Eight Ways to Strengthen Mennonite Peacebuilding

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Introduction

The Martyrs Mirror, as its name suggests, offers images and reflections of Mennonite suffering. The Global Mennonite Peacebuilding Conference and Festival in June 2016 provided an opportunity to hold up a “peacebuilding mirror” and reflect on our collective peacebuilding. What have Mennonites learned about peacebuilding over the last 500 years? We have some shining contributions and stories to tell. We also have some significant flaws.

When I arrived in Afghanistan in 2010 to research the peace process,1 a tribal elder welcomed me, saying, “Ah, you are from the tribe called Mennonite.” I think he meant this as a compliment. It echoed what Mennonites found in Somalia, where they are known as the “peace clan.”2 I came to Afghanistan on the coattails of Mennonite humanitarians who had befriended and supported Muslim peacebuilding in the region over many decades. Being part of the Mennonite tribe signaled that I was not part of the military tribe. This increased my safety and my ability to work.

Mennonites have contributed to global peace and the relief of suffering. We are quite gifted at loving people in far-off corners of the world. Peacebuilding experts in the United Nations, in governments around the world, rabbis in the US, imams in Muslim centers like Qom, Iran, and others regard Mennonite peacebuilding as exemplary. Mennonite peacebuilding is making noteworthy contributions to the wider field of peacebuilding. At the UN, more than a dozen high-level staff have degrees in conflict transformation from Mennonite-affiliated schools. In remote parts of the world, Mennonite-trained practitioners are hard at work protecting human rights and building relationships between conflicted groups. Mennonite

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Central Committee (MCC) is supporting local peace efforts in hundreds of communities. And in New York and Washington, Mennonites are promoting peace to the UN, the US Congress, and the Pentagon.

Mennonite peacebuilding is also responsible for promoting key peacebuilding ideas. Matthew 5 records Jesus’ call for people to love their enemies. The impetus to reach out and listen to people with who are different and hold opposing beliefs is central to peacebuilding. Mennonites have played a key role in promoting the idea that negotiation and dialogue between people in conflict is an important element in transforming conflict.

Mennonite emphasis on supporting local communities reflects a belief that Jesus often spoke and lived with the poor and those referred to as “the least of these.” Local ownership and empowerment of local actors is often rare in the world of secular peacebuilding and development that relies on top-down approaches where white “experts” tell local people of color how to solve their problems. A more humble approach focuses less on outside superstars who come in and make big changes. Instead, peacebuilding should empower and highlight the vision and hard work of local people, who are their own experts and guides to a just peace.

However, there is an underside to this public witness for peace. Mennonites are not so gifted at loving their neighbors within the church in the midst of conflict or theological disagreement. Amongst our own tribe, we have had 500 years of internal conflict and division. We have a history of ugliness and social persecution of each other. Our communal culture teaches us to give icy stares and cold shoulders, and to use the well-known social torture technique of “the silent treatment.” While Mennonite peacebuilding has gained attention and reputation in the wider world, within the Anabaptist community peacebuilding skills and practices are scarce. One of the most striking elements of Mennonite peacebuilding is a vast disparity between being able to help others through conflict yet being relatively unable to transform major and minor differences and conflicts within the church.\(^3\)

The field of peacebuilding stresses the value of self-reflection. We can do effective peacebuilding only if we take time to reflect on what works.

well and what is challenging. What didn’t work, and what can we learn from our failures? As we reflect on 500 years of peace and conflict within the Mennonite church, we need to look in the mirror—both to pat ourselves on the back for our peacebuilding and to consider how we might improve it in the future.

This article examines and juxtaposes the gifts, challenges, and blind spots for interpreting an Anabaptist theology of love of enemies and peacbuilding. It presents a two-handed approach to peacbuilding, and discusses commonalities and differences in Mennonite communities exploring creation care, and dealing with sexual violence, racism, white supremacy, and the inclusion of LGBTQ people in the church. The article began in a set of eight art pieces I created in preparation for the Global Mennonite Peacebuilding Conference and Festival. Several of the pieces challenge Mennonites to listen more closely in order to remember that Anabaptism was born on the margins of the church, and that today we must continue to listen to voices on the margins. Together this article and the art ask this question: How might we bring more integrity to Mennonite peacbuilding? Below I offer eight ways to strengthen Mennonite peacbuilding, each accompanied by a related art piece.

1. **Embrace a Two-Handed Approach**

Echoing other Protestants, Mennonite theologians have advocated a two-kingdom theology, where Mennonites live in God's kingdom while the State rules the secular kingdom. Some Mennonites interpret this approach to mean that we should withdraw from the secular kingdom, and not challenge or resist its direct or structural violence. Both conservative and progressive Mennonites do withdraw from the secular kingdom and are counter-cultural in significant ways. However, two-kingdom theology becomes problematic when it is used to justify apathy toward an unjust status quo for other social groups suffering from state policies. It also can play a role in justifying Mennonite support for aggressive state policies and leaders. It can suggest

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4 I presented the article with the artwork as part of the keynote opening addresses at the event. I used Mennonite art forms in plain birch panels, and then aged and distressed the wood to make them look like older artifacts. At Eastern Mennonite University, we integrate art into our teaching.
that Mennonites can both be pacifists and allow the state to use violent actions to secure the interests of the White upper class.

Two-kingdom theology does not provide an adequate platform for understanding the challenges of peacebuilding. In a democracy, Mennonites have the right and responsibility to engage with the state. The state is a complex mix of governance for the public good (hospitals, roads, schools) and taxation for war, unfair trade rules, and policies that discriminate and harm people. While it is rare to have options for voting that reflect Mennonite values, Mennonites still have an obligation to use their power to vote for political leaders who offer the least harm and the most good.

Mennonite peacebuilding requires a “two-handed theology,” whereby we both reach out one hand to love those with whom we disagree, and put one hand up to resist injustice and to push and advocate for justice and peace. Instead of imagining that Mennonites live in an imaginary and otherworldly kingdom, we should be engaging directly with governments to challenge and urge reform toward values that reflect Jesus’ teachings on human dignity.

Figure 1 illustrates a two-handed approach to peacebuilding. Feminist scholar and nonviolence practitioner Barbara Deming borrowed Buddhist teachings to develop this approach to nonviolence in her book Revolution and Equilibrium.

With one hand we say to one who is angry, or to an oppressor, or to an unjust system, “Stop what you are doing. I refuse to honor the role you are choosing to play. I refuse to obey you. I refuse to cooperate with your demands. I refuse to build the walls and the bombs. I refuse to pay for the guns. With this hand I will even interfere with the wrong you are doing. I want to disrupt the easy pattern of your life.” But then the advocate of nonviolence raises the other hand. It is raised out-stretched – maybe with love and sympathy, maybe not – but always outstretched. . . . With this hand we say, “I won’t let go of you or cast you out of the human race. I have faith that you can make a better choice than you are making now, and I’ll be here when you are ready. Like it or not, we are part of one another.”

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A two-handed theology provides Mennonite peacebuilding with a biblical focus on love of enemies and victims through offering both a hand out in relationship to those with whom we disagree and acknowledging the structures of power and privilege that must be pushed to bring about change. In a two-handed theology of peacebuilding we must find ways to love the Taliban and the US military, to demand that Black Lives Matter, and to find a

way to love the police, Palestinians and Israelis, and victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse.

2. Move beyond Enemy Language
When I went to Iraq with MCC in 2005, Iraqi peacebuilders told me directly, “It is great that you Mennonites teach and support people in community-based peacebuilding, but what we really need you to do is to teach your government and military about peacebuilding. Peacebuilding doesn’t land in a helicopter. It grows from the ground up.”

From my point of view, based on listening to local people across Asia and Africa, directly educating and challenging the US military to understand peacebuilding is a natural extension of the journey of Mennonite peacebuilding and love for those with whom we disagree. When I started attending and speaking at military conferences and training military units in peacebuilding, some Mennonites questioned whether this was a “Mennonite” approach to peacebuilding. Some denounced me. Some wrote in church papers that I could not be Mennonite if I engaged with the US military. For them, working with the military was a distraction from, or even a betrayal of, the real work of Mennonite peacebuilding. Instead of engaging with the US military, some said I should be trying to dialogue with Al Qaeda or teaching the Taliban about peacebuilding. In their purity narrative, engaging with the military defiled the whole community and was a departure from the Mennonite path.

What this criticism toward my work highlighted was the confusion and inconsistency in how Mennonites define and use the word “enemy.” Mennonites adopt “enemy” language from Matthew 5, where Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to do good to those who harm us. How do we define an enemy today? Linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff highlights the common problem in how we communicate. The very language we use shapes the way we think. If we talk about enemies, we must first find enemies. Language matters. The word “enemy” is deeply problematic.

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The US military is required to refer to an adversary as an “enemy.” Military doctrine is full of references on how to “engage the enemy.” In this context, “engage” means “use violence.” To engage the enemy means to drop a bomb or fire a weapon at another group of people. When I speak at conferences in the Pentagon or on military bases, I challenge the military’s requirement to think in terms of an “enemy.” The world is not a simple matter of dividing people into camps of allies and enemies. In many regions, local people are just as afraid of the US military as they are of insurgents or terrorist groups. These people are stakeholders. They have a stake in what happens to their community, and the US military should listen to them and respect them.

Peacebuilders do not use the word “enemy,” since this term is seen as unhelpful and dehumanizing, falsely asserting that the blame lies only on one side and limiting the understanding of all the people affected by conflict. Instead, the peacebuilding field uses the term “stakeholders” to refer to everyone who has a stake in a conflict, including those waging conflict and those suffering from it. The core principle in peacebuilding is to engage with all stakeholders, to address the needs and interests of all groups.

When Mennonites talk about loving their enemies, they often refer to the state’s enemies. However, the state’s enemies are not the Mennonites’ enemies. We need to think harder about those with whom we disagree. Often they are not far-off strangers but people who live close to us, such as people in the US military, people who voted differently than we do, or neighbors who think differently than we do. Mennonites take pride in their relationships with the state’s enemies in Iran and Palestine, but many balk at talking to the US military, the Israeli settler, the neighbor who voted for Trump, or the religious leader who denounces LGBTQ people. To accept the state’s definition of “the enemy” is to make a serious error. Jesus’ teaching to “love enemies” applies to all those with whom we disagree, both far and near.

Mennonites laud the opportunity to have dinner with the president of Iran as an opportunity to love “our enemy.” But how does this differ from speaking on a panel or sharing dinner with a US military general to discuss

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peacebuilding, or reaching out to dialogue with a conservative religious leader who advocates hatred toward Palestinians or LGBTQ people? The language of “enemies” becomes problematic in either scenario. If you are engaging in a relationship with someone, you are seeing that person’s humanity. This is the point of Jesus’ teaching. To call any person an enemy is an act of conflict in itself, and introduces unnecessary friction into a relationship.

While Mennonites can link our engagement with stakeholders or with all sides of a conflict on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5, we don’t need to call people our enemies. This language twists our understanding of humanity and
building peace. It should not be surprising or scandalous for Mennonites to talk to the military, to Trump voters, Israeli settlers, sexual offenders, or the preacher or white nationalist shouting extremism. It should be a logical part of our pacifism. Mennonite peacebuilders need to think of loving all those with whom we disagree, those who suffer, and those who are our neighbors. We need to love everyone—including people in the military.

Figure 2 illustrates the work of planting seeds of peace in the Pentagon. One idea seed is for the US military to no longer require usage of the term “enemy.” If we learn the world is a complex place, full of ambiguity and people with mixed interests, we are more likely to be cautious about using force. The concept of an enemy is simplistic, blinding us from shared interests and a shared humanity. Mennonites too can recall this when we start slipping into enemy language.

3. **Rethink Martyrdom in a Mennonite-Muslim Dialogue**

A martyr is someone who suffers or dies for his or her convictions. A martyr is someone with a choice, but a victim has no choice. A victim suffers for no good cause. In Christianity, Jesus is viewed as dying on behalf of the good of others. In the *Martyrs Mirror*, the community of believers remembers and honors Anabaptists who suffered for their beliefs. Martyrdom seems to make suffering seem worthwhile. Today we hear of martyrs who die wearing a suicide vest that kills others. This concept of martyrdom is quite different from the idea of being willing to die to help save others. Martyrdom is a dangerous concept: it can glorify suffering and it can justify violence. How can Mennonites explore martyrdom together with Muslims?

Michael Sattler was one of the earliest Anabaptists to risk death for his pacifism. Authorities martyred him largely because of his refusal to fight Muslims. At his trial, Sattler was reported to have said that “if the Turks should invade the country, no resistance ought to be offered them; and if it were right to wage war, he would rather take the field against the Christians than against the Turks; and it is certainly a great matter, to set the greatest enemies of our holy faith against us.” Sattler died as a martyr, willing to give

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his life for his belief in not killing others.

At a time when prominent political leaders blame Muslims and cry out for a war against Islam as well as immigrants, Mennonites offer a different view. At Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), Muslims come to study peacemaking and they tell us they leave as better Muslims. In fact, we have more Muslim women wearing head coverings at EMU than we have

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Mennonite women doing so.

Figure 3 illustrates the teaching in Matthew 5, and the relationship between Mennonites and Muslims. Three of my colleagues have been martyred because of their work for peace in Muslim countries. Glen Lapp, an MCC volunteer in Afghanistan, was killed along with nine other humanitarians delivering health care to remote Afghan villages. Javaid Akhtar was killed in Pakistan by militant groups opposing his work with Just Peace Initiatives, a program started by EMU graduate Ali Gohar. Tom Fox, a member of Christian Peacemaker Teams in Iraq, was killed because of his human rights advocacy on behalf of Muslim men in Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. A top Muslim cleric in London and Muslim Brotherhood leaders in Iran called for those holding Fox’s CPT team hostage to release these good men.11

Of course many other thousands of people have died in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. Most of them are innocent victims who did not choose to risk their lives for peace. But there are a significant number of Afghans, Pakistanis, and Iraqis, as well as people from other countries who are devoted to peace and the dignity of all human beings. For that cause they are willing to die. They are potential martyrs. How can Mennonites work with Muslims to rethink the concept of martyrdom today? In an increasingly Islamophobic world, Mennonite voices are on the margins. Nevertheless, Mennonites have an important and unique role in reaching out to Muslims and working together for peace.

4. Listen to Victims

The Martyrs Mirror image of Dirk Willems is a common symbol of Mennonite love of enemies. Willems was an Anabaptist who escaped from prison, where he was serving a death sentence for his beliefs. The prison guard chases him across a frozen pond. The guard falls through the ice. Instead of running away and saving himself, Willems rescues his pursuer. Like Michael Sattler, Willems is held up as a martyr to revere. Willems went so far as to save not just any life but the life of an official who would later put him to death.

Like martyrdom, Mennonites focus on love of the “enemy” as the
ultimate expression of faith. That may be fine and good in many contexts, but the celebration of martyrdom and love of enemies can silently ignore victims who have no choice in their suffering. In the case of sexual violence, churches often extend an embrace to offenders while doing little to support victims. Some Mennonite theologians who spoke out most clearly to bring an end to war were covertly assaulting female students and colleagues in Mennonite institutions.\(^\text{12}\) While Mennonites have had a significant voice in

\(^{12}\) Rachel Waltner Goossen, “Defanging the Beast”: Mennonite Responses to John Howard
advocating for the end of war, Mennonite women have waged an internal nonviolent struggle to end sexual violence within the church and to recognize the violence of processes that silence victims. How is it that the church most concerned with state violence has fallen significantly behind the state’s efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence? What happens when Mennonites are called to love both victims and oppressors? What does it really mean for Mennonites to love offenders? Does it mean looking the other way or forgiving them even when they continue to abuse? Or does it mean holding them to account and insisting that the abuse stop?13

Figure 4 is a reimagined portrait of the Dirk Willems story. In this version, Willems symbolizes the Mennonite church reaching out to save a perpetrator of sexual violence. Around the offender in the water is a victim of the sexual perpetrator. The victim continues to drown while the church reaches out to rescue the perpetrator. Advocates against sexual violence witness the church’s one-sided approach to protect the dignity and life of the perpetrator. Mennonites are called to love both victims and offenders. Our peace theology has not caught up with the dilemma of how to keep victims in the center of our peacebuilding when they challenge the church’s integrity. In sexualized violence, the church rushes to love “the enemy.” We must listen to the voices of victims on the margins. The integrity of Mennonite peacebuilding depends upon the ability to prevent sexualized violence in the church.

5. Foster Diversity and Undo White Supremacy

I grew up in Bluffton Mennonite Church in Ohio, singing “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in God’s sight….” That song was my first introduction to the concept that Black Lives Matter, as illustrated in Figure 5. Yet I rarely saw anyone who was not white in the pulpit of my church. Mennonites cannot be a prophetic voice for peace in a diverse world if only Swiss, German, or Russian Mennonites head most of our institutions. We have to break out of the

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There is a genetic disorder known as Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS) shared by many Swiss German Mennonites. My immediate and extended family suffers from this disease of the connective tissues. Our ankles, wrists, knees and shoulders rip and tear, and we have had many surgeries. We end up wearing braces and taping our bodies to keep our internal tissues together. There is irony in this genetic ailment. The physical bodies of some ethnic Mennonites with EDS mirror the body of the church. The Nigerian novelist
Chinua Achebe wrote a book called *Things Fall Apart* to describe life in the Igbo tribe. I think this is also an apt title for the tribe called Mennonite. The genetic and Swiss-German cultural dominance in Mennonite institutions is not an asset but a liability. For too long, the Mennonite church leadership chose mostly white male managers who practice conformity and management rather than creative and visionary leadership. This protects the white ethnic hold on institutional power, but it does not provide the creativity or vision to renew and foster growth.

Drew Hart’s *Trouble I’ve Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* articulates the problems with church blindness to race and racism. Because Mennonites themselves suffered persecution and because they do good works in the world, there seems to be an unstated belief that they cannot possibly be racist. Yet the assumptions of white superiority are found in every aspect of Mennonite cultural and religious life. In *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*, Ben Goossen examines the relationship between Mennonites and German nationalism during the 19th and 20th centuries. He documents how white German nationalism helped to form Mennonite identity as “a chosen nation” and included acceptance of Nazi racial identification.

Efforts to educate Mennonite institutions and staff about racism and white privilege have faced tremendous backlash. The uncomfortable truth is that Mennonites have not been willing to accept their own deep-seated narratives of white supremacy. They participated in colonial and imperial projects where white men and women set out to “save the souls” of people of color. Mennonite relief and development efforts have too often mirrored colonial thinking, where white men must head institutions in order to control and protect them. By habit and intention, these institutions remain closed to leadership by people of color.

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17 Regina Stolzfus and Tobin Miller Shearer gave a presentation at the Global Mennonite Peacebuilding Conference and Festival documenting Mennonite reaction to their anti-racism training. See Tobin Miller Shearer, “White Mennonite Peacemakers: Oxymorons, Grace, and
White Mennonites need to take responsibility for whiteness by challenging white power structures. This can mean reaching out to and working with poor white communities who support racist policies and violence to people of color. If Mennonites are white, we must also take responsibility for this whiteness. We can and should witness to white Christian churches that foster racism and division.

Diversity is an asset, not a liability. Mennonite institutions need diverse leadership to bring greater integrity, creativity and vision to peacebuilding. Mennonites must be held together not by a genetic code but by an ideology that supports a Jesus-informed peacebuilding, a commitment to stand with those who suffer and to find ways of both working for justice and loving those with whom we disagree. We need diversity in leadership.

6. Listen to Voices on the Margins, Practice Tolerance, and Remember the Waterlanders

After five centuries of internal conflict, perhaps Mennonites should take a step back. The Apostle Paul does make statements about keeping the church “pure” and “without blemish” (Eph. 5: 25-27), but for centuries the church has used these passages to justify the ban and excommunication. Conflict in the church became a holy war. “Purity” became more important than “community” and “love.” Each side believed God was on their side and condemned those with whom they disagreed. Paul’s teachings shaped church attitudes to conflict. This is unfortunate, as Jesus offers a different approach. Jesus put far more emphasis on not judging others. His admonitions against picking out the speck of dust in your neighbors’ eye before pulling out the log in your own eye (Matt. 7:5), and the warning that he who is without sin should cast the first stone (John 8:6-7) offer an alternative narrative for tolerance.

Mennonites who practice tolerance are in the minority. However, throughout our history, there have been progressive Mennonites who wanted to follow Jesus’ teachings about love more than Paul’s teachings about purity. While Menno Simons and other Anabaptists argued about how and when to implement the ban and excommunication in order to keep the church

Nearly Thirty Years of Talking about Whiteness,” The Conrad Grebel Review 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 259-266.
pure, a more tolerant group of Anabaptists in the Waterland region of the Netherlands opposed coercive punishments and social torture in the mid-1500s. The Waterlanders became a strong branch of Dutch Mennonites, but they rejected the “Mennonite” label because they didn’t want to be named after a person, especially someone with whom they disagreed. Other Mennonites referred to them as “De Drekwagen”—the garbage wagon—because they were open and tolerant of many other people and allowed members to marry non-Mennonites. The Waterlanders allowed more contact with outsiders.
and held more progressive ideas. They held communion around a common table and offered silent prayer, rejecting some of the authoritarian elements of other Anabaptist groups.\textsuperscript{18} They had a sense of what we today might call “the beloved community.”

Too many Mennonites have meetings to talk about homosexuality without inviting any LGBTQ people to be involved. The integrity of Mennonite peacebuilding requires standing with marginalized people anywhere, including listening to and respecting the humanity of LGBTQ people and their voices on the margins of the church. Pink Menno is an organization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex people and those who stand in solidarity with them. Its representatives have consistently been excluded from official church processes.\textsuperscript{19}

Early Anabaptists who did not conform to official church doctrine were convicted of heresy. Authorities ordered guards to construct an iron torture device that would literally screw down the tongue of the condemned, making it impossible for them to speak to those who came to watch their executions. Today’s Mennonite institutions also silence Anabaptists who do not conform. At the 2015 Mennonite Church USA Kansas City Conference, Pink Menno member Jennifer Yoder interrupted the meeting and stood in front of the audience in her rainbow toga. She spoke out against the silencing of LGBTQ people in the very processes that are deciding whether the church can include them. In Figure 6, Yoder speaks out about the church’s repression. LGBTQ activists are modern-day martyrs, suffering for their principles as they protest their repression within the Mennonite church.

As a supporter of Pink Menno, I offered to sell their t-shirts at Mennonite World Conference (MWC) in Pennsylvania in 2015. Organizers of the conference had made an agreement with conservative Mennonite churches that there would be no discussion of homosexuality during the event. In doing so, they sent a message to the LGBTQ community and their thousands of supporters in the Mennonite church that they were not welcome. MWC leaders rejected workshops offering to explore the concept


\textsuperscript{19} See www.pinkmenno.org.
of homosexuality, even those that included conservative and progressive points of view. So, when the organizers caught wind of my plan, security guards descended on my car to tell me I could not sell the t-shirts.20

The Waterlanders set an early Anabaptist example of how to create a “welcome table” open to everyone. Mennonite peacebuilding needs to grow out of a practice of radical hospitality within our own churches. Mennonites cannot chastise the US government for not negotiating with Iran, or tell Israelis and Palestinians to dialogue with each other, if they are not willing to talk to the people in their own church who believe differently.

7. Practice What We Preach
Sigmund Freud called conflict between groups of people who were far more alike than different a “narcissism of minor differences.”21 Catholic and Protestant Lutheran church officials persecuted Anabaptists. Mirroring this treatment, Anabaptists similarly become intolerant of minor differences among themselves. Their desire to “live without sin” contributed to the adoption of social practices such as shunning and excommunication. They divided into smaller units that shared scriptural interpretations of sin, but disagreed over the form and style of excommunication. They split over clothing, such as whether to use buttons or hooks and fasteners, or what hats to wear, and over whether to allow women to preach, or to have Christian education and Sunday School programs. They had heated arguments over what type of vehicle to drive. Most recently, they cannot agree on whether to allow LGBTQ people as full members in their churches.22

Mennonites should model peacebuilding within their church relationships. The largest peacebuilding organization in the world is Search for Common Ground, whose stated mission is to “transform the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches, toward

22 Schirch and Schirch, “Peacebuilding in a Divided, Pacifist Church.”
cooperative solutions.” The organization employs methods that “identify the differences, but work on the common ground.” On matters of theology, it might be difficult to find commonality across different types of Mennonites. Yet in practice, Mennonites continue to share a focus on community, service, peace, and music that sets us off collectively from other tribes. The integrity of global Mennonite peacebuilding rests on our ability to work through internal conflicts and to develop a coherent ideology that allows for greater

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theological diversity in our church. Figure 7 illustrates this family tree of difference and common ground. Care for the environment is an example of common ground within Anabaptist life.

8. Find Common Ground in Environmental Sustainability

Some days I bike out in the country with my Lycra biking shorts and pass Mennonite women biking in their dresses and bonnets. Other days I’ll be driving our Toyota Prius and pass an Old Mennonite family in a horse and buggy. Each time I think about the similarities and differences. My understanding of religion and theology is significantly different from that of the folks in the horse and buggy. Still, there is a commonality that sets conservative and progressive Mennonites off from other churches or even mainstream Mennonites. Figure 8 illustrates this juxtaposition.

Lines of horse and buggies appear in parking lots of Old Mennonite and Amish churches. Lines of Prius and other fuel-efficient cars equally line up in progressive Mennonite Church parking lots. The Prius is the progressive Mennonite’s horse and buggy. On a workday in Harrisonburg, Virginia, many people bike to work. Again, it is often conservative Mennonites and progressive Mennonites who choose to do so, opting out of fancy cars and using gasoline in favor of transportation methods that reflect care for other people and parts of creation. At a time when Mennonite churches are in conflict over how to respond to sexual violence or whether to welcome LGBTQ people, when it comes to the environment, there is some surprising common ground, indicating that something still holds these diverse peoples together.

Looking for common ground among Mennonites is an element of creating a greater sense of integrity in peacebuilding. Sometimes the common ground cuts across the diversity of the Mennonite community in interesting ways. While conservatives and progressives disagree on many theological issues, their practices of environmental sustainability or “creation care” are more similar than those of mainline or moderate Mennonites.

Few researchers have documented the history of Anabaptist thought about and relationships to the environment. The official church’s persecution of Anabaptists drove many Mennonites to rural areas with land that no one else wanted to farm. The need to establish agriculture in difficult areas led
to Mennonite inventions in a variety of sustainable farming techniques. Persecution also drove communities together. The biblical emphasis on land and natural metaphors seemed to work well for Mennonites who came to see “simple living” as both a practical necessity and a theological principle. Simple living included learning to be self-sufficient in making food, clothing, and shelter. As some Mennonites became wealthier, there was less emphasis on simple living. In places where persecution ended, some began to take up similar lifestyles to those around them. Today, the Anabaptist Creation Care
Network\textsuperscript{24} affirms that creation care and simple living are still Mennonite values.\textsuperscript{25}

**Agenda for Mennonite Peacebuilding**

First Nations elders taught me an important lesson when I worked for MCC Ontario as Native Concerns Coordinator from 1990 to 1992. Elders teach that every religion is a gift. To belong to a religion is to belong to a tribe. Like any tribe, there are parts that may be out of balance, but all tribes have valuable teachings accumulated and passed down through the ages. People need roots—to know where they come from. The elders also told us to learn from others, to have wings to explore. Culture and belief are not static: they grow, learn, and adapt. This wisdom is captured today in the advice to give children both “roots and wings”—roots so they know their ancestors, and wings so they can break with the past and move forward.

Mennonites have solid roots. Our legacy of peacebuilding is strong. Pacifist theology can be, and has been, translated into practical actions. Mennonites have lived out the words of Menno Simons to clothe the naked, to comfort the sorrowful, to give food to the hungry, and to shelter the destitute. Mennonites today have added to that list of faithful activities. They protest in the streets for justice, mediate between warring groups, facilitate dialogue between haves and have-nots, teach the military alternatives to war, and educate children about peace. However, Mennonites also need wings. Mennonites, especially non-ethnic Mennonites, need the freedom to transform and challenge gaps in Anabaptist theology and distortions that twist Mennonite culture away from Jesus’ teachings.

Improving Mennonite peacebuilding begins with self-reflection. A two-handed approach to those with whom we disagree can move us beyond unhelpful “enemy” language. Our institutions can be set free from the requirements for ethnic Mennonite leadership so that we explore the ideology of Anabaptism, and are free to create and inspire new visions of Mennonite peacebuilding. While doing so, we will do a better job of

\textsuperscript{24} See www.mennocreationcare.org, accessed May 1, 2017.
challenging the secular white supremacy that has leached into our theological fields, damaging the seeds of hope and healing. We will listen more closely to voices on the margins of the church and society, and affirm their dignity. We will care for victims of sexual violence and tend to their needs instead of focusing only on the needs of offenders. We will model peacebuilding within Mennonite church relationships. We will practice tolerance and remember the Waterlanders’ vision of a beloved community. When we find ourselves disagreeing with other Anabaptists, we will search for common ground. And we will continue to marvel at how conservative and progressive Mennonites find new ways to support environmental sustainability. Reflection and self-assessment require us to examine our strengths and weaknesses, our assets and gaps.

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