, 144–47). Arnold van Gennep’s classic work on rites of passage simplified the initiation ritual into three phases: a separation, a liminal state, and then aggregation into the community in a new state (1960). These phases are similar to the call process Mennonite leaders experience.

For people who receive a specific call, the phases of this rite can be both internal and external. Once they recognize a call, they are separated from others who have not received a call to that specific role, and they enter a liminal phase. In that middle ground, they must decide whether or not to accept the call for their life or ignore it. Sometimes the liminal phase involves preparation such as seminary education or chaplaincy training. The process of discernment and instruction can last for years, even decades.
Once the preparation period is complete, the person enters into a figurative community of those who respond to the call they have received. For individuals pursuing pastoral ministry, there may be rituals involved that welcome a person as a pastor in a congregation. Other rituals might confer a new title upon a person, such as a deacon or chaplain. Victor Turner says that rituals mark social transitions and are transformative for the person in the new position. In contrast, ceremonies are confirmatory and are designed to mark a person’s social state (Turner 1967, 95). For those who choose to be licensed by a conference, the credentialing service serves as the ceremony designating a person’s confirmation by the congregation and conference. Those who are licensed toward ordination will have a second ceremony later to mark their ordination, once the probationary period has passed, and they decide that is what they want to do. In either case, credentials, whether a license or ordination, confirm that a person has been transformed from a lay member of the church to a recognized leader within a specific congregation and denomination. However, like baptism in the Anabaptist tradition, the credentialing ceremony is an outward manifestation of what has already inwardly taken place, and it could not have happened if the person had not undergone the quest of hearing, accepting, and enacting the call from God which brought about internal transformation and led to a social transformation.

**Eastland Mennonite Church: A Case Study**

In this section, I analyze one specific congregation as a case study of an environment where people were able to enact their call, form positive relationships with other staff members, and discover that they fit well in the congregation and in their role. In order to understand how their sense of call is supported, I will give some detail about the working relationships among staff members. Their responses reveal that when a person is called, the individual and the church must find the right fit for that person to enact the calling. For the current staff members, Eastland
Mennonite Church (EMC), a semi-rural congregation with an average attendance of 200 people, has been a good fit for them. I will introduce the staff members of EMC, discuss their varied ideas of call in their roles, and then examine how the staff members and congregants find their fit in the congregational environment.

There were five people on staff when I attended the congregation for 13 months between October 2018 and October 2019. Nate Evans was the Lead Pastor and had been at Eastland Mennonite Church just long enough to feel established in his role. Kathy Denlinger, the church’s Administrator, felt like she had a good understanding of the congregation and knew how to care for the needs of both the building and the people. Lindsey Kane, the Associate Pastor of Worship, had one of the longest tenures in leadership among the EMC staff. Beth Keener, Minister of Congregational Care, and Colette Thiessen, Director of Children and Youth, both filled part-time roles and had other careers before working at Eastland. Nate, Lindsey, and Beth were credentialed within the Mennonite church. Each person on staff was considered a member of an extended pastoral team, whether or not they were credentialed or had “pastor” in their title. They did not make distinctions among themselves because they recognized that each person was a good fit for their role and for the congregation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eastland Mennonite Church Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kathy Denlinger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate Evans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey Kane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth Keener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colette Thiessen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

45 In line with their credentials, each person’s title reflects their credentialed status. Those who were licensed or ordained as pastors have “pastor” in their formal title. Beth was licensed for a specific ministry within the congregation so her title of “Minister” reflects her credentials. Colette and Kathy are not credentialed.
Each staff member at EMC taught me something different about what it means to be called in an ecclesiastical context that recognizes a personal call and an institutional call. While interviews with other credentialed Mennonites had introduced me to the sequence of call narratives, I realized that not everyone on the church staff sensed a personal call, and, for those who did, the call often came in different ways. Nate felt drawn to pastoring, but he did not talk about a clear personal call. I did notice that Nate put a lot of effort into his sermons and his interactions with the congregation. It took work to fulfill the calling he had received. Nate, Lindsey, and Kathy were placed in their current roles mainly due to other people’s prompting. For them, the call of the community was greater than their individual sense of call, and they displayed the importance of the communal call. Colette noticed how her gifts enhanced her work at the church, but she did not find her vocational calling in church work. Colette demonstrated that there can be a clear distinction between a general call to participate in God’s mission and a specific call to a religious vocation. Lastly, Beth echoed some of the elements that were present in other people’s call narratives, and she clarified the importance of continual affirmation even while people are living out their call. While people need encouragement to pursue a call, they must also have ongoing support in order to sustain the work to which they are called.

*Nate Evans*

Nate Evans has an open and honest approach to preaching and appears to be at ease in addressing the congregation. He melds scripture with philosophical works, early church theologians, contemporary American culture, and his own life experiences. Nate presents the material in a way that most people can understand, and it is clear that he spends a significant time studying in order to prepare each sermon. As the Lead Pastor and main preaching pastor, Nate Evans is the most recognizable voice of the congregation. However, he did not initially
intend to be a pastor. He was pursuing another career when he started taking seminary classes for his own personal enrichment, owing to what he calls his “growing interest in theology.” Through those studies, he began to form relationships with some people in Atlantic Coast Conference, and that led to a phone call asking if he would be interested in pastoring a small church for a short time. Nate discovered that he enjoyed pastoring. A few years went by, and he eventually moved to Eastland Mennonite Church where he could expand his pastoral responsibilities. Nate’s experiences reveal two things about the call: other people can lead a person into church ministry and enacting a call takes work.

Nate never told me that he felt “called,” nor did he give a clear explanation of his path toward pastoral leadership. Despite that, I discovered elements of the call narrative throughout our conversation. He did not feel pushed to go to seminary, but he felt drawn to it, which matches the definition Lou Groff gave when I asked him to define a calling. The people Nate met through his seminary courses affirmed his leadership abilities, even to the point of inviting him to pastor a congregation. The phone call that led Nate to pastor a small congregation was the first step where another person directed Nate to formal church ministry. From there, he completed the Ministerial Leadership Information process through ACC and MC USA, and was affirmed by the conference as a pastor. These next steps indicated that the Mennonite institutions accepted him as a pastor and were willing to call him to a pastoral position. Nate’s journey to becoming a pastor included a lot external prompting, and Nate agrees that they led him into something he enjoys doing.

Being called does not mean that all the work becomes effortless. Instead, each person has to labor to enact their call. Nate admitted that he was nervous about coming to EMC. It was not easy to transition to a new and larger congregation, but it has been a good place for him. He is
able to work with a team of people and he also gets a lot of time to preach. When he listed pastoral tasks that were high priorities for him, Nate immediately stated: “Preaching and teaching. I see that as a very high priority.” He turned preaching into a multimodal experience. It was not uncommon for him to use video segments, audio clips, or physical demonstrations to illustrate a point in his sermons. Of course, all of these extra elements took time, but Nate thought the effort was worthwhile. People in the congregation also recognized his preaching gifts. Colette said that her teenage children enjoy Nate’s preaching. She explained, “His sermons are so relatable.” It is clear that being called and having a gift required work. Pastors still had to put time into forming good relationships with people and into preparing their sermons if they wanted to do them well. The congregants at EMC were pleased with Nate’s efforts and could understand his messages. Having a proclivity toward a certain task does not mean it is effortless. Even though I did not hear his full call narrative, I can see how Nate was drawn to his studies, affirmed by others, questioned his own abilities, and has found a place where he can use his pastoral gifts in a way that is satisfactory to him and to the congregation.

Lindsey Kane

Lindsey Kane was one person who did not give any indication that God had called her to her work, but it was clear that a number of people had affirmed her position in the congregation, even bringing her to EMC when she was not expecting to work in a church. For Lindsey, the communal call was more important than an internal call. As the Associate Pastor of Worship at Eastland Mennonite Church, Lindsey is responsible for everything from organizing musicians and audio-visual technicians to sharpening pencils and refilling the crayons for children’s worksheets. She has a background in music. As she said, “that's kind of what I do.” Therefore, when a member of EMC heard her playing music at an event out of the area, he encouraged her
to apply for the job that had just opened at EMC. Lindsey talked to her husband about the job. She continued, “And when my husband read the job description, he's like ‘They wrote this about you.’” Through the encouragement from her husband, the affirmation of the church member, and the acceptance from the congregation and conference, Lindsey continues in her role as an associate pastor.

When Lindsey talked about her work at EMC, she spoke about the positive aspects of receiving a communal call. She met people who were willing and eager to have her use her gifts in a pastoring role. Her experiences were striking because they were so different from the institutional hindrances and negative personal interactions many women pastors had faced in LMC. Lindsey and her husband did not come from Anabaptist backgrounds, and they joined a Mennonite church as adults. For this reason, she did not have some of the adverse prejudices that LMC women pastors had to overcome in order to be pastors. Lindsey’s whole attitude was summed up in her words: “that’s kind of what I do.” She repeated that phrase several times in our conversation, and it was clear that she was confident in her training as a musician and did not see any reason why she could not be a pastor. Since the church’s call was so strong and was affirmed by Lindsey’s husband, she did not have to wrestle with or question an internal call. In her case, the communal call was a positive and fulfilling experience.

**Kathy Denlinger**

“Have you seen Lindsey’s office?” Kathy Denlinger asked me. I had not. “It is total chaos. Total chaos.” Clearly Kathy was incredulous that anyone could work under such hazardous conditions. Despite the disheveled appearance of Lindsey’s office, Kathy had great respect for her and recognized Lindsey’s creativity and musical talents and ability to organize people each Sunday, which was done differently from the ways in which Kathy coordinated
other events at church. As the church Administrator, Kathy handled large and small issues that arose weekly in the congregation. But she said her main job was to act upon what she observed in the building or among people. She monitored the church and congregation for everything from a malfunctioning HVAC unit to an outgoing person who suddenly seemed reserved. “It's just a matter of noticing everything around you related to people, the building, the programs,” Kathy said to sum up her work. Kathy helped me understand the underpinnings and inner workings of the congregation. Most of her knowledge is not directly included in this work, but her insights helped me understand who to connect with in the congregation, and she enhanced the way I experienced Eastland Mennonite Church.

While Kathy cares for the congregation and the building, she is grateful for support from people in the congregation. She is not credentialed for her work at EMC, and she did not go through any institutional affirmation process for her role beyond the standard job interview procedure. Kathy did not talk about being called, but she did talk about how others encouraged her to apply for the job and how she had been continually affirmed in her work. She has occasionally found notes or flowers on her desk. At other times, people will personally thank her for the work she is doing. Kathy told me, “I've always felt appreciated by the congregation. I feel like people express their appreciation to me a lot. That has been very encouraging.” She treasures the support she receives, and her experience reveals that affirmations are important whether or not a person feels called to their role.

Colette Thiessen

In the beginning of this chapter, I used Colette Thiessen as an example of a person who said she felt called to ministry, but that it did not mean she was called to a ministry vocation. She declared, “I do feel like there are people who are called to ministry. I never felt that way.”
Colette defined herself primarily as a teacher, and she realized that she brought her teaching abilities to her role as the Director of Children and Youth. As she expressed to me, “My vocational calling is teaching, and I’m able to use that plus my love for ministry. My vocational gifts plus my love for ministry blend together very well for a job here.” She told me that she was good at working with kids, and she realized that she could quickly come up with a lesson plan because she had a repertoire of activities in mind. Her goal at church was not only to keep kids busy, for she genuinely cared about them. “I really value connections with people,” Colette emphasized. “And I really value connections with kids. I'm not just trying to deliver a lesson. I really want to get to know these kids, and I think I do that pretty easily.” Colette valued relationships with people of all ages, from the kids to the adults. That desire led her to take the job at EMC, but it was not something she thought she would do until retirement.

Colette underscored the difference between a general call to ministry and a specific vocational call to ministry. It was possible, Colette believed, for her to be called to her work with children and youth in the church without having received “the call.” She joined other volunteers and staff members like Kathy, who was not credentialed, in helping to run programs at the church and serving members of the congregation. Colette believed that this was a general call to ministry for each person to serve others and form those positive relationships. She was clear that people like Beth were called to ministry as a vocation, but it was not something that she wanted to spend her life doing. Her vocational work lay within the elementary education system.

Part of what I think makes the team at Eastland work well together is that they all desire to have good connections with people, as Colette mentioned. They are not only doing the job because they get paid or because they are good at it. They want the music, the sermons, the children’s programming, the Sunday school lessons, youth events, and everything else they do to
make people feel connected to one another and to enhance people’s connections to God. They have varying success with their endeavors because not each person who attends the congregation feels a sense of belonging. What is comfortable for the staff members may not resonate with another person. However, this disconnect does not detract from the gifts the staff members display. Rather, it leaves room for people to use their gifts in other congregations.

**Beth Keener**

Beth Keener offered a different perspective on the call by highlighting the need for continual support, even while she is enacting her call. Beth had a different and unrelated job before becoming the Minister of Congregational Care at EMC. Beth began working at the church because they were looking to fill an empty position. Like most people on staff, Beth did not say that she felt called to the role, but she did receive external and internal affirmation for the job. Beth said that she and her husband both thought she would do well in the role, and another friend at church also encouraged Beth to apply for the job. However, it did not seem right for the time, so she refused. The position went unfilled, and Beth and her husband considered it again. This time, Beth agreed to start working at EMC. She told me, “I never anticipated working in the church. That was never a dream of mine. It was just the right position at the right time for me. So, I don't have training in this. Like actual training. I had lots of experience. It fits very naturally with my gifts.” She can see how she has the abilities to do the job, but there are also times where she feels inadequate and wonders if she should have more training.

When Beth encounters those insecurities, she recalls the affirming words from a former pastor who had become like a mentor to her. Beth explained how those interactions have strengthened her: “And she has been very helpful for me in saying, ‘Beth, you were called at this time in this place. That’s what you carry to move forward. If you believe that that's what you
were called to be here, at this time and place, then you trust and you move forward.’ And that's the legitimacy. So, she's been helpful. And then she also has been affirmative over my instincts of what I have said.” Beth has learned that most times, her instincts serve her well, and her prior interpersonal experience has aided her work at EMC. Beth said her husband also continues to support her and help her process difficult situations she encounters. Through my interactions with Beth, I learned that affirmation is necessary even after a person receives a call, overcomes obstacles, and steps into the role. While Beth recognized her work is a natural fit for her gifts, challenges still arise, and those who are called and those who are working in church ministry need continued encouragement in order to persevere in their ministry role.

**Finding a Fit**

The way Eastland staff members fit their role is a way of expanding the conversation about belonging and considering how people are well suited to a certain environment. Fitting in is not equivalent to belonging because belonging must be personally felt so that an individual internally senses acceptance, and belonging also usually entails acceptance from a particular group. Fit is related to environmental or institutional conditions, while belonging is a sensation. Belonging is something individuals feel internally, while fit is something that others attempt to evaluate externally. For example, a person could fit the qualifications for a pastoral role but feel like they do not belong among the other people in that context. Having a good fit means that a person is aligned with the environment, but it is an environment comprised of and shaped by individuals. When the environment changes, people who are not able or willing to adapt leave and find another group. Fit can help to explain why individuals leave congregations and why conferences like LMC leave their denominations, like MC USA, and seek to form new alliances. Fit refers to the way an individual aligns with the identity of the group, such as the way people
told me they attended EMC because they formed personal friendships with like-minded peers. Fitting in also happens when an individual’s talents align with the needs of the group, like the way Nate said his gifts for preaching and teaching fit the congregation’s desire for a teaching pastor. The condition of the congregation made it a good fit for Nate. The role was a good fit, but it took some time before he sensed that he fully belonged in the congregation.

Fit and belonging are correlated because the individual and the group influence each other. Sociologist Samuel Stroope examined the connection between an individual’s beliefs and a group’s beliefs and noticed there was a greater sense of belonging when the beliefs were closely aligned (2011, 580–82). Stroope also noted that Christian congregations with higher belief-unity tended to polarize people’s sense of belonging, but in congregations with lower belief-unity, people’s sense of belonging was more uniform, though belonging was still at a lower level than high belief-unity churches (2011, 582). These findings demonstrate that individual beliefs play a role in supporting one’s sense of belonging within a group (Stroope 2011, 583). By finding a group with similar beliefs, a person is more likely to feel like they fit in the group, which could enhance their sense of belonging. To expand upon this point, individuals can influence the level of belonging that they and others experience within a group. As more like-minded people join a group because they think they fit the ideas of the group, they bolster shared belief as a criterion for belonging. If people do not think their beliefs fit in the group, they will have a greater experience of nonbelonging. Each member of a group affects the entire organism.

It is difficult to measure fit, especially because, within religious groups, fit is often a subjective decision based on a person’s experiences. In progressive Mennonite settings, both the pastor and congregation give input into their relationship with each other. MC USA promotes the
use of the Ministerial Leadership Information process (MLI), a long vetting practice. During that
course of preparation, potential pastors complete an MLI form and, out of twenty pastoral tasks,
choose the ones they consider to be top priority. Congregations also rate their priorities. “And it's
not necessarily that you're looking for a one-to-one match,” Nate Evans reflected. “But you're
looking for sort of overlap and also to start the conversation.” Seeking a fit between pastor and
congregation is seeking to understand where both overlap. Martin Long began his current
pastorate at a congregation that had recently undergone a lot of transition. He explains why he
took the position: “And [I] just felt drawn to this congregation. Felt like kind of the stuff that
they were dealing with were things that I felt like I could work with.” He was honest with them
about his own beliefs and priorities, and the congregation accepted him as readily as he accepted
them. Sometimes the factors that promoted fitting in were not tied to theology, but were personal
and practical.

Kelly Schwartzentruber told me that congregations can have specific characteristics that,
in some ways, mimic human personality types. Kelly did an activity where she typed her
congregation according to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The practice challenged her to “start
thinking of the congregation as a whole as an individual, almost like having certain tendencies
and roles that they fill in.” Just as with human personalities, there can sometimes be conflicts
between or within congregations when personality types collide. I remember hearing a pastor tell
a group of people that there are not necessarily bad pastors or bad congregations, but rather bad
matches between pastors and congregations. However, a congregation that agrees to hire a pastor
cannot just swipe left as if the match was made on Tinder and then magically get a new pastor.
The process is much more complicated than that, involving a person’s individual call to be a
pastor, and then a vetting process to be credentialed as a pastor (a denominational call), and then a candidating process to be hired (a congregational call).

Even with all of the work to ensure a good match between pastor and congregation, there are times when they are not aligned. Staff members at EMC helped me understand fit better by describing an experience with a former pastor, Carl, who created some tension within the congregation. Kathy Denlinger, Eastland’s Administrator, spoke hesitantly, “We definitely had some struggles with the lead pastor. It just did not mesh with this congregation at all.” Each staff member mentioned something about the tensions the congregation encountered with the former lead pastor. Since Carl was no longer present, I did not get his point of view, but I did notice that each staff person had a similar view of his work style.

I did not ask questions about the past, but, when I asked each person about their present role and connections to the congregation, they all had very positive responses and contrasted the present situation to the difficulties of the past. Beth Keener elaborated on the “struggles” Kathy referenced regarding the former pastor: “I wouldn't say he really did anything controversial other than he underperformed. And the staff who were here covered for his underperformance.” Lindsey Kane worked closely with the former pastor and was one of the people who took on extra work during his era. She tried to explain the dynamics: “He had never been part of a team before. And so, we just had to run around picking up after him. It just wasn't a good fit for here. He's probably a great solo pastor of a small church. So, it just didn't work.” What I appreciated about Lindsey’s comment was that, even as she was discussing the chaos he created among the staff and eventually in the congregation, she was also aware of his gifts and that he might work more comfortably as the solo pastor of a smaller church. She did not question his calling but recognized that someone who is called does not fit in every congregation. Her insights about how
the former lead pastor fit were tied directly to the fact that he was not working in a place where his gifts were aligned with his position.

The staff dynamics at Eastland Mennonite Church shifted after Carl left the congregation. Nate Evans was eventually hired as the lead pastor, and he entered with a different view of how the lead pastor should interact with the staff: “I feel a little weird about the word ‘leading’ the staff because I think for the most part what I do is give them permission to do the things they’re good at. Like, ‘Yeah do that. That's a good thing.’” Nate was confident in his own work, and also recognized the talents of the people on staff, some of whom had been running the church long before he came. He was willing to cooperate with and contribute to what was already happening in the congregation. He did not feel the need to dominate the other staff members but rather empowered them to use their gifts. He realized that this form of leadership freed him to have more time for his own work. By recognizing the gifts of those around them and having their own gifts validated, each staff member at EMC felt empowered to do their work in a way where they did not feel controlled by others. The current staff members function well together because they have created a mutually symbiotic environment.

Fit can refer to the external factors or structures that condition belonging, but it is also a way for an outsider to evaluate belonging. For example, the staff members at Eastland Mennonite Church could not say if Carl experienced belonging. Therefore, they could not speak in terms of belonging. However, from their external perspective, they could say that Carl did not fit in with the staff. Even though Carl was vetted and hired by the congregation and belonged as their pastor, his working style did not fit the team that existed at Eastland.

The staff at Eastland Mennonite Church fit well together as a team because each person is working in areas where they can use their gifts, but they are all willing to put in effort to make
things go smoothly. They all care about the congregation, as individuals and as a whole, in a way that makes them deeply invested in what they do for the sake of the congregation. In addition to having a good fit between staff members, people consistently told me that they thought Nate, as lead pastor, fit the congregation very well. Les Peters, who attends EMC, said, “I've seen so many pastors, and he’s way ahead of many. We are blessed.” Rosanna Peters agreed. Nate also acknowledged the reciprocal fit between himself, as pastor, and the congregation. He admitted, “I feel like this is a congregation where I can be my authentic theological self. Like I can just say, ‘This is how I read scripture, and this is what I think it might mean for how we live our lives today.’ And I'm not too far out of sync with the center of the congregation.” In a church context, fit may mean that people share similar values, have a similar congregational vision, prioritize specific theological ideas, or desire to live in the community in similar ways. With pastors and congregations, there may be a plethora of congregations where a pastor fits, or where values are in alignment. But belonging happens when a pastor is placed within one of those congregations, forms relationships, understands the rhythm of that congregation, and feels accepted.

People at EMC expressed general satisfaction with the congregation as a whole and thought that it was a good fit for them at present. However, many people had come from other congregations and were aware that individuals shifted congregations when the environment changed and they no longer fit in the same way. That is, they adapted by searching for a new congregation. In reference to EMC, Sofía Miller told me that her family feels “incredibly supported there,” in a way that she had never experienced in other Mennonite congregations. Kathy Denlinger appreciated the commitment everyone had to the congregation, even though it was a diverse group: “I think we're just a congregation that kind of recognizes that we don't all think alike, but that doesn't mean we have to split.” Several other people reiterated Kathy’s
comment and were grateful for the way people were willing to discuss difficult issues and situations with one another. Clint Miller said, “I enjoy Sunday school for the authenticity of people.” Even though he did not unpack that statement, I knew what he meant, especially because he had mentioned earlier that he liked Eastland because he did not feel judged, as he had felt at other Mennonite churches. I had attended his Sunday school class and heard people discussing everything from job-related struggles to children dealing with drug addiction to health concerns. By authentic, I believe he meant that people were not trying to hide the imperfections in their lives, but rather were willing to seek insights from the group.

Eastland congregants reflected what people said in other congregations where they felt welcomed by the people in the congregation, they thought everyone was friendly, and they felt at home among the people. If every congregation says this, then why are there so many different congregations with so much diversity among them? Fit. Each person I met must have found a congregation that fit them well. Stroope makes the argument that belonging is related to beliefs within religious groups. Abby Day argues that belonging goes beyond belief and is tied to social and cultural identities among Anglicans in Great Britain (2011, 48).

By focusing on how people fit in groups, I consider how belonging is related to the way gifts align with the needs and priorities of a congregation. Beth Keener spoke out of her experience as Minister of Congregational Care: “I think this church does very well at extending care to one another who want to be a part of the church. And why I say it that way is there are some people who are on the fringes who wouldn't say that they receive care.” Beth was aware that each person had a different experience within the same congregation. Even though the

---

46 During my time at Eastland, I spent at least one week, usually several weeks, in each adult Sunday school class. Visiting the Sunday school classes gave me the opportunity to get to talk to people on a personal level, and they could also learn about me. It was always hard to leave one class and move to another because it felt like there was a good connection with each group.
congregation may have a specific center, there were also people on the peripheries. The staff might do well at meeting the needs at the center of the congregation, but Beth’s comment expresses the fact that the staff cannot do everything. Other people in the congregation shape the experience each person has. As the examples above demonstrate, people found strength in the other human connections around them. It takes a congregation, not just the staff, to create a good fit for people within a church.

The reality of belonging is that it is complex because it is a combination of individual identities and group identities, both of which shift and change according to the surrounding social milieu. When those identities become too unbalanced, people either push the group to change in a way that satisfies the majority of people, or they leave the group in search of another congregation or conference where they fit better. In this way, belonging always constitutes non-belonging because identities are never static.

**Contributing Gifts**

Now that I have zoomed in on one congregation, I want to zoom out again and revisit the way that a person’s call intersects with their gifts, which I analyzed in chapter 3. In an interview, Lou Groff mentioned that a female pastor gave some of the best sermons he had ever heard. During that same part of our conversation, he mentioned that a young Mennonite male had given at least one of the top 10 sermons on Lou’s hypothetical list. Lou discussed how gifted Matt was as a speaker. When I questioned him further, Lou decided that Matt, like the female pastors, probably had to work harder than other men to have his gifts be accepted because he was an openly gay male. Lou considered that Matt probably thought “every sermon has to be a slam-dunk because he knows that, at any point, he could be under the microscope.” Lou focused primarily on Matt’s speaking gifts. From there, Lou jumped from discussing gifts to expressing a
certainty that Matt was called. Based on Matt’s gifts, Lou said, “He would have to convince me in major ways that he's not called because I think he would be lying.” Lou was aware that the conference might not accept Matt’s personal calling, but there was no doubt in Lou’s mind that Matt was called by God and had gifts to enact that calling. Lou’s example highlights the intersection between gifts and calling. Not everyone who has a particular set of gifts is called to fill a certain role, but it is clear that those who are called by God are given gifts for that work.

When the call is restricted by one characteristic, such as gender, there is not space to explore the call, and both individuals and the church community are harmed by trying to control who God calls and how God calls people. Gifts are given by God and so it is a power that humans cannot control, which can be disconcerting. Humans do have power to limit the exercise of people’s gifts, and the Mennonite church has exercised that restrictive power. There are many factors that limit gifts, not just intentional human actions. Some other factors that constrain gifts include education, geography, physical ability, and financial resources. However, if roles are opened to people who are called and who have gifts, instead of limiting roles by gender or other factors, then all individuals become empowered because each one can fulfill their calling from God. Even those who do not sense a call can use their gifts, if they are not restricted due to a specific factor. Since the idea is that all people have a talent, then each person has something to contribute to the life of the church, whether they are on stage or behind the scenes. That means each person can hold some power within the institution.

Not everyone who has gifts is called, and not everyone who senses a call takes time to hone their gifts. Colette Thiessen is a gifted teacher, but she does not feel called to make children’s ministry her vocation. Not every person who is called to be a pastor takes time to refine the skills needed for pastoral ministry. It is also possible for people to be called to the
same vocation and to have different gifts. Pastoring requires people to perform a variety of roles, including teaching, preaching, administration, funeral planning, visitation, vision planning, greeting new attendees, budgeting, and many other tasks. It is very rare that one person does everything well, which is why it is important for pastors to recognize their gifts and use them and also notice their weaknesses and find people who have gifts in those areas to support the work in the church. When I began my fieldwork, I was attracted to Eastland Mennonite Church because it had a sizeable staff, and I wanted to be able to study the relational dynamics among the staff. I was not sure what I would find, but I met a group of talented individuals who, though different, were committed to working together for a greater purpose in the congregation.
Chapter 5
Cutting Horns or Catching Foxes: The Adaptability of (Biblical) Hermeneutics for an Interpretive Community of Practice

“Yes’m,” The Misfit said as if he agreed. “Jesus thrown everything off balance.”

—Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find”

Introduction: Off Balance

When I met Susanna Kreider, she acknowledged that it had taken a lot of time and effort to come to the place where she was ready to be ordained as a chaplain. She was raised in a home where she did not always feel supported and nurtured, though it was a happy home overall. Like many of the Mennonite families around her, women did not hold any position of authority over men, and, as a child, Susanna believed that the gendered divisions were part of God’s design for creation. As an adult, she said, she slowly became aware of areas in her life where she was not handling certain situations in the best way, and she decided to seek assistance from a professional therapist. The therapy sessions increased her self-awareness, but they also had the unanticipated result of changing her theology. Susanna reported: “And through therapy, I did a lot of change of seeing myself through God's eyes.” It was hard, but she discovered: “I loved who I was getting to become. I really felt like, ‘I love me! I'm starting to love who I am.’ The verse that comes to my mind is ‘I came to give you life, and to give it abundantly.’ So I really felt like I was starting to experience a whole life. Like, life is good. And understanding God

---

48 John 10:10
through new eyes.” For Susanna, her increased self-assurance was directly related to a different, more positive interpretation of God.⁴⁹ She told me that her understanding of God had changed, and that understanding led to a more confident view of herself.

I interviewed Susanna early in my fieldwork, and I did not realize at that point how often the theme of self-awareness would arise in conversations. Even more surprising was that the progressive Mennonites I met equated their greater knowledge of themselves with a transformed understanding of God. Through people’s personal narratives, I also recognized that ideas of the Bible and biblical hermeneutics played a significant role in how Mennonites understood God’s interactions with humanity. In a focus group conversation halfway through my fieldwork, I asked people to tell me why women could not be pastors, according to what they had learned in Mennonite churches. The answers were filled with biblical quotations. When I followed by asking for reasons why women could be pastors, the group participants responded with many of the same Bible verses and then added others. I had expected some scriptures to enter into the conversation, but I was not prepared for how much the topic of biblical hermeneutics would dominate the group’s discussion, as participants offered either liberating interpretations or contextualized explanations of passages that had once been used to restrict women.

The foray into biblical hermeneutics in our group conversation clarified that progressive Mennonites also engage in hermeneutics of the community, whereby they continually reinterpret the practices and positions of their religious fellowships. Just as Mennonites had various ways of explaining biblical passages, they had multiple ideas of how community members should interact with one another and how they should enact their faith, and they often draw from the Bible to

⁴⁹ Through interviews and observations, God was primarily defined as a powerful sentient and relational being who would interact with individuals and groups. Mennonites evinced a Trinitarian understanding of the divine as God transcendent, God incarnate in Jesus, and God manifested in the Holy Spirit. Exceptions to this understanding of God are noted in the text.
support their practices. For Anabaptists, as heirs of the Protestant Reformation, the Bible and the community of faith are foundational to shaping Mennonite religious identity, as I explained in chapter 1. There is no consensus on how either should be interpreted or applied, but it is clear that how the Bible and the community are interpreted affects the way individuals belong within Mennonite contexts.

**Interpretation and Belonging**

In this chapter, I demonstrate that different interpretations of the Bible affect how Mennonites envision their community and how they practice their faith differently. Other researchers have noted how conflicts reveal the variable nature of Mennonite communities, but their studies focus mostly on organizational changes or the interpretive activity of Mennonites in contrast to American society. Historian Steve Nolt does consider how two competing paradigms of biblical hermeneutics affect Mennonites’ views of life insurance (1998). However, social scientists rarely include this emphasis on biblical hermeneutics. This chapter reveals how interpreting the Bible affects the ways in which individuals enact their faith and relate to Mennonite groups. As participants in interpretive communities of practice, Mennonites negotiate their views of biblical hermeneutics, church polity, and individual practices in conjunction with others in their community.

Mennonites’ interpretive practices related to theology influence their sense of belonging within the church. These acts of interpretation are interconnected, such that theological ideas affect the church’s polity. The polity impacts an individual’s sense of belonging, and the idea of belonging contributes to how people understand themselves in relation to God. How people understand and relate to God informs their theology. As seen above, Susanna Kreider evinced this interconnected loop between interpretation and belonging when she talked about how she
experienced a greater sense of belonging to God as she gained more confidence in herself. With this new perspective, she also began working as a chaplain, answering a call from God. She found that she was able to belong as a Christian leader within her community, something she had not thought possible earlier in life at a time when her own theology and church polity placed restrictions on women as spiritual leaders.

Belonging is an interpretive process. It is an interpretation of one’s place in the community, and the community’s interpretation of who can belong within its ranks. Since communities of practice are continually shifting due to different interpretations, belonging becomes a fluid process. The process of interpretation creates alternative forms of knowledge, and, for interpretive communities of practice, this knowledge is enacted in particular ways. Thus, new interpretive communities of practice are formed while the remnant communities continue to hold on to the traditional interpretation. This disjuncture can cause nonbelonging for people, and alternative forms of interpretation can lead to alternative communities for belonging. There is a continual movement between belonging and nonbelonging. When some progressive Mennonites decided to ordain women, this change opened space for people who had advocated for women in leadership to feel like they were welcome in the institution. Others entered a state of nonbelonging because they did not agree with the new policy. Though they remained within the institution, their sense of belonging shifted because the practices were reinterpreted. Belonging happens within a community, but the way the community interprets its priorities impacts how people experience belonging, even if they are officially recognized as members.

In the preceding chapters, I have curated a particular interpretation of Mennonite identity based upon the progressive Mennonites I met in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Other anthropologists and historians have emphasized different elements of Mennonitism, including as
persons for whom their work is a marker of distinct identity (Naka 2008) or as a people shifting with American social trends (Kniss 1997) or as people who remain flexible in an era of cultural upheaval (Bush 1998). Each description, including mine, reflects only a small group of American Mennonites. As I talked with progressive Mennonites, they spoke freely about the variety of Mennonite traditions around them. Those who participated in my research did not dispute the validity of other Mennonite practices. They were sometimes critical, sometimes sympathetic, but they never denied the Mennonite identity of other groups. Rather, the distinctions between Mennonites forced the people I met to clarify their own views and explain their behaviors more explicitly. By comparing Mennonite identities and Christian social worlds (Handman 2015, 2), Mennonites were participating in communal hermeneutics, explaining their own interpretation of why they aligned with one particular Mennonite fellowship and not another.

**Interpretive Communities of Practice**

*Communities of Practice*

One Sunday morning, I was intrigued by an announcement in the congregation. The congregation was forming “communities of practice,” which were groups led by congregants centered around similar interests. Those interests included refugee resettlement, hiking, creation care, and more. The groups were more than affinity groups. They were formed so that people could become more intentional about getting to know others in the congregation and engage in participatory learning together around a topic of mutual interest. Anthropologist Jean Lave and educator Etienne Wenger coined the term “communities of practice” to refer to ways people can learn by engaging “the whole person acting in the world” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 49). Wenger said communities of practice “are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor” (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015).
Anthropologists have long observed how rituals and shared practices serve to instruct members in a particular religious identity. Participants learn how to form their religious and social selves as they join in shared activities from initiation rituals (Turner 1967) to creating a worship experience through particular musical styles (Handman 2015, 231–41). The practices of faith provide religious education, but each group must determine what they deem appropriate for their community of practice. Lave and Wenger and others have expanded the concept since it was first introduced, but the initial idea remains the same. Communities of practice are groups where people with similar interests learn from one another in the midst of their ordinary social environments.

Mennonite fellowships can be described as communities of practice because of the complementary tenets of living out faith in fellowship with others. Individual Mennonites learned from others in various ways. Susanna Kreider said that her congregation was one community where she was able to learn through practice: “They’ve nurtured me and allowed me to explore and encouraged me to try stuff. Like, working for the church or worship leading or whatever. I learned a lot there.” Susanna equated learning with the opportunities she had to practice her gifts as she was supported by others within the congregation. Ellen Eby-Groff emphasized the activity of faith: “So, my early experience of church was that this was not about— It's not just an idea. Salvation is not an idea. It's a practice. And it's about helping others to experience release and justice. It's not just for us. It's not earning it; it's sharing it. And men and women were doing all of this work.” Susanna and Ellen both demonstrated how their local congregations became spaces where they could grow as individuals and where they had opportunities to practice what they were learning with other congregants, sometimes in ways
which connected them more closely with a local congregation, and other times in ways that encouraged broader Anabaptist connections.

**Interpretive Communities of Practice**

In addition to forming groups where people learn together through practice, Mennonites also negotiate the arrangement of the community and the format of the behaviors that are accepted. They become interpretive communities of practice. Interpretive communities of practice are formed by people drawn together with a shared purpose or passion to shape the community and delineate what is meaningful to them as they exchange information and experiences, and then practice what they learn. The term, interpretive communities of practice, is my compilation of Lave and Wenger’s ideas and the notion of interpretive communities. Literary theorist Stanley Fish, focusing on the ways people read texts, defined interpretive communities as entities “rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings” and “determine the shape of what is read” (Fish 1980, 14). Each interpretive community is a subjective group with its own interests and goals, and the meaning that arises from what is read is based upon the group’s concerns. Fish concluded that there is not “one true way of reading” a text, but “the meaning arises from the varied communities, not from the text itself” (Fish 1980, 15–16).

Like Fish, anthropologist Clifford Geertz thought that the process of interpretation is a search for meaning by a specific group of people (Geertz 1973, 5; Fish 1980, 14). Both realized there is an interactive process between author and reader, text and communal context, so that any interpretation is influenced by a community of people. There can be conflict between different interpretive communities because they are so focused on their own projects that other groups with different interests appear strange. Critiquing other groups can be part of the hermeneutical process, which serves to clarify and bolster a particular interpretive community’s reading.
Interpretive communities of practice can be contentious. The qualifier “interpretive” indicates that communities of practice are constantly changing, which can cause conflict for the community’s participants. If there was, as Fish says, “one true way of reading” (Fish 1980, 16) or, likewise, one true way of practicing, there would be no need for interpretation and no need for different communities of practice because the meaning of the text and the proper mode of action would be evident to each person. However, that is not the case, and critique and criticism can come from within the community or outside of it. Fish writes that “the business of criticism was not (as I had previously thought) to determine a correct way of reading but to determine from which of a number of possible perspectives reading will proceed” (Fish 1980, 16).

Similarly, in outlining critical Christianity, Handman is not trying to prove that one Guhu-Samane perspective on Christianity is the “true” way since the Christians themselves do not seem to be concerned with the idea. The congregations she compares do critique each other by justifying the suitability of their own practice for their context. By pointing out the differences in another congregation’s musical or dance styles, for example, they can explain why their own styles are meaningful (Handman 2015, 239–40). Likewise, Mennonites clarify their viewpoints by noting how their ideas of the Bible differ from other interpretive perspectives.

Mennonites are aware of the variations of Mennonite identity, and they recognize that part of this dissimilarity is founded on different ways to interpret the Bible. Nearly 50 years ago, the (Old) Mennonite Church, one of the organizations which would form MC USA, produced a statement on “Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church,” in which the denomination declared: “The believing community is an interpreting community” (Mennonite Church 1977). While recognizing a variety of interpretations and a need for studying the Bible, the denomination affirmed, “Through interpretation of the Bible the church finds direction for its life
according to God's will” (Mennonite Church 1977). Mennonites reiterated that their understanding of the Bible guides their lives today, and, through their stories of how their perspectives shifted over time, they continue to affirm that believing communities are interpreting communities. Most of the Mennonites that I met did not adhere to one meaning or one valid interpretation. They recognized that they had their personal perspectives on how the text should be interpreted, and there were some readings that they considered inappropriate, but they were open to the idea that the text could have multiple meanings, which could be enacted in various ways.

Defining the Community

Most of this chapter focuses on a very specific topic, the role of women in ministry in progressive Mennonite churches and associated interpretations of the Bible, but the context, conversations, and relevant cultures extend far beyond present-day Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Lave and Wenger note that communities of practice are not isolated or bounded units. They state: “A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 98).

As I mentioned in chapter 1, the community is a source of authority for Mennonites, and the long history of Mennonites in Lancaster County is part of the process that gives authority to church leaders and to individual Mennonites to discern their expression of this Christian tradition. By performing specific iterations of Christianity, Mennonites learn in community, and what they learn affects their understanding of their faith and religious identity and their place
within that fellowship. As they learn, they interpret, and together, they decide which knowledge to include in their community. Each community of practice offers different understandings of faith, work, God, the Bible, American society, and their own role in their social environment. Mennonites participate in overlapping communities of practice, and the boundaries between communities continue to shift and be contested. It is through this process of critique that they make sense of their heritage, create knowledge, and define themselves as Mennonites in the United States in the twenty-first century.

Congregations encompass one type of community for Mennonites, and they are the primary interpretive communities of practice for most laypersons. Each congregation is the site where individuals meet with other constituents from their local area on a regular basis. Beyond the congregation, progressive Mennonites are part of conferences and denominations, which act as additional interpretive communities of practice. The denomination or conference sets standards for its member congregations, but each congregation interprets how it will practice those standards. Since congregants are part of several interrelated religious communities of practice at once, they sometimes pick and choose which interpretations and practices they want to follow. Having multiple interpretive communities can lead to conflict in the church, but it can also create space for a diverse group of people to belong together, even if they do not agree on everything. In this chapter, I consider these overlapping Mennonite communities of practice and examine the ways they influence how people interpret the Bible and define roles women can have in the denomination, conference, and congregation.

**Biblical Hermeneutics**

The Bible, as a text, is a communal project. It is not only interpreted by diverse communities; it was written and compiled by various communities. It was written by many
different authors, and some books, such as Genesis and Isaiah, are compilations by multiple authors. Other books originated from common sources circulating among a community of authors who took what they wanted to form their own text out of the original source. Later, when Christianity was an established religion, the process of canonization was the act of a community to determine the composition of the text. Mennonites and non-Mennonites have strong opinions about canonization, and whether it should have happened and which books should be included, but their debates are one way in which they continue to demonstrate the ongoing importance of the Bible for the Christian community. In addition, Mennonites and other Christians disagree on the extent of the Bible’s sacred nature and the reach of its authority. In each of these instances, it becomes clear that interpretation is not only about gleaning meaning from a text or a community, but it is about understanding how author and text and community join together in ongoing interpretation.

Since the Bible is widely varied, and people approach the Bible in different ways, it is a good source to use to examine the interpretive activity of the Mennonite community. First, I will talk about some of the ways people understood biblical interpretation. Then, I will focus specifically on passages that people use to explain women’s roles in church ministry. The biblical texts come from Genesis 1-3, from the Gospels, and from some of the epistles, including 1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy, Ephesians, and 1 Peter.

**Differences in Biblical Interpretation**

The Mennonites I talked to articulated their own perspectives on biblical interpretation. As I interviewed people, 18 out of 33 Mennonites talked directly about their own way of interpreting scripture or mentioned the impact that different interpretation styles had upon relationships within the church. Some people discussed how they began to read the Bible
differently as they grew into adulthood and had experiences outside of their childhood environment. Other Mennonites said that reading and formal study helped them name and explain the interpretive models they had often used. Susanna Kreider said her seminary courses helped her understand that there are different ways to approach the Bible: “How to read scripture, like the literal versus the metaphoric. Different ways of thinking.” Joyce Sangrey tied literal interpretations with a flat reading of scripture, meaning that passages in the Old Testament are given equal weight with New Testament passages. Joyce preferred a Christological approach, recognizing that Jesus helped people reinterpret the Old Testament; therefore, the Old Testament should be read through a Christological lens. She explained, “Well, the flat book thing for a lot of people is, I think, just part of what they were programmed to believe. Old Testament and New Testament are equally important. I think they sort of understand that some things changed when Jesus came along, but it's kind of limited.” By focusing on Jesus, Joyce and several others who mentioned reading the Bible from a Christocentric perspective recognized that Jesus interpreted the Hebraic law and prophets through an alternative lens. Like the authors of the Bible who continually interpreted the theological works that came before them, Mennonite Christians continue this interpretive conversation in their own contexts.

The Christocentric approach to reading the Bible is not explicitly Anabaptist, but several people tied their approach to biblical interpretation to their Anabaptist-Mennonite identity. Miriam Eckman described why Anabaptism was important to her: “And we read the Bible through the eyes of Jesus. We don't just look at it as a flat book where some obscure verse in Exodus means more than what Jesus said, and that's really important to me. It makes sense to me. That's what I want to be about. I don't think that Anabaptists somehow hold all the truth, but I think we have a piece of it.” Martin Long explained what first attracted him to Anabaptism,
Well, I like the centrality of Jesus in the Jesus story. I'm a big fan of Jesus. In seminary I was warned against a canon within a canon, but it seems to me that that's one of the strengths of the Mennonite church or Anabaptism is we just go ahead and own the fact that we have this canon within a canon, that we interpret the rest of the Bible through the Gospels. That's just who we are. Or at least that's the kind of Mennonite I am.

The specific emphasis on a Christocentric reading of scripture was tied to Anabaptism for the people that I interviewed. They were also aware that other Mennonites did not hold the same perspective, but they were open to the idea that there would be multiple acceptable interpretations.

These terms, literal and metaphoric, and the idea of reading the Bible Christocentrically are not specific forms of biblical criticism. Rather, they are helpful ways for people to generally talk about how their view of the Bible differs from another person’s perspective. There are a number of different methodologies and perspectives biblical scholars employ to analyze the biblical text. An introduction to biblical criticisms can include an explanation of redaction criticism, narrative analysis, poststructuralist criticism, feminist criticism, and more (LeMon and Richards 2009; McKenzie and Haynes 1999). Each of these methods indicates that the scholar is approaching the work from a particular perspective, while recognizing that there may be multiple perspectives on a text. The majority of Mennonites are not biblical scholars, though some people did reference works by biblical scholars. However, Mennonites do engage in the activity of interpreting the biblical text and applying it to their lives. They recognize that the works by biblical scholars aid them in their own understanding of the Bible, and they recognize that their fellow congregants hold a variety of perspectives on what the Bible means. The process of interpretation is complicated because the Bible was written across centuries. The texts were recorded for or sent to people under different political regimes, in diverse religious settings, and in languages that are distinct from English.
People who attended progressive Mennonite churches rely upon a variety of sources to help them understand the Bible and its applicability to their own context. They would read the Bible independently, discuss it in small groups or Sunday school classes, or rely upon the works of Christian authors and speakers. At least one adult Sunday school at a Mennonite congregation I visited discussed the then-recently-released book *What is the Bible?* by pastor and best-selling author Rob Bell. For those in the class who had read it, it changed their perspective and made them excited to read the Bible in ways they had never thought about before. Another adult Sunday school class at a different congregation used a video series by pastor and speaker Tony Evans to spark discussions about the lesson from the Bible and relate it to events in their own lives. One person mentioned how much she was impacted by author and blogger Rachel Held Evans’s book *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, which explored ideas of biblical interpretation and gender roles. Evans, who passed away suddenly in 2019, had also been the main speaker at the MC USA Convention in 2017, where other people mentioned how much her writing had impacted their understanding of Christianity. These examples demonstrate that Mennonites appreciated input from other Christian traditions as they interpreted the Bible within their own social context and church environment. It was a way of reminding them that they belong to a global body of Christians. The example below expands upon this idea that Christians in distant places can learn from each other since they all belong to a worldwide religion.

**Cutting Horns and Catching Foxes**

The process of translating the Bible into different languages sometimes involves interpreting the words when there is no lexical equivalent, but it also requires translating some of the cultural elements so that the meaning can be understood by the audience. In a focus group conversation about women in leadership, the topic of biblical interpretation came up repeatedly,
and Elvin Thomas shared an example from his own experience about how translating a biblical concept helped people grasp its meaning. This account originally came from a Mennonite pastor who had been visiting a Mennonite missionary in Kenya. It was shared at a Lancaster County Mennonite church at some prior time, and Elvin recalled it for us.

The story goes, the missionary asked the visiting pastor to share with the Kenyan church and give some reasons why his marriage had lasted so many decades. The pastor consulted his wife, who was traveling with him, and they agreed that good communication was important in their marriage. The pastor explained that consistent and regular communication with his wife helped to ensure that minor annoyances did not fester and become larger problems. He quoted a passage from the Song of Songs to illustrate his point: “Catch the foxes for us — the little foxes that ruin the vineyards — for our vineyards are in bloom.” (Song of Songs 2:15 CSB). As the pastor told the story to the audience, he said that his interpreter paused when he reached this point. The pastor asked if there was a problem. The interpreter said, “Yeah, we don’t have foxes. We don’t even have a word for foxes.” After a pause, the interpreter said something to the Kenyan church and then turned to the pastor and reported he had told his cattle-herding audience, “You’ve got to cut the horn when it's soft.” For those who grew up around the dairy farms of Lancaster County, the metaphor was appropriate. Dehorning an animal was much easier when the horn was soft and small and the animal was young.

This story of translation stuck with Elvin because, as he said, “But you gotta cut the horn when it’s soft. It was just so perfect. And we're talking about a lot here, tonight, that had to do with context. And how you move the meanings into the new context. And that’s exciting, but, boy, that's hard work.” Elvin made the point that sometimes the Bible could not be interpreted according to the exact wording. Sometimes it was more important to get the meaning out of the
text than to force a translation that was not relatable in the present context. In this particular context in Kenya, there was no word for foxes, but the translator was able to extract the meaning. Every translation is an interpretation. In translation, there is an interpretation of the text, but there is also an interpretation of the community of practice. Elvin was aware that not only could the Bible be interpreted differently in a single language, but he was aware of the contextual nature of the biblical text and the constant process of interpretation it had and is undergoing in order to be understood in new and shifting contexts. Most of the group members were convinced that the biblical passages that told women to be silent in churches were for a specific group of people at a specific time, but that the larger message was that God had gifted certain people for leadership in the church so that the church could function well. In this present Mennonite context, where women are educated and have access to religious knowledge from many sources, not only from their husbands, Elvin and others in the focus group believed that women should be encouraged and permitted to serve as pastors and church leaders, thereby engendering new interpretations for the community to practice.

**Interpreting Scripture**

In order to more fully explore an interpretive community of practice in action, I will explain how some progressive Mennonites connected their shifting understandings of women’s roles in the church to certain biblical passages. Most of the people who participated in interviews or focus groups were like Amy Watson, who said, “I grew up in church all my life where women weren’t allowed to be pastors.” These Mennonites referenced Bible verses from 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy that appeared to explicitly prohibit women’s participation in church ministry. 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 (NIV) says:

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but
must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they
should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the
church.

1 Timothy 2:11-12 (NKJV) states: “Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do
not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.”50 After telling
me about these verses, Mennonites told me that their views had changed or were changing, and
they cited other scripture passages that supported their conviction that women could be pastors
and church leaders. Sometimes they even offered alternative interpretations of 1 Corinthians and
1 Timothy. For example, Ellen Eby-Groff drew from biblical scholars who say these two
passages were “later add-ons in the margins” that were eventually incorporated into the text.

To demonstrate how their views evolved, I will consider three sections of biblical texts
that people most often raised in discussions. First, Mennonites cited the creation accounts in
Genesis where male and female are created. Secondly, they brought up passages in the epistles,
verses that are sometimes tied to Genesis, to discuss the role of women in first century
fellowships. Lastly, they drew from the Gospels to talk about how Jesus’ actions toward women
affected their understanding of women’s ministry in the church.

**Genesis and Gender Balance**

When God gave birth to creation in Genesis 1 and 2, human male and human female
were conceived. Mennonites said their interpretive communities of practice have used this
primordial sexual distinction to support the roles men and women can have in their
congregations in the present. In a conversation discussing her role as a pastor, Melody Wiebe
said that at one point, before she was hired as a pastor, she found it difficult to be a woman in her

---

50 Mennonite individuals and congregations did not adhere to a specific Bible translation. In conversations, people
often used the New International Version and a few used the King James Version (or New King James Version). I
use the NKJV for this passage since it translates ἰσχύς as “silence” which is the term that repeatedly came up in
conversations.
church. She questioned God about why there were two sexes, which she equated with binary genders. She told me, “It's a pretty deep thing to ask God what he means by creating men and women, two genders.” Though Melody and her husband, Tanner, did not enforce traditional, distinct gender roles in their marriage or in their congregation, they did both understand that God had intentionally created two separate sexes, resulting in different genders. Melody referenced the Genesis creation accounts to explain her understanding that the distinction between men and women originated with God, and, therefore, must have some purpose and should not be ignored.

Other Christians have used these first two chapters of Genesis to explain that male supremacy is part of God’s design in creation.51 This idea is partially drawn from 1 Timothy 2:13-14, the verses following the excerpt quoted above, where the author writes: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (NIV). The Mennonites I met preferred to discuss Genesis 3 as a reason for male dominance, which I explain below. They usually did not reference a hierarchy in Genesis 1 and 2. However, they did quote from 1 Timothy, which drew from Genesis. They demonstrated that most of the churches of their childhoods in the latter twentieth century did use the Bible, from Genesis to the epistles, to support ideas of a male-dominated hierarchy.

The difference between male and female became poignant when Mennonites equated the Fall with the beginning of male dominance in societal and ecclesiastical settings. In a focus group meeting discussing women’s roles in Mennonite churches, I asked participants to explain some reasons why women could not be pastors or hold formal leadership roles in the church.

51 For example, author Stephen Clark contends that the woman is called man’s helper (Genesis 2:18) and is, therefore, subject to his authority. In defining what it means for the first woman to be a helper to the first man, Clark states, “that her life is oriented toward his in such a way that direction from her life comes through him” (1980, 24–25). First published in 1980, when many of the people I interviewed were middle-aged adults or entering young adulthood and beginning to explore biblical interpretations about women’s roles, Clark’s book was reprinted in 2021 and remains relevant among American Christians.
Respondents drew from the story in Genesis 3 where first Eve, then Adam, ate the fruit of a certain tree. Rebecca Ward was told that women were responsible for humanity’s fall from God’s favor. For a time, she believed: “We’re the weaker partner. We were the first ones deceived in the garden.” Some congregations would not allow women to teach men for fear that women, “the weaker partners,” would teach something that was not appropriate and so deceive the church into turning from God’s will, as the church leaders understood God’s will. According to Genesis, Adam and Eve and the serpent were cursed by God as a result of their actions. Amy Watson quoted from Genesis 3:16 to explain why the Mennonite church of her childhood had espoused a male hierarchy: “For the curse in Genesis, ‘her husband will lord over her.’” The curse of Genesis 3 includes this statement that men will rule over women, and some Mennonite congregations felt bound to enforce this injunction. They used this verse to justify female subordination in the church, in workplaces, and in the home.

People in the focus group said the Mennonite congregations of their earlier years had taught them that God ordered creation so that men would rule over women. Elvin Thomas challenged this view in our focus group. He believed God intended men and women to work together equally because God’s image was reflected in both of them, according to Genesis 1:27, which says, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (NIV). Elvin shared his thoughts: “But something happened there at the Fall that put women in subjection to man. But the beauty of creation, the fullness of God’s image is in the male and female. And for mankind to have wrecked that whole harmony through the Fall, and it's taking so long for that to get restored.” Elvin was convinced that male and female equality reflected God’s image and intention for creation. The idea of gendered subjugation was part of the Fall, according to Elvin, and he believed that Christians should work
to reverse the curse, not uphold it. As people who have “new life” in Jesus Christ, Elvin told that focus group that “our fellowships should certainly cultivate that idea that we’re all in the image of God.” Throughout our conversation, he equated the image of God with egalitarianism, not gendered subordination, even though there is a long history within the Christian church that does not agree with his interpretation. Those in the focus group did agree that female submission was not part of God’s design for creation, according to their interpretations of the first three chapters in Genesis.

Some Mennonites thought that the gender distinctions in Genesis were one way that God’s complexity was revealed to humans. Rebecca Ward echoed ideas similar to what Elvin shared, though she spoke at a different point in our focused group conversation. Rebecca believed “gender balances our image of God.” She elaborated,

So, if all the leaders and decision-makers of our faith are one gender, we can tend to focus on the attributes of God that align with those genders. And we see that God created both genders to work together. So, when we limit to only one of those genders being our voices in the church, that can really influence what we learn and hear as people.

She thought that having only male leadership within the church was a limitation that she did not want to continue.

I observed Rebecca's ideas in action in one congregation that I visited. During the time for announcements, a woman asked for volunteers for a church program. She especially invited men to participate because she said there were so many women involved in church ministries, and she wanted to balance out those numbers with a few more men. I could see evidence of her concern. That morning, women had preached, led singing, and led the congregational prayer. By looking at the stage, one would have thought that the congregation consisted almost entirely of women. However, looking around the congregation, there appeared to be equal numbers of men and women. By allowing women in leadership, the women in this congregation did not seek to
replace men in leadership. Rather, they wished for a more balanced representation of men and women sharing the work of the congregation.

These Genesis stories of creation and the Fall continue to be meaningful in Mennonite Christian contexts because of the way the stories provide mythic foundations for present behavior. Anthropologists classify such accounts as myths, and biblical scholarship affirms the mythic nature of the early chapters of Genesis. Biblical scholar John W. Rogerson offers a brief discussion of whether the Old Testament, particularly Genesis, contains myths or only mythic elements (2014, 15–16). Some Old Testament scholars refuse to apply the term to Genesis, equating myth with untruth (Rogerson 2014, 17; M. S. Smith 2014, 72), but Rogerson is not concerned about stating that the first eleven chapters of Genesis contain myths, which differ in significant ways from the contemporaneous myths of the ancient Near East (Rogerson 2014, 21, 23). Thus, these opening chapters lay a foundational worldview for the ancient Israelite community in contrast to the surrounding societies.

Old Testament scholar Mark S. Smith specifically considers Genesis 1 and questions whether or not it is a myth. Like Rogerson, he vacillates on the definition of myth, concluding that while the chapter contains mythic elements, the important thing to note is that the priestly tradition sets up Genesis 1 as the only creation account, despite contradictory creation passages throughout the Old Testament (M. S. Smith 2014, 93–94). Genesis 1 is important for the insights it offers into the priestly tradition and its political and religious function in ancient Israel’s history (M. S. Smith 2014, 94). Anthropologist Peggy Sanday makes a related argument by explaining how the Genesis creation accounts were written by different authors with competing religious and political aims (1981, 220, 225). Each account offers different ideas of God and of male and female relationships. Genesis displays both “the seeds of sexual equality and male
dominance” (Sanday 1981, 231). The roles between males and females are buttressed by religious ideas, but they are also tied to political agendas and economic conditions, and they shift as those conditions change. The passages in Genesis remain important not for their empirical truths but for the way they have provided foundations for particular Judeo-Christian communities and practices.

Among anthropologists and folklorists, a myth is a sacred narrative that explains something about the origins or nature of the world, not an intentionally false story. Folklorist Alan Dundes offers this definition: “For the folklorist, a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and mankind came to be in their present form” (2007, 343). Rather than being untrue, a myth reveals deep truths about the world and establishes ideological and cosmological foundations for those who adhere to it.

Early anthropologists have also analyzed myths to understand the behaviors and attitudes of a particular society. They explored the connections between myths and rituals (Frazer 1951; Malinowski 1984) and used myths to explain the order or structure of a society (Leach 1969). Though anthropology has moved away from ritual studies or structuralist and functionalist explorations, these approaches demonstrate that myths have an impact upon the practices of a particular community. Not just stories told for entertainment, they are narratives that are repeated to explain some aspect of community life, which is how the Mennonites I met discussed Genesis and its implications for men’s and women’s roles. For them, the early chapters of Genesis set a precedent for power and authority in Mennonite churches. Most people I interviewed said that, at one time, they believed that Genesis taught that men should have authority over women, which gave men more power in congregational settings. However, in the focus group conversation, each person described how their ideas had changed over time. They still held on to Genesis 1-3
as sacred narratives explaining the world, but they reinterpreted the meaning of those myths, and instead argued that they set a precedent for equality, with God as the ultimate authority.

No one I conversed with described Genesis as myth, but they did hold to the idea that it revealed truths and was foundational for their present ecclesiastical structures and their involvement in church life. Therefore, it can be classified as a myth, in the folkloric sense, because it is a sacred narrative set in primordial time that reveals truths about the nature of a particular group. One reason myths have fascinated anthropologists is that they can function as foundational stories for a group’s beliefs and practices, and people in a particular group reference the myths throughout informal conversations. Mennonites I met invoked Genesis because of their conviction that it was, in part, essential for understanding women’s roles in relation to men’s roles in their Mennonite congregations. As an interpretive community of practice, they were engaged in the work of understanding a story that was geographically, culturally, and temporally far removed from their present context. These Mennonites believed that the stories of Genesis were still meaningful, and they were attempting to explain the implications of their interpretations for practices within their churches. As they did so, they offered alternative understandings of the Genesis passages.

In contrast to other Mennonite communities of practice, the people gathered in this focus group used Genesis to assert that since God created all people equally in God’s image, men and women should be able to hold equal roles within the church, a practice that reversed the curse of Genesis 3. Within the focus group, these Mennonites demonstrated how different biblical interpretations lead to different practices. They all affirmed women in church ministry to some extents. Some women took on formal ministry roles, while other women encouraged their congregations to have women in leadership even if they did not seek such roles for themselves.
The men present personally encouraged women to speak or actively gave women opportunities to lead within a congregation or challenged those who opposed women in leadership.

**Reading the Mail: Silence and Literalism**

The New Testament epistles, which occasionally draw from Genesis, give the most explicit statements Mennonites used to define the roles of women in Christian communities. The focus group discussed how people had been told the Bible says women cannot lead because they must be “silent” in their congregations. Ellen Eby-Groff clarified another person’s comment: “The ‘silent’ is in Corinthians and in Timothy.” 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11, quoted above, both use terms translated as “silence” in relation to women’s voices in the church. In our focus group conversation, Mel Newswanger said that some Mennonites look at places in the Bible “where it says women need to be quiet,” and apply them as if women should literally be quiet in churches. Mel did not agree with this interpretation, but he realized that it can be disconcerting to suddenly “change that and say women can speak and be part of” Mennonite church leadership. He realized that it would be difficult to introduce another way of interpreting those ideas, and that it should be “done extremely cautiously so it doesn’t disrupt somebody’s base and core belief system.” Other members of the group demonstrated that it was possible to reinterpret the Bible without disrupting existing belief systems. That is, people could still view the Bible as foundational, but interpret it in ways that led to different church polity and personal practice. Mel raised the point that challenging biblical interpretations and practices could affect people’s sense of belonging within the congregation. He wanted to be sure that people felt accepted even if others around them held different beliefs or understood the Bible differently.

The epistles offer a glimpse into the challenges the early church faced in forming faith communities. As later generations read the mail between Christian founders and fellowships, it is
apparent that there was a lot of variation in these early communities. Therefore, it is no surprise that Christian communities of practice today have different interpretations of how they should enact their faith, and that each perspective could use the epistles to support its position.

The passages quoted above were places where Mennonites most frequently talked about the difference between interpreting the Bible literally or using cultural context to understand the meaning. Throughout conversations, Mennonites defined a literal approach to interpretation as applying the basic sense of a word. Relatedly, some people thought that a literal interpretation meant that the text only had one true meaning and was not open to variable interpretations. For most of the people I met, the different interpretive approaches created tension when they realized that other people were not willing to admit that there were variable interpretive strategies. Joyce Sangrey explained how these different hermeneutical approaches affected her personally. She told me,

I would get so frustrated when I would hear people say, “I take the Bible literally, and it says women are to be silent in the church. End of sentence. End of discussion. There is nothing else to discuss. Don't tell me that the prophet Joel in the Old Testament said anything about women prophesying at one time. Don't tell me that there's different ways of looking at, you know, submission or whatever. I don't want to hear it. The Bible says women are to be silent in the church.”

In this imagined argument, Joyce was vexed by the fact that some people she had met in Mennonite congregations sought to impose their own understandings on others without being open to the idea that there might be other ways of interpreting a text.

Joyce advocated for helping people recognize that their literal application of the written text was only one of many possible interpretive style. She would ask people: “When Jesus says to sell all that you have and give to the poor, you take that literally?” They would answer, “Well,

52 Joel 2:28-29. See also Acts 2:16-18.
53 Ephesians 5:21-24 and 1 Corinthians 14:34
no. He didn't mean—.” Joyce then asked me, as if still talking to imaginary opponents, “Do we pick and choose which things we take literally and which things we don't?” The clear implication of her rhetorical question was that, yes, reading the Bible to apply the words literally does involve choosing scriptures to suit one’s own ideas and mood in the present. Joyce never claimed consistency for herself, but she wanted to make the point that the way others read the Bible had a direct impact upon her and her ability to enact her faith in the way that she thought aligned with biblical passages about the roles of women.

Another person from Lancaster County introduced me to The Blue Parakeet, a book by religious studies author Scot McKnight, who encouraged people to ask questions of the text in order to understand the Bible. He used the practical term “pick-and-choose method” to explain the human tendency to filter what we allow into our lives (McKnight 2008, 13, 19). He was not criticizing this method but rather challenged himself and his readers to “think about why and how we pick what we pick and why and how we choose what we choose” (McKnight 2008, 19). McKnight encouraged his readers to enter into the Bible as a story of the way God interacts with humanity. Each passage that people pull out tells only a part of the larger story (McKnight 2008, 42, 59, 64–65). Joyce referenced the prophet Joel’s words about women prophesying and passages about submission from 1 Corinthians and from Ephesians in order to demonstrate her conviction that these separate passages from various times and distant communities should be read together as part of a larger story. In a manner similar to McKnight’s arguments, Joyce wanted Mennonites to understand the Bible as a story that spanned centuries and numerous cultures, and to recognize that they did not approach all of the Bible in the same way. She implied that the danger of applying the basic meaning of a word set up the individual as the final
authority on biblical interpretation instead of drawing from a community of interpreters, which
partially included Mennonite churches in Lancaster County.

Mennonites who critiqued the literal approach advocated for using sources beyond the
Bible to enhance their understanding of the Bible and its application to their present practices.
They were aware of how their own interpretations had changed over time as they interacted with
other interpretive communities of practice. By reading books by biblical scholars and Christian
authors and by relating to Christians outside of their local Mennonite congregation, they found
their own understandings challenged. Part of this shift began when they recognized the
inconsistencies within their own Mennonite circles, as Joyce mentioned above. Even though
women were told be “silent” in the church, a number of Mennonites talked about how women in
their congregations “occasionally led the singing,” as Pearl Gehman said, or took roles as
“Sunday school teachers” or leaders for “Vacation Bible School,” as Susanna Kreider told me.
Susanna’s examples revealed that it was acceptable for women to teach children in Sunday
school or summer children’s programs. That is, the injunction to be “silent” in the church was
never absolute or literal.

Beyond noting the discrepancies in their congregational practices, a few Mennonites also
drew upon biblical scholars, pastors, and theologians to learn more about what it meant for
women to be part of early Christian fellowships. Ellen Eby-Groff said that there was one point,
years ago, early in her involvement in church ministry, when she was at a dinner, and one person
confronted her with a list of scriptures for why women should not be active in church leadership.
Ellen did not have much to say at that time, but later she came across a pamphlet by Dennis R.
Kuhns, *Women in the Church* (1978), which helped her to better understand the different ways
the Bible was used and to form her arguments in favor of women in church ministry.
Rachel Huber found that she faced both external and internal resistance due to her conviction that the Bible said women could not be church leaders. She used the book *Men and Women in the Church*, by theologian and former pastor Sarah Sumner (2003). The book and its detailed footnotes gave Rachel a new understanding of biblical texts so that she could pursue the call she felt to be a pastor. Each individual was picking and choosing what sources they would use to help them interpret and apply biblical passages. However, their activity was relevant because they all said that at one point in their lives, they did not know there were different sources they could use to pick and choose. Most of these Mennonites had been taught there was only one way to interpret the Bible, but these additional sources gave them a greater appreciation for the diversity of insights they could glean from the Bible.

A brief example illustrates the intersection of biblical hermeneutics with Mennonite interpretive communities of practice. In one Mennonite congregation in Lancaster County, a group of people used the book *Creating a Scene in Corinth*, by New Testament scholar Reta Halteman Finger and theology professor George D. McClain, to learn about the political, religious, and social environments that shaped the epistles to the Corinthians (Finger and McClain 2013). The book explains that the first-century house church in Corinth was in conflict over a number of issues, and the authors encourage participants to role play some of the debates (Finger and McClain 2013, 25). Rather than accepting the words of the letter as untouchable and unchangeable instructions, members of this group enacted the tensions among first-century Christians, which allowed them to continue the work of interpreting the letters in their twenty-first-century communities of practice.

Several Mennonites I met referenced how works by Reta Halteman Finger helped them understand the broader cultural context of the New Testament. In a brief article in a Mennonite
publication for a general audience, Finger explored the selective interpretation of 1 Timothy 2. 

Prior to the verses directing women to “learn in silence with all submission,” the biblical author writes:

I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works (1 Timothy 2: 8-10 NKJV).

Finger says she never heard instructions to men to raise “holy hands” and the practice did not exist in the stoic Mennonite churches around her. Likewise, Finger writes: “Given the pervasive [braided] pigtails of my childhood, we Mennonites obviously didn’t take that ‘braided hair’ phrase too literally, and though most jewelry was banned for a generation or two in many Mennonite churches, little is said today” (Finger 2000, 6). In a few words to a broad Mennonite audience, Finger encouraged her readers to recognize the variety of their own interpretive stances. Her reference to banning jewelry harkens back to the era of nonconformity, which, as chapter 3 discussed, did not produce uniform attitudes among American Mennonites, even if their outward appearances were similar for a few decades. Finger’s work, in conjunction with what others stated above, is evidence that there is not a clear divide between literal interpreters and non-literal interpreters. Instead, interpretation takes place within communities of practice, and those who participate in Mennonite fellowships actively shape the ideas and behaviors of their community.

Reading the Mail: Biblical Translation and Cultural Interpretation

In addition to those epistles that were used to silence women’s voices, Mennonites cited other epistles that advocated for women’s submission to men, and said these passages had been used to justify the practice of letting women speak in church, as long as they did not have any
political or spiritual authority over men. When I asked a focus group why Mennonite congregations did not allow women to be pastors, Ellen Eby-Groff replied: “In Ephesians, women should submit, and a woman should not be above a man.” Later in our group conversation, Ellen and Elvin Thomas discussed how the activity of Bible translation affected individuals and congregations who used the New International Version (NIV) translation. They believed Ephesians 5:21 should be part of the passage before, which would instruct all Christians to submit to one another, but certain Bible translators grouped it with the following household codes, where only wives (or women) were instructed to submit.54

Elvin: What really also gets in my gander a bit is in this whole Ephesians passage about submission. It’s the NIV that put the division there.

Ellen: Yes!

Elvin: It says be submissive to one another. Submit yourself one to another in fear of the Lord. Okay, if women are better at the gift of submission, okay, that’s fine. If men are better at the gift of love, well then, we could go on that way. But this whole idea that you have this cut off there. And there’s something. I don’t know how that happened.

Ellen: I do!

Elvin: Was it J.C. Wenger that was on that committee?55 I think he was. It happened in the translation.

Ellen: It was a very deliberate decision. They decided to separate that verse from the rest.

Elvin: That was a tragedy!

Ellen: Yes. The women’s movement was starting. You know, women had just gotten the right to vote. Whether it was conscious or not, I don’t know.

Ellen jumps a few decades in connecting women’s right to vote with the women’s rights movement in the 1960s and the complete translation of the NIV first published in 1978, but she

54 Appendix C compares Ephesians 5 in three different versions, comparing the placement of verse 21.
55 J. C. Wenger, a Mennonite author and theologian, taught Hebrew and Greek at Goshen College. He was part of the NIV Committee on Bible Translation from 1965 to 1978. The Committee produced the 1978 and 1984 NIV Bibles referenced here (Marlowe 2012; Weaver 2012; John C. Wenger 1993, 65–66).
is making a larger point that significant shifts in American society influenced the way in which the translators did their work. This conversation highlights the reality that Mennonites live, learn, and worship within overlapping communities of practice. They live within the United States. They are constituents within Mennonite networks. They are members of individual congregations, which are the local interpretive communities of practice that shape behaviors and attitudes based upon their social and religious environments. The committee members who were translating the texts that became the NIV Bible were a literal interpretive community. Their work has influenced generations of Americans who read the NIV, thus affecting the biblical interpretations within other communities of practice.

Norm Reimer realized how much he had been shaped by various Anabaptist interpretive communities of practice, and he connected those experiences with his appreciation for understanding the Bible as a collection of culturally-specific texts that remain important today. Norm and I were discussing differences that he noticed in Mennonite congregations in Lancaster County. I asked for clarity, and he responded:

Well, in biblical interpretation, for example, they—and this is a generalization—the tendency to pick and choose and not really do the hard work of interpretation, to be more literalistic. Whereas my thinking and sense is Anabaptism takes the Bible seriously, but looks carefully at the context in which it was written. What were the cultural nuances? What was the reason for this statement? What might the writer have had in mind? I think the best sense of Anabaptist theology is in taking the Bible seriously, but to realize it was in a different culture, a different time, a different language, by a whole host of different writers, with different backgrounds. Some good writers, some not-so-good writers, but it's packed together in what we call the Bible. And if we don't take culture seriously and try to understand it, then we go awry in how we apply the Bible. Some of the Bible doesn't apply today. But if we take Jesus as central, Jesus applies par excellence on questions of peace and justice and conflict resolution and outreach and witness.

Norm’s approach to the Bible stressed the context of the text, but he was also aware that the text should have meaning for how Mennonites live their lives. Norm thought all of the work of biblical interpretation was meaningless if it did not transform people’s attitudes and behaviors.
This viewpoint is not unique to Anabaptists, and not all Lancaster County Mennonites would understand the Bible this way, but for Norm and others quoted here, understanding the socio-cultural context, past and present, was vital for understanding biblical passages. For them, it was also an important piece of their Anabaptist identity. They recognized how they had each been shaped by interpretive communities of practices where Anabaptism was interpreted and shared among group members. By emphasizing how Anabaptism promotes the Christocentric and culturally sensitive approach to biblical interpretation, Norm was enhancing his idea of belonging. He strongly identified as an Anabaptist, and he was convinced that his idea of biblical interpretation belonged within Anabaptist circles. One part of Anabaptism that Norm and others continually mentioned was its prevailing emphasis on the life and teaching of Jesus. Even though Jesus said very little about the role of women, Mennonites used the witness of Jesus’ interactions with women as evidence that he was challenging the dominant patriarchal practices of his time.

**Witnessing Jesus**

For Mennonites who read the Bible Christologically, the lived and recorded example of Jesus carries a lot of weight in their own decision-making processes. There were other scripture passages Mennonites quoted or other biblical names they mentioned in relation to female leaders, but they regarded Jesus as the most authoritative biblical figure. Most of the Mennonites I met understood that Jesus welcomed women into non-traditional roles in his own context, and would, therefore, promote women as church leaders today. The witness the Gospel writers gave about Jesus was essential for understanding the later letters to the first Christian congregations and the earlier myths that undergird the Judeo-Christian worldview.

Mennonites realized that there was a lot of debate among Christians regarding women who were mentioned throughout the Bible, but they thought Jesus’ actions held greater weight
than any of the other writings. Several people mentioned notable women from the Bible, including Deborah, Martha, Phoebe, and Junia, each character with her own controversial interpretations.\textsuperscript{56} Mennonites were aware of discrepancies in biblical interpretation in regard to how women were viewed and treated. For example, these contemporary Christians also noted inconsistencies between Paul’s life and some of the letters attributed to him. In each instance, Mennonites were aware that biblical passages could be used to support a variety of viewpoints. However, they thought that Jesus’ actions toward women challenged the existing practices and attitudes of Jesus’ day and could be instructive for Christians today.

Despite what male church leaders wrote in the epistles or the way later generations have used biblical texts to limit women’s roles, the Mennonites who conversed with me were all convinced that Jesus invited women into conversations and roles that were not usually afforded to women at that time. Ellen Eby-Groff had done some study on this topic prior to our focus group meeting:

Jesus clearly freed women, called women, needed women to be a part of the movement, as the early church, as I understand it, actually had more females than males in it. Women were leaders in the early church. So, it wasn’t until it started to get more formalized in the 300s that they put significant restraints on women. So, I’d say the first 200 years are a testament to the fact that Jesus, and the early church, and the Holy Spirit wanted women to share their gifts.

Not everyone supports Ellen’s ideas of church history, but they do recognize that Jesus treated people kindly, in ways that often challenged existing social norms.

New Testament scholar Lynne St. Clair Darden does not agree with Ellen’s claim that the entire early church wanted women to share their gifts. She compares two stories from the Gospel

\textsuperscript{56} There is great debate among biblical scholars about Junia’s identity and standing, wherein the philological concerns reveal personal “theological and ideological presuppositions” (Howard 2021). Some scholars contend that Junia is a female apostle (Epp 2005, 79–80; Hartmann 2020, 657–59). Others insist the proper noun is a male name, Junias, (Wolters 2008, 408), or that, if she was a woman, she was only known to the apostles, not counted among them (Burer and Wallace 2001, 90; Ng 2020, 525–28).
of John: the Samaritan woman at the well and Mary Magdalene’s witness to Jesus’ resurrection. Darden claims that each pericope first appears to elevate women’s status, but the end result is that men dominate, and the voices of women are silenced as the story moves on (2015, 184, 195). The Johannine community, Darden says, recorded Jesus’ actions toward women, but they were a community in transition, and they faced external pressures from Jews and Romans (2015, 183). Therefore, the Gospel that was produced reveals the tension of the first century interpretive community of practice trying to figure out how to enact what Jesus taught and modeled in a world that held contrary views. Despite the restrictions of the early church and later Christian institutions, it may be true that Jesus and the Holy Spirit, as Ellen says, “wanted women to share their gifts.”

Instead of emphasizing the way other communities of practice interpreted Jesus, Mennonites who were part of a focus group about women in leadership continued to return to Jesus’ interactions with women as the standards for their own behavior. During Jesus’ life, he interacted with women in much the same way that he interacted with men. He taught women. Healed women. Conversed with women. Mel Newswanger found Jesus’ interaction with the Samaritan woman particularly compelling in exemplifying how Jesus spoke volumes without any specific statement on women. Jesus met this unnamed woman at a public well in Samaria.

To me one of the most powerful stories in the whole scripture is the woman at the well. From my understanding, she taught Jesus how to love women. He was running for his life, and she was in a bad situation. And when the two met, she was a teacher of Jesus. Jesus learned a lot from her. It’s not all in there, but if you read between the lines, there’s a lot there. She taught Jesus that he wasn’t there for the male Jews. He was there for the women. He was there for the Samaritans. And he was there for everyone. Jesus’ ministry at that point changed completely.

Jesus engaged in theological conversation with a woman, even a Samaritan woman. The Jews at that time regarded Samaritans as unclean and heretical. Yet Jesus and the woman had a
meaningful intellectual and spiritual conversation, which equipped the woman to return to her neighbors as what theologian Sarah Sumner calls “the first evangelist” (2003, 231). Darden again challenges the reader to examine the text more critically. This encounter is in John’s Gospel, and Darden argues that the Johannine community edited the story so that the Jewish male would prevail. The story is not about how Jesus elevated women or learned from a woman. It is about the primacy of Jewish religious knowledge. In the end, the people of the town were able to access Jesus for themselves, no longer relying on the woman’s testimony about Jesus (Darden 2015, 199). Darden agrees that Jesus’ actions were unusual for a Jewish male teacher (2015, 197–98); therefore, this story remains meaningful in demonstrating Jesus’ unique actions in connecting with other people.

After his resurrection, Jesus continued to interact with women and to entrust them with the role of messengers, which challenged prevailing cultural customs. Ellen Eby-Groff listed many women whose lives were changed by Jesus. As one example, she recalled “Mary Magdalene at the tomb. So, she was the first preacher, she went back to preach that news, to tell that good news.” Though each Gospel author writes from a different perspective to varying audiences, they all agree that Jesus’ resurrection was first announced to women (or to a woman).57 Women not only witnessed the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection; women were the first ones commissioned to be witnesses to the other disciples of Jesus’ resurrection, according to Matthew, John, and Mark’s longer ending. In a culture where the testimony of a woman was invalid, the women were sent as the first apostles of the resurrection, which overturned the cultural norms and rabbinical traditions of the time (France 1995, 78).

Both Mel and Ellen highlighted the fact that Jesus talked with women alone and sent them off as emissaries of the message he brought. They shared these examples as a way to demonstrate that Jesus challenged the established traditions of offering religious education to males. He also gave women leadership roles among his disciples, as much as he could during his time. Speaking of Jesus, Joyce Sangrey was sure “there's more that he would have said regarding women and how to treat women. He said lots by how he treated women without saying the words.” These individuals highlighted Jesus’s behavior and words and recognized that Jesus was constrained by the cultural and political situation of his first-century context. They believed that Jesus would confront the Mennonite church’s practice of restricting women’s roles in the same way he challenged the Jewish religious and social systems. This perspective enhanced their personal sense of belonging. By invoking Jesus, a source of authority for their community, these Mennonites challenged the existing institutional boundaries and restrictive attitudes and emphasized their sense of belonging to a wider Christian tradition led by Jesus, who was outside the bounds of Mennonite institutions.

The Power of Jesus

Toward the end of the focus group about women in leadership, the conversation turned to how applying the Bible affects the ways power is arranged within the church. After we had discussed reasons why Mennonite congregations had different policies and perspectives on women in leadership, I asked the focus group why they thought this had been a point of tension within the church. Lou Groff was first to respond: “I think it’s that men are afraid of losing their power. I mean, why else would the bishops not want a woman present as a bishop equal? I think it's a power issue. I really do.” The group processed Lou’s comment, but none of them felt
qualified to discuss the role of power in the churches. It was true that men had held positions of power and authority in their Mennonite congregations for centuries.

In another conversation, Rachel Huber thought that the political system of ordaining men as pastors and as bishops meant that the men in leadership had a longer history of trust and experience with one another that made it more difficult for women to enter into collaborative working relationships with male church leaders. Rachel shared about how difficult it was for her to feel integrated into a specific group of LMC leaders: “They all had a history with each other. They were all very aware of the whole system and had been in it for multiple years, had been meeting together, and they knew each other. Some of them I knew, some of them I didn't know very well. So, they had relational power with each other, which I didn't have. So, positional, social, just cultural—with a whole culture of LMC, men carry more power than women.” The comments from Lou and from Rachel are evidence of the way biblical hermeneutics have been subtly used to shape Mennonite conference polity for decades, even for centuries in LMC. By using the Bible to restrict women as church leaders and to promote the authority of men over women, Mennonite conferences allowed only men in positions of power in the church. As I described in chapter 3, the polity did shift. This change occurred, in part, as more Mennonites began to promote a view of biblical interpretation that enabled women to be leaders in Mennonite churches.

The ideas of power in congregations led the focus group participants to consider how Jesus displayed power. Again, they were confident that Jesus’ actions were instructive for Mennonites in this century. Amy Watson thought that Jesus presented an alternative understanding of power, contrasted with the way the church had reserved positions of power for Mennonite men. After the brief discussion around Lou’s comment, she spoke: “Going off what
you guys are saying, one thing I just realized that I forgot to mention that was significant for me is that when we talk about what is leadership according to the Bible and according to Jesus’ example, it was being a servant. So, we’re arguing over who's going to be the servant. It’s kind of funny.” A few group members softly affirmed “Amen” as she spoke and others murmured their agreement. Though participants in this particular group did not feel confident discussing the history of gendered power within Mennonite conferences and congregations, they did feel comfortable referring to Jesus’ example as the way in which leaders should act within churches.

Instead of defining power as the ability to force or coerce people to act a certain way, Amy and the other people present understood power as the ability to offer care to others, to influence others through vulnerability. One example Mennonites often used to describe Jesus’ service was the act of washing the feet of his disciples, according to John 13:1-17. Jesus took the role of a formal servant in his society, and Mennonites today occasionally reenact this ritual as a memorial of Jesus’ instructions to lead others through service. In a group conversation about Anabaptist priorities, Isaac Watson said that the practices of the church were ways in which people could express their internal convictions: “When you're engaged physically in something, it's more meaningful. I think of some traditions, even things like foot washing, the Lord's supper, baptism are ways that we can take truth from here to here.” These rituals, all of which Jesus initiated or participated in, were ways Mennonites could express their internal convictions. Enacting the ritual was one way in which Mennonites demonstrated service within their community of practice, a value which they believed should be carried out from their congregations into their neighborhoods, based on Jesus’ example. Power was equated with the practice of service.
For Mennonites, reading the Bible Christologically meant that all interpretations led back to Jesus. The passages from Genesis and the epistles were all connected to the Jesus revealed in the Gospels. Elvin Thomas believed that Jesus’ incarnation, death, and resurrection initiated a reversal of the curse from Genesis 3 and promoted egalitarianism among the sexes. In the middle of a conversation on sexual differentiation, Elvin mused, “I don’t know how much we ever spent time on the whole impact of the Fall, and the restoration of the Fall. Because God certainly created male and female in his image. And the restoration of humankind from the impact of the Fall, seems to me, is all part of what we're talking about tonight. But something happened there at the Fall that put women in subjection to man.” The “restoration” that Elvin thought was important came through Jesus, and so Elvin interpreted Genesis from a Christological standpoint.

Other Mennonites applied the same Jesus-centered lens to the epistles. Rebecca Ward referenced the household codes in the epistles, which provided instructions for husbands and wives, masters and slaves, fathers and children. She said that the people in churches around her emphasized the few verses instructing wives to submit to their husbands, but they never approached the larger context of the text. Rebecca reasoned, “if we read in the context that it’s with slaves, and other oppressive pieces, it's teaching those who are in unjust systems how to act like Christ. Not a way to prescribe how society is meant to be structured.” As Rebecca interpreted the passage, both slavery and patriarchy were oppressive systems that Jesus Christ did not condone. For the focus group members, neither the rule of husband over wife in Genesis nor the command for wifely submission in the epistles was meant to be prescriptive for all people at all times. Rather, Rebecca agreed with Elvin that such systems were undermined by Jesus.

58 Ephesians 5:22-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1; 1 Peter 2:18—3:7
As participants in interpretive communities of practice, Mennonites influenced each other as they sought to understand the Bible and apply it in their congregations and relationships. As one example, they discussed various interpretations of the roles women could have in the church. The members of the one particular focus group were fairly consistent in their hermeneutical conclusions. When they read Genesis, they focused on the mythic precedents in the first three chapters, which they believed declared that male and female were created equally in God’s image and that a hierarchy between the sexes was not part of God’s original design for creation. In the epistles, their interpretations focused on the words of the text itself, and the importance of understanding the cultural, social, religious, and political context in which those words were penned. In the Gospels, they emphasized Jesus’ actions, which elevated the status of women in society and which entrusted women with spiritual responsibilities. In each case, they were interpreting the scriptures in a way that gave authority to their views that women should have equal roles with men in church ministry. Based on the conversations I had, it is evident that there are many individual Mennonites and congregations in Lancaster County who do not share these views, and who would offer alternative interpretations on Jesus’ life and on the other scriptures that were debated in our conversations. By reading different parts of the Bible as mythic precedent, as context-specific plans for church and family life, or as exemplary practice, Mennonites displayed their ability to interpret the scriptures in different ways that led to a variety of applications within their interpretive communities of practice.

Conclusion: Turning the Gem

There is a tradition in Judaism that studying and interpreting scripture is like turning a gem, seeing a single precious object from numerous perspectives. A midrash on the book of Numbers declares there are “seventy faces to the Torah” (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15-16 2021).
And Yohanan ben Bag Bag’s words, recorded in the Mishnah, encourage people to “Turn it over, and [again] turn it over, for all is therein” (Pirkei Avot 5:22 n.d.). Pastor and author Rob Bell approaches scripture in this way, “you keep turning it like a gem, letting the light refract through the various faces in new and unexpected ways” (2017, 79). Judaism has a long practice of offering alternative, sometimes conflicting, interpretations of scriptures. Christians also approach the scriptures from different angles, and these different interpretations result in a variety of practices that Christians follow in order to align themselves as participants in a specific community, real or imagined.

Christianity itself is like a multi-faceted gem, with each tradition presenting a different face of the mystery of God. Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Orthodoxy, Evangelicalism, Anabaptism, and many other streams offer a facet of God’s interaction with humanity. Within each tradition, there is variety of practice and varying perspectives. American Mennonites also have diverse viewpoints and reflect some of the other facets of Christianity. When Ervin Stutzman, former LMC moderator, was Executive Director of MC USA, he told a group of LMC leaders that their perspective on Anabaptism was vitally important. Josh Hollinger recalled the conversation: “He said, ‘MC USA is heavy in the peace and social justice stream.’ He said, ‘We need Lancaster Conference at the table because you bring more of like a charismatic stream or more of a gift of evangelism.’” To separate the mixed metaphors, turning the gem is a way of reading the biblical text again and again to find facets previously unseen. Living within a stream of Christianity, or sometimes at the confluence of streams, means to enact the interpretation of those readings.

Just as Mennonites offer many different interpretations of the Bible, they have varied ideas of the form a Mennonite community should take, and these diverse viewpoints affect how
individuals experience belonging. Like the scriptures, the Mennonite community is a multi-faceted gem that keeps turning, refracting the light and offering new perspectives. These various faces reflect the different ways in which Mennonites interpret scripture, but they also reflect people’s diverse communities of practice. Each congregation has its own rituals, routines, values, and vision. Individuals sometimes shift to a different congregation in order to find a place that aligns with their priorities and where they can feel a greater sense of belonging. Since the community, like a gem, keeps turning, or offering different interpretations of Mennonitism, individuals’ own sense of belonging is never stable. Instead, they also contribute to the changes within the church based on their own experiences and perspectives on life and faith.

Personal experience shapes how one thinks and acts, and new experiences can modify a person’s perspective, which results in changes in how they relate to their community of practice. In the focus group on women as pastors in Mennonite congregations, Rebecca Ward and Amy Watson admitted they were hesitant to attend. They were interested in the topic, but they did not think they would have anything to contribute. Amy confessed, “I felt like I really should have studied way more to come today.” I reassured the group members that I was not looking for theological experts or biblical scholars but wanted people who were willing to share their experiences within the Mennonite church. Amy said her confidence increased: “I can share my experience.” Some people, like Ellen Eby-Groff, did come to the group with books and other resources that they had used to study the topic. Formal study was part of Ellen’s experience, and some of the resources she received came from those who knew of her interest in church ministry. For Ellen, the encouragement she received from church friends led her to be ordained in her Mennonite conference, which changed her role and position within the community. Amy’s and
Rebecca’s experiences were less formal but no less important as they discussed their shifting theology and their greater eagerness to encourage women in church ministry.

Experience brings new perspectives, and people in Mennonite congregations found that they modified their views on women in leadership after situations where other people presented alternative viewpoints. As Rebecca Ward said in our focus group, she struggled for a long time because she had leadership gifts, but her church did not allow women to be pastors. Here, she belonged in practice but not in thought. When she attended college, she saw women in leadership for the first time and thought, “Well, this finally lines up with what I know in myself, but I can't catch up cognitively.” At this point, she still felt like she did not belong due to her upbringing. Because of her church background, Rebecca told our group, “I feel like I'm still catching up. Because even in the church that we just left, I was asked to preach on a number of occasions and was welcomed, but it was very clear that there would be no way that I could become one of the pastors, even on the pastoral team. That was still a limitation.” Had she been exposed to women in church leadership at a younger age, Rebecca was sure she would not be struggling as much now to try to reconcile the conflicting messages she was receiving from different congregations and from her own internal sense that she had a gift for church leadership. As Elvin Thomas pointed out, it is easier to catch the little foxes before they grow too big. In this case, it is easier to expose people to various theological perspectives and diverse church experiences at a young age so that they recognize that there are multiple ways of interpreting the Bible and enacting faith, even within the Mennonite tradition.

Mennonite congregations are interpretive communities of practice in which constituents learn from one another and engage in the act of vetting interpretations and practices that they find appropriate for their fellowship. In this way, congregants help define the parameters of
belonging, but it also means they can influence changes related to belonging. In each conversation with Mennonites and in my observations of group activities, they valued when the process of interpretation happened in collaboration with others. Each congregation or small group ultimately decided what was acceptable within their community of practice. Beth Keener talked about how their adult Sunday school class sometimes used lessons from other sources that differed from her own theology. She called those differences “a point of conversation. You don't have to agree with everything they say. The point is conversation.” She was comfortable bringing alternative ideas to the class, so that they could determine which concepts were important to their small group.

Amy Watson was aware that even if interpretation happened within a group, that group did not always reflect the demographics of those who would be affected by the decision. She did not like it when she was left out of conversations in the congregation that affected her role in the church. She really appreciated attending the focus group on women in church leadership because she told us: “I want to talk about this! This is the first time in my life that I've ever sat in a circle with people who were having an open discussion about women's ministry in the church. It was always like the men talked about it.” For Amy, it was important to include all people in the community of practice in the interpretive process because what “the men” decided impacted the entire congregation. Nate Evans was aware that keeping an interpretation to one’s self or contained only within a very small group could be detrimental to the church and to individuals. He gave several examples of dysfunctional Mennonite systems. He thought it was important to “be honest about, ‘Hey, guess what? We as Mennonites have screwed up too.’” By honestly discussing those issues, he thought the community could find healing and improve in the future. Individual Mennonites gather many different resources and perspectives to shape their attitudes
and behaviors, but the community of practice is the site where interpretations are challenged or accepted. A Mennonite interpretive community of practice is never static. It will continually reinterpret itself and its practices to correct shortcomings as people work together to learn and live their faith.

The Christian community, broadly defined, is both the product and progenitor of biblical interpretation and the site of application of those interpretations to people’s lives. The exploration of biblical hermeneutics among Mennonites displayed how the same scripture passage could be used in divergent ways. Each conference, congregation, or individual arrived at their particular understanding of the roles women could have in the Mennonite church based upon certain interpretations of the Bible. Not all interpretations were welcomed within each congregation, which caused some people to experience nonbelonging. Some congregations would not hire a female pastor because they believed that women should not have authority over men. Other times, individuals left a congregation with a female pastor and sought a different interpretive community whose practices aligned with their understanding of the roles women could have in the church. In other instances, individuals found communities who allowed them to explore alternative interpretations. In each case, people were making changes so that they could experience a greater sense of belonging where they were aligned with the congregation’s practices of faith and interpretations of Mennonitism.

Amy Watson recalled how she came to find a greater sense of internal belonging during a seminary course as she was researching the roles of women in Christian churches. She wrote in her paper, “For the first time in my life, I truly feel like I can be who God called me to be, and it doesn't matter so much what all the other voices are saying.” Her seminary classmates and her own personal experiences helped her become more confident in promoting women in leadership,
in contrast to what her childhood congregation, “the other voices,” had taught her. She recognized that, through the seminary course and in her current congregation, she had found interpretive communities of practice where she could belong.
Conclusion: A Living Hope

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

1 Peter 1:3 (NIV)

Centered on Jesus

In the year 1539, Menno Simons, a Catholic priest-turned-Anabaptist, wrote compellingly to instruct his audience in some of the fundamentals of Anabaptism: “We seek to walk humbly and uprightly in Christ Jesus, in the covenant of His grace, in His eternal peace, and to have a pious and peaceful conscience before the Lord” (Simons 1956, 130). Nearly half a millennium later, this emphasis on walking with Jesus Christ in grace and peace continues to define Mennonites in the United States. Miriam Eckman wanted the church to be a place where people were “extending grace, forbearance, and understanding. As long as we're keeping Jesus at the center. I think that's my deepest hope. And that kind of work starts with each of us individually.” Like many other Mennonites who use this language, Miriam did not give a complete definition of what it meant to keep Jesus at the center, but she was certain that centering one’s self on Jesus would affect the whole church.

Palmer Becker, a pastor and author, affirmed that Anabaptists focus “on the life and ministry of Jesus” rather than on Jesus’ death (2008, 4–5). He explained that Anabaptists apply this idea by practicing Christian discipleship, reading the Bible Christocentrically, and affirming Jesus as savior and Lord so that their allegiance is primarily to God, not to any human authority (Becker 2008, 6–8). These themes saturated my conversations with Mennonites as they talked about serving meals to their neighbors, moving away from a “flat” reading of the Bible, and recognizing their part in contributing to the kingdom of God.
Each person must make an effort to become like Jesus; it does not happen automatically. After all, Anabaptists are not passivists. Throughout conversations, Mennonites asserted that being Jesus-centered is important for the benefit of others, not only for one’s self, because faith is a communal endeavor. Kelly Swartzentruber was excited that her congregation was shifting away from a consumerist mindset in which people only came to church for their personal benefit. The congregation was becoming a “ministry pipeline” where people began to recognize their own gifts and contribute to the congregation and their neighborhood. Kelly said, “we are constantly equipping others to equip,” and she was amazed to see how people in the congregation gained more confidence in themselves and were taking roles they had refused to do several years ago. When the focus was no longer on themselves, Mennonites in that congregation were being transformed and were willing to practice their gifts and to train others to use their gifts.

Placing Jesus as the center is one distinction that Anabaptism contributes to Christianity. The Christocentric lens by which Anabaptists approach their faith offers a different perspective from the Spirit-filled charismatic traditions or hierarchically-ordered mainline traditions that portray God’s sovereignty and order. Anabaptists read the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and digest Jesus’ words to get an understanding of how they should live today, since they emphasize the practice of faith. However, Jesus is a conveniently elusive character who can be interpreted in many different ways. For Christians who want to be centered on Jesus, the dynamism means that there are many different interpretations of how one can place Jesus in the center. These interpretations can lead to divisions, as Anabaptists have demonstrated. Some Mennonites fear those rifts will harm the future of the church and their witness to the world. Others recognize that the resurrected Jesus offered new life to them personally, and they believe that renewed life is
also meant for the church communally. In this conclusion, I explain how progressive Mennonites created a community centered on hope through all of the challenges and divisions they faced. I will review the disparate elements that people used to define their religious identity, establish that individuals have power to influence belonging, and offer evidence of hope for the future as Mennonite church constituents find a place to belong in the fluid American religious landscape.

Creating a Centered Community

The Mennonite interpretive community of practice is a patchwork network of individuals of varied perspectives and experiences who choose to live, work, worship, and learn together. Throughout this work, I have pieced together different elements that contribute to a Mennonite identity and discuss how each patch offers persons a nuanced sense of belonging. Instead of focusing on how belonging is constructed by the Mennonite church at the institutional level, I have taken a narrower perspective to examine how individuals experience belonging and act in response to that sensation. Their stories reveal that belonging is fluid, and that those within the church have power to effect belonging for themselves and for others.

Mennonites lamented the conflicts they experienced and were aware of their own mottled religious history as a schismatic peace church. A study of Anabaptist-Mennonite history reveals a steady stream of critique within Lancaster County and beyond as Anabaptist groups separated to emphasize different aspects of their faith. Handman’s words about critical Christianity resonated with what I had learned about Mennonites, and offered a useful counterpoint. Handman explained how Christian social worlds are transformed by Gihu-Samane Christians through the process of critique (Handman 2015, 15–17). Likewise, Mennonites understand critique as a social project. They are not trying to create a church of disconnected individuals, but they advocate for a fellowship where each person has power to contribute to forming an
interpretive community of practice. Institutional schisms happen because people want to belong to a community where they feel like their ideas and behaviors are accepted.

Belonging is a framework that helps explain why conflicts arise in churches. As Mennonites discussed ecclesiastical controversies, they could not agree on a single factor that led to each rift. Rather, it became apparent that people disagreed because they had a different interpretation of a practice or value, and that difference made them feel a sense of nonbelonging. At one point, the role of women in church leadership was a central topic, but as Mennonites talked about the future of the church, they rarely mentioned ideas related to gendered roles. Though each conflict focused on a particular issue, such as clothing requirements, women in leadership, or licensing individuals in same-sex relationships, the roots of the tensions were always much deeper. Therefore, this study expanded beyond considering gender roles to examining the different factors that led to church schisms and interpersonal struggles.

Navigating between the personal and communal perspectives shows how individuals function as agents of religious and political change within a particular group. Mahmood framed agency as “a modality of action,” which sometimes, but not exclusively, involved resisting social norms (Mahmood 2005, 157). Mahmood’s work is useful in noting how agency appears different based on the people involved and the political and cultural context. Mennonite men and women who wanted women to be pastors did resist the prevailing norm in their congregations, but they also appealed to wider Christian traditions by seeking God’s gifts in people’s lives and understanding and interpreting the Bible in various ways. Their efforts were both distinct from their Mennonite conferences but also within the realm of historic Anabaptist repertoire. The change has been gradual, but, by working within the institution, men and women changed Mennonite church policies while also retaining their distinct Mennonite identity.
This research among Mennonites is important because conflict will arise again, and no disturbance arises from a single factor. Instead, tensions and separations are based upon clashes in an interconnected web of ideas. When conflicts occur, people are impacted differently. Each conflict shifts the balance of belonging so that some who had sensed nonbelonging now experience belonging, and those who felt like they belonged now feel like they are on the margins. Understanding how individuals are affected and how they have transitioned through each schism can guide Mennonites who experience church tensions in the future.

Throughout this dissertation, I have defined belonging as an experience that is fashioned by institutional factors and an individual’s reaction to those conditions. The tension between individual and institution becomes more visible during times of conflict, when the institution takes a firm stance and its constituents must decide how they will respond. I explained the conflict between LMC and MC USA in the introduction, and described how it created internal tension for a few individuals and congregations who eventually left LMC. The schism between the denomination and the conference had been building for years, even decades, since the two organization were based upon different polities. In chapter 1, I demonstrated that the history of the Mennonite church affects people in the present, no matter how long they have been part of the church. For those who have decided to belong to a particular congregation or conference, their experience of belonging is conditioned by the larger networks and histories of which that group is part. In chapter 2, I expanded upon the concept of belonging as a precarious interaction between individual and group, which set the stage for how individuals reacted to the institutional conditions that arose in the following chapters. Chapter 3 focused specifically on LMC and covered the transition from mandated nonconformity to the challenge to gendered hierarchy to considering how various persons have God-given gifts for leadership. The discussion of gifts led
directly into the call narratives in chapter 4. Throughout the call process, individuals wrestled with internal insecurities and personal and institutional obstacles, and were able to fulfill their call if they had sufficient affirmation from friends and from their conference and congregation. In this way, people were able to belong to the Mennonite community in a new way, and they also found a greater sense of belonging within themselves. Lastly, in chapter 5, I presented the concept of interpretive communities of practice to describe how individuals contribute their own ideas to the community, how they value input from other Mennonites, and how they prioritize practicing their faith based upon the way they read the Bible.

**Centered in Hope**

At the end of the interviews with people from Mennonite congregations, I asked about each person’s hopes for the future. It was an open-ended question, and people gave a variety of responses. Individuals shared about personal hopes or things that had come up in conversation. Many of them spoke about their optimistic perspective on the future of the Mennonite church. I found their responses intriguing in light of our conversations, which centered around their frustrations with current church structures or conflicts with challenging personalities. It became apparent that people believed the church would continue its work, even if it moved forward in much the same way it had existed previously. People believed there would be congregations and conferences that emphasized different facets of Mennonitism. There would be varying experiences of belonging, but as long as people continued to affirm one another, they could find a space to belong within the church. There would be more conflicts that demonstrated that the whole interpretive community of practice is continually critiquing itself, while also displaying that it values the community and wants it to continue as a source of support and instruction.
Regarding their hope for the church, people spoke about their personal desires for what the church should be, ways that they thought individual gifts could aid the congregation, and a definitive desire to let God lead the church. Even though they had personal visions for the church, they did not feel responsible for what ultimately happened with the church. As Dustin Penner declared: “It's still God's church. It may not just be the same people in control, which maybe is what needs to happen.” Like Dustin, other Mennonites trusted God would care for the church, even if that meant living through significant changes.

Each person who spoke about having hope for the future of the church indicated that they were excited to see what each congregation would become. I was keenly aware of the way their responses appeared to be disconnected from our forgoing conversation. Even though they had just spent time telling me that they were disappointed by the changes between LMC and MC USA, they were now excited to see how the church would transform in the future. Tanner Wiebe noticed how resilient the congregation has been: “The things that have happened in this church's past would be crushing blows for any congregation. Any of the things and all the things combined, would wipe out a church. But yeah, they keep on going.” Tanner did not claim any credit for the congregation’s survival, and he and Melody were both willing to radically change the church structure or close the church doors if they needed to, but neither of them thought that time had come yet. In fact, they used the metaphor of resurrection to describe the new life in the congregation. Melody affirmed, “It feels like the Spirit has been at work, kind of renewing and refreshing the congregation and their relationships with each other.” If the Spirit of God was active in their presence, they were going to allow the Spirit to effect resurrection.

Martin Long had been in several congregations in the midst of conflict, and he chose to see the promise in those fellowships instead of abandoning them. In his current position, he
thought the trials that the congregation had endured were “a gift,” even if the people were still trying to figure out what their future would look like. Martin maintained, “I'm genuinely curious to see what's going to happen here. As I said, I feel like there's a lot of potential. There's a lot of strength here. That's one of fun things about being a pastor, really. It's never the same.” Kelly Swartzentruber was part of a different congregation that was also undergoing a transition. In the midst of that, so many people were volunteering to serve the church and community that they were expanding the number of ministry roles. Kelly was delighted: “I am getting very excited about seeing people wake up. Wake up and start using their gifts. And I say that in a way that I know that I wasn't [using my gifts] either.” She recognized that the transition in the congregation led to positive change and noted how congregants were being personally transformed in a way that inspired others and created better relationships with people in and out of the congregation.

The conviction that God was leading the church gave Mennonites confidence that the church would continue, even if the future church was organized in an unfamiliar way or functioned differently. Rachel’s perspective on the future was three-fold. She wanted to discover what was “next beyond traditional church” so that the Christians would move outside the doors of the church instead of maintaining the same habits and working to draw people in. She also wanted the building itself and, by extension, the people in it to be “a resource for our community that builds the kingdom in this area.” Like Martin, she sensed the potential within the congregation and hoped to help them “understand who they are now as a people of God and what has God called them specifically to.” She was convinced that she had the gifts the congregation needed to achieve that vision, and she was glad that they allowed her to “fully use” her gifts. Miriam agreed that the current traditional model of church might fade, but she was not discouraged: “So, I really don't believe the church is going to go away. It might look different.
But it's not going to go away. I just have too much hope. The church is going to continue long after we're gone.” In fact, she was enthusiastic because she was aware that the mission of the church was beyond her: “I just think there's probably nothing more exciting than being involved in the life of the church. God's Spirit just doesn't stop.” If the church looked different in the future, these Mennonite leaders were sure that it was because the Spirit of God had led them in a new direction. Through all of the translations into new contexts and re-interpretations in familiar settings, the worldwide Christian church, including its Mennonite iteration, continues.

Just as some individuals received a calling from God for their roles, Mennonites believed that the church as a whole had a mission from God. Cora Meyer quoted Jesus’ words in Luke 17:21, “Surely the kingdom of God is among us.” She said this verse was important to her because she thought it explained what “the church is called to be. That every person holds a piece of that kingdom of God that God wants to bring into fullness.” Then she applied that general vision to herself: “So, to me, that's what drives my willingness to expose myself to other people that are very different, to want to understand and hear other perspectives. Because I've only got such a small angle and piece of the kingdom, and all the rest of it is right here, out there ready to come into bloom as we all figure out together what it's supposed to look like.” Nate Evans was aware that the church did not always reflect its loyalty to God’s reign. He believed that the church’s true allegiance was to Jesus Christ, not to any person or nation, and he hoped that Mennonites and all Christian would live so “that the church would be the representative of Christ on Earth.” Despite the denominational quarrels, pastors and congregants believed that the church had a larger mission to enact God’s grace in the world.

Through their responses, these Mennonites taught me what it meant to be centered on Jesus. It meant that they were certain that God, incarnated in Jesus and raised to life again, could
continue to give life to the church, the living representation of the body of Christ, and that they had a part to play in the work of God’s kingdom already present among them. With this mindset, they were aware that they did not have to fear for the future of the church. Even pastors, whose livelihoods came from the church and who had invested a lot of energy in their Mennonite congregations, did not ultimately feel responsible for saving the church. Since it was God who called them to the work, it was God who was accountable for the future of the church, and these Mennonites had a deep trust in God and God’s ability to bring resurrection and offer living hope.

A Centered Circle

Discussing visions for the church made me think about each time I prepare to start a new quilt, when I form an idea of what I expect it will be. When I begin, I cannot help thinking it is strange that I would cut up a perfectly good piece of fabric into small pieces only to stitch it together with other pieces that I have cut from other yards of complete cloth. Mennonites had the same dilemma when they questioned why a peace church would keep splitting. They will have to decide for themselves whether the schisms are worthwhile or if they should learn to be at peace with their differences. For the quilt, the resulting combination is more aesthetically pleasing than sewing together swaths of uncut fabric. I do not cut up fabric for the pure pleasure of uniting material and metal blade, but rather, I have an idea in mind of its potential, of what it can become when united with other patches cut from different cloth.

The work of piecing a quilt aligns with Cora’s idea of the church as a place where everyone brings a “piece of that kingdom of God.” Each patch comes in different shapes and sizes, cut from different cloth, but the united effort has a different beauty that is unique to the community that created it. The full pattern of a quilt is never apparent at first. It begins as a stack of patches, of varying colors, shapes, and sizes. These are slowly united into new combinations,
turned and shifted to form a coherent pattern. The various elements in this dissertation all form a patchwork comforter. They create a “Mennonite,” in the sense of the story from the introduction. Mennonite history and present priorities, nonconformity and gender roles, gifts and calling, and biblical hermeneutics are all patches that were handed to me as I met with progressive Lancaster County Mennonites. I have stitched them together with the thread of belonging and the understanding that belonging is ever-changing, as the interpretive community of practice continues to redefine itself. The Mennonite community will take these patches and continue to piece them together, critiquing the design, and forming new patterns in the future.

The church sewing circle is a living example of a Mennonite community of practice where each person belongs in different ways and comes with various gifts. It is an intentional gathering where people from diverse backgrounds and experiences join together with a single mission. The goal is to create finished comforters. Some of the women have been sewing for decades. Others learn only when they join the sewing circle. Each woman has learned to sew in the same way they learned to be part of the church: by watching others, practicing, making mistakes, persevering in their task, and switching positions so that they could get a better perspective on the work. There may have been some formal training, but, most of the time, they learn from each other. Sometimes a woman would bring snacks to share, or another person would bring music to play in the background while everyone works. Each woman contributed her gifts to the group, according to her ability.

Interacting with and working alongside others in the sewing circle demonstrated how Mennonites can be centered on Jesus. Since Mennonites take the life and teaching of Jesus as the model for their life and faith, they have a particular vision for how they should behave. The women in the sewing circle were not working on a project specifically for the church, nor was
the conversation saturated with theological terms or spiritual concerns. Rather, they all had a common vision for finished the comforter that was in front of them. As each person sat around the quilt frame, with a needle and embroidery floss, we worked toward the center. That was our goal, and the conversations and interruptions and breaks from the work did not change the fact that the mission was to arrive at the center of each comforter. We did not start in the middle of the quilt frame because we could not reach it. As we completed one edge of the comforter, we rolled the quilt frame toward the center. All women working on that side moved together, helping each other. Each person sat at a different spot and had a different perspective on the comforter. We worked at different speeds, but we all moved steadily inward. This physical example of movement elucidates that being centered on Jesus does not mean that every word, thought, or action has to be about Jesus. Rather, it means that living like Jesus is the central goal, and nothing that happens in a person’s life or in the institution’s history erases that goal.

Within the sewing circle, belonging happened when each person arrived that day and decided to contribute something toward the group’s goal. Since the sewing circle met in the church building, there were often other people who would be at the church, and they would stop by and chat before continuing on their way. Often one of the pastors would wander into the room, admire the work, munch on some of the snacks that were offered, and then return to their other tasks for the day. In this way, the work of the church continued, whether it was preparing sermons or knotting comforters. All Mennonites are invited into an imagined sewing circle where they go on, cutting, arranging, and stitching together each patch into an ever-changing arrangement, teaching their skills to future generations who will add their own patches and create their own patterns. The church goes on, sending more Mennonites out into the world.
Appendix A: Interview and Focused Group Details

I conducted 33 semi-structured interviews with Mennonite individuals and four focused groups on specific topics. Of the 33 individuals interviewed, 28 of them are currently in ACC. Eighteen of those 28 people recently transferred to an ACC congregation from an LMC congregation. In all of the interviews, 23 of 33 people are either in LMC or have recent LMC experience. Those listed as currently in ACC did not mention any significant interaction with LMC, if they had any prior interaction.

### Interviews with Mennonite Individuals

(All names of participants and congregations are pseudonyms unless noted)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People currently in LMC</th>
<th>People who had recent experience in LMC and who are currently in ACC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Josh Hollinger, pastor</td>
<td>Jacki Dietrich, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly Schwartzentruber, exploring pastoral ministry</td>
<td>Ellen Eby-Groff, chaplain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melody Wiebe, pastor</td>
<td>Miriam Eckman, congregant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanner Wiebe, pastor</td>
<td>Pearl Gehman, congregant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick Zeiset, pastor</td>
<td>Lou Groff, congregant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*People currently in ACC (No recent LMC experience)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shana Bushong, congregant</td>
<td>Rachel Huber, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy Denlinger, EMC* Administrator</td>
<td>Alan Klassen, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate Evans, EMC Lead Pastor</td>
<td>Susannah Kreider, chaplain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey Kane, EMC Associate Pastor of Worship</td>
<td>Martin Long, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth Keener, EMC Minister of Congregational Care</td>
<td>Cora Meyer, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Peters, former pastor</td>
<td>Sofia Meyer, congregant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosanna Peters, congregant</td>
<td>Clint Miller, congregant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merv Stoltzfus**, Executive Conference Minister</td>
<td>Dustin Penner, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colette Thiessen, EMC Director of Children and Youth</td>
<td>Janice Reimer, congregant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnamed Person</td>
<td>Norman Reimer, former pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joyce Sangrey, pastor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Richard Spangler, congregant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Eastland Mennonite Church

**No pseudonym; name used with permission

### Focused Group Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Question</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should women be pastors?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Call: What does it mean for God to call people today?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is a missional church?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should be the main priorities of the Anabaptist-Mennonite church today?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Anabaptist Mennonite Network’s Seven Core Convictions

1. Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. He is the source of our life, the central reference point for our faith and lifestyle, for our understanding of church and our engagement with society. We are committed to following Jesus as well as worshipping him.

2. Jesus is the focal point of God’s revelation. We are committed to a Jesus-centred approach to the Bible, and to the community of faith as the primary context in which we read the Bible and discern and apply its implications for discipleship.

3. Western culture is slowly emerging from the Christendom era when church and state jointly presided over a society in which almost all were assumed to be Christian. Whatever its positive contributions on values and institutions, Christendom seriously distorted the gospel, marginalised Jesus and has left the churches ill-equipped for mission in a post-Christendom culture. As we reflect on this, we are committed to learning from the experience and perspectives of movements such as Anabaptism that rejected standard Christendom assumptions and pursued alternative ways of thinking and behaving.

4. The frequent association of the church with status, wealth and force is inappropriate for followers of Jesus and damages our witness. We are committed to vulnerability and to exploring ways of being good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted, aware that such discipleship may attract opposition, resulting in suffering and sometimes ultimately martyrdom.

5. Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission, places of friendship, mutual accountability and multi-voiced worship. As we eat together, sharing bread and wine, we sustain hope as we seek God’s kingdom together. We are committed to nurturing and developing such churches, in which young and old are valued, leadership is consultative, roles are related to gifts rather than gender and baptism is for believers.

6. Spirituality and economics are inter-connected. In an individualist and consumerist culture and in a world where economic injustice is rife, we are committed to finding ways of living simply, sharing generously, caring for creation and working for justice.

7. Peace is at the heart of the gospel. As followers of Jesus in a divided and violent world, we are committed to finding non-violent alternatives and to learning how to make peace between individuals, within and among churches, in society and between nations.

Taken from: https://amnetwork.uk/
Appendix C: Ephesians 5:15-29

New International Version (2011)
15 Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. 18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Instructions for Christian Households
21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing of water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

New American Standard Bible
15 So then, be careful how you walk, not as unwise people but as wise, 16 making the most of your time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, in which there is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your hearts to the Lord; 20 always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to our God and Father; 21 and subject yourselves to one another in the fear of Christ.

Marriage like Christ and the Church
22 Wives, subject yourselves to your own husbands, as unto the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church; and he is the Savior of the body. 24 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. 28 So husbands also ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself;

New King James Version
Walk in Wisdom
15 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, 16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; 20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another in the fear of God.

Marriage—Christ and the Church
22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. 24 Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and without blemish. 28 So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself.
Works Cited


Atlantic Coast Conference. 2011. “Atlantic Coast Conference of the Mennonite Church Bylaws.”


Bishop Board Minutes, 1980-2005. Box Bishop Board 008, Mennonite Life Archives, Lancaster, PA.

Bishop Board Minutes, 2006-2019. Box Bishop Board 010, Mennonite Life Archives, Lancaster, PA.


Brown, Brené. 2007. I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn’t). New York: Avery.


Fish, Stanley. 1980. *Is There a Text in the Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.


