

Following Jesus in Social Work: Learning from Anabaptist Theology and Practice

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This article poses the question: What does it mean to follow Jesus in social work? To address the question, it introduces the Anabaptist Christian tradition and draws on several major Anabaptist theological concepts including: discipleship, church, love and nonresistance, and service. Noting the importance of connecting word and deed, it summarizes a variety of practice innovations that grow out of Anabaptist theology and Mennonite experience and which are relevant for social welfare. The article ends with a call to recognize Jesus as Lord.

WE CALL THIS ASSOCIATION THE NORTH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION of Christians in Social Work, though it's not always clear what we mean by "Christian." Some of us claim that name and identity more readily than others. Because Christian has so many connotations, I sometimes prefer to be known as a "follower of Jesus." Although that phrase communicates something a bit different it, too, can be a slippery term. But this leads to the question I want to pose: What does it mean to follow Jesus in social work? But first, I would like to tell you a bit about what led to this question.

I was born and raised in a close-knit Mennonite community in rural Nebraska. This was the world I knew best for the first twenty-some years of my life. I continue to identify myself as a Mennonite because I was so deeply formed by that Christian tradition. I attended Rosedale Bible College, a Mennonite Bible college in Ohio for a couple of years. Then I transferred to Concordia University, a Lutheran college in my

home town of Seward, Nebraska. I married a Mennonite woman who graduated from Cedarville College, a Baptist college in Cedarville, Ohio. While working in child welfare, I entered the MSW program at Ohio State University. After my graduation, we moved to Jackson, Mississippi, where we were members of a small, interracial Mennonite congregation and served as unit leaders for a Mennonite Voluntary Service Unit, while I worked fulltime at Catholic Charities. During my PhD program at the University of Chicago, we joined Reba Place Church, an urban Mennonite congregation in Evanston, Illinois, that included an intentional Christian community. In 1996, we moved to Columbia, South Carolina, when I joined the faculty at the University of South Carolina. We began attending an interracial, nondenominational congregation where I sing in the gospel choir. In 2004, when I spent a semester on sabbatical at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia, we attended an Anglican congregation.

For nearly 30 years, I have been an active member of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW) and served several terms on its board of directors and associate editor of its journal. Some of my dearest friends are part of this group, and they are from the Reformed, Church of Christ, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Salvation Army, and other denominations. I mention these things to give a sense of my diverse experience with faith and faith communities.

A few years ago, however, I concluded that my own faith was not adequately grounded for dealing with the university context. For more than 25 years, I have studied and worked in secular universities. Perhaps more importantly, like most social workers, I have been immersed in a largely secular social work culture.

I recognize my own efforts to integrate faith and practice, like much of what I see in NACSW, too often reflecting an effort to fit faith to social work, to start with social work and try to fit faith to it. Such efforts often take the form of “Here’s a great idea [or approach] in social work, let’s see how consistent it is with our faith,” or “Here’s how it can be adapted to a faith-based organization or perspective,” or things like that. Infrequently, I saw efforts going the other direction, starting with theological resources that were then used to understand social work or to critique social work. I have not seen us drawing very deeply on theological resources. As a result, our faith traditions are seldom equal partners in our integrative efforts.

I concluded that I needed to get more of an education theologically and so I did that the cheap way by buying books and reading them methodically over several years. Sometime later I became intrigued by scholarship by and about Mennonites and Anabaptists. Because that was my tradition, I especially felt at home with these sources but also realized that I was not current or well informed about my own theological foundations. Perhaps this search is a middle-age return to roots; I'm not sure. But it coincided for me with a growth of interest in Anabaptist history and theology in the broader church during the last few decades. There have been significant reinterpretations of the Reformation, in general, and of Anabaptism, in particular, as a result of trends in historiography and theology. As a result, the Anabaptist tradition is being reinterpreted and reappropriated for the present time. A few of the books I have read recently have been by and about Anabaptist theologians John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas (e.g., Berkman & Cartwright, 2001; Carter, 2001; Nation, 2006; Wells, 1998; Zimmerman, 2007). In preparation for the Allen Keith-Lucas lecture, I took an online seminary course on Anabaptism Today with Mark Thiessen Nation, a professor at Eastern Mennonite University. Preparing this article marks another step in my own learning and growth. It's been a challenge for me to identify the central core of Anabaptist theology and practice that would have some benefits for Christians from other traditions, to identify aspects of Anabaptist theology and practice beneficial specifically for social work and related professions, and to do so in an even-handed way.

Although fascinating and engaging, the process has also been difficult. There are probably several reasons for that. For one, a focus on Anabaptist theology and practice required me to draw on some of my earliest memories, to rethink some of my earliest experiences, to reflect on some of the choices I've made and not made, to re-evaluate the direction of my life and God's call on it. It left me wondering what the future holds and what God could be calling me to now. And so in the midst of all that reflection and turmoil I'm not sure what I have to say. At the same time, it was daunting to anticipate diverse listeners and readers. I thought about the individuals I know here in all their particularity—with different levels of social work education and experience—from social work undergraduates to social workers with 40 or more years of practice or academic experience. I also considered the range of theological traditions—Methodist, Reformed, Salvation Army, Roman Catholic, Nazarene, Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopal, Church of Christ—and so on.

In the midst of this diversity, I'm not sure whether what I have to say will be beneficial for very many of you. But the thing that has been hardest would be questions about my own relationship with God. My work on this manuscript raised questions about the validity of my faith, including its sincerity, depth, and commitment. It left me longing for a deeper, more vibrant faith for my life now. It often challenged and inspired me, sometimes shamed and convicted me. It feels very much like a work in progress, a baby not yet ready to be born.

What Does It Mean to Follow Jesus?

More than a hundred years ago, Charles Sheldon wrote a popular Christian book, *In His Steps*, that encouraged people to “do the right at all costs.” It became one of the best-selling books of all time. In it, a pastor challenges his congregation not to act without first asking, “What would Jesus do?” A few years ago, the WWJD fad had people buying paraphernalia to remind them of the same question. Both the original book and the recent fad reflected a desire to follow Jesus but, as Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder (1994) points out, the book's message was not essentially derived from Jesus. On the contrary, “the right thing to do” was believed to be knowable apart from Jesus and the gospel.

Yoder makes the counterintuitive argument that there are many ways in which we are not expected to imitate Jesus. Jesus did not own a house but the New Testament does not teach that we must not own houses. Jesus was celibate. But even when arguing for celibacy, Paul did not cite Jesus as an example. Similarly, we are not required to be barefoot itinerants, work as artisans (i.e., carpenters), or associate primarily with fishermen and peasants. Though we may benefit from Jesus' example, we are not required to teach in parables, to have a small band of disciples (i.e., that's not the only way to growth churches), even to be involved in extended fasting and prayer. Jesus (nor the New Testament writers) does not tell us to imitate him in these particular ways. But Yoder (1994) argues:

There is thus but one realm in which the concept of imitation holds—but there it holds in every strand of the New Testament literature and all the more strikingly by virtue of the absence of parallels in other realms. This is

at the point of the concrete social meaning of the cross in its relation to enmity and power. Servanthood replaces dominion, forgiveness absorbs hostility. Thus—and only thus—are we bound by New Testament thought to “be like Jesus” (p. 131).

Yoder sums this up as “vulnerable enemy love and renunciation of dominion in the real world” (p. 132). Those are the ways we’re supposed to imitate Jesus; that is what it means to follow Jesus. Taken seriously, these are strange and difficult words.

I want to explore a particular theological tradition and its connection to helping. Specifically, I draw upon Anabaptist theology and discuss some contemporary Mennonite service efforts. I hope to inspire your social work practice or, if you are a student, your studies. Further, I hope to encourage further reflection on your own theological tradition and what it has to offer social work. But most importantly, I hope to challenge us all to follow Jesus as Lord in social work.

I began by introducing the concept of following Jesus and suggesting how it’s not simply imitating Jesus in certain external ways, but in more profound ways that go to the heart of who we are and how we relate to others. I want to talk about several Anabaptist essentials, and the way these support service in the Anabaptist and Mennonite traditions. I will give some concrete examples of Mennonite service and then draw some lessons.

Let me offer a few other disclaimers. Though it’s not original with me, I like to say I’m a “partial scholar.” One of my friends says he is a partial scholar because he can’t keep up with his field, he’s only partial. He also means he has a perspective or a bias. I’m acknowledging that, too.

I am also something of a peripheral Mennonite. While deeply formed by the Mennonite tradition, I’ve spent most of my adulthood outside of Mennonite congregations or in Mennonite congregations outside of the mainstream (e.g., a black/white congregation in Jackson, Mississippi, Reba Place Church in Evanston, Illinois). Furthermore, I’m not a theologian.

Anabaptists and Mennonites: Their Origins

Because you may be unfamiliar with Anabaptists and Mennonites, let me make a few brief comments. Anabaptism emerged in the

sixteenth century, during the turmoil of the Protestant Reformation. The early Anabaptists were committed to following literally the teachings of Jesus, and that got them in considerable trouble. They were rejected and persecuted by Catholics and Protestants alike. Some five thousand were martyred for their faith, at the hands of both Catholics and Protestants. Why?

The Anabaptists proposed several things that were quite controversial at the time (Yoder, Redekop & Jantzi, 2004, p. 335-336). First, they advocated separation of church and state. You may remember that church and state were often conflated prior to the Reformation, i.e., the power of the state was used to enforce participation in the church and vice versa. Anabaptists thought church and state should be separated, partly because they rejected violence and military service. Second, they were committed to personal conversion experiences and believed that people should not be baptized until they were personally converted. They believed that only adults could do this. Third, they had a congregational church structure, not a hierarchical one.

Nevertheless, Anabaptists also accepted the basic and orthodox theology of both Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions. Indeed, as pupils of reformer Ulrich Zwingli, “they became disappointed with his leadership because he did not live up to his promises and threats. When they went beyond him they used no language against him but what they had learned from him” (Yoder, 1985, p. 3). In short, the Anabaptists generally agreed with what the Reformers were seeking to do, but believed they were not going far enough (Graber Miller, 1996, p. 13). Today, Anabaptism is represented by several denominations, the largest of which is Mennonite. Currently, there are more than a half million Mennonites in the United States and Canada. Worldwide, there are one million more, and the denomination now has a white minority (Bender, Steiner & Thiessen, 2011).

Anabaptist Biblicism

The preceding comments about origins provide an important clue for understanding Anabaptism, and a good starting point for discussing Anabaptist theology. Menno Simons, a prominent early leader among the Anabaptists, trained and served as a Catholic priest. Though not a founder of the Anabaptist movement, Menno is credited with rejuvenating it through moderate leadership and prolific writings (van Zanten, n.d.).

Menno Simons was a Biblicist in the truest and best meaning of the word. He turned away from tradition and became Bible-centered in all his beliefs and practices. Once he had turned to the Bible, he took it for the Word of God and made it the cornerstone of all his work. His writings are filled with Bible quotations. His approach to the Bible differs from that of the other reformers. It is above all Christ-centered. Every book and every little pamphlet he wrote have on the front page the motto, 'For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ' (I Corinthians 3:11). Christ-centeredness marks his theology and the practices he derived from the Bible (Krahn & Dyck, 1989).

Menno's thorough, Christ-centered Biblicism provided an enduring foundation for subsequent Anabaptists and Mennonites.

Anabaptist Theology

Nearly 70 years ago, church historian and theologian Harold Bender articulated the Anabaptist vision in a small book by that name. The book quickly became a significant point of reference for Mennonites, academics and lay people alike. Bender identified three essential elements of Anabaptism: a commitment to discipleship, the church as the body of Christ, and love and nonresistance. To some extent, those words will be familiar to most Christians. So part of my task here is to identify what, in Bender's (1944) articulation, is distinctive about Anabaptism.

Discipleship

First, many Christians talk about discipleship. Anabaptists, however, conceive of it as the essence of Christianity. They thought that following Jesus was the essence or the core of Christianity. They believed in faith alone for salvation, but then emphasized following Jesus in life. Once saved, live like it. That should start to change your life. They often used a German phrase, *nachfolge Christi*, which means following after Christ. So their theology was based on the life and the teachings of Christ. Some Christians emphasize Christ's death and resurrection, and their benefit for salvation. Mennonites pay serious attention to Jesus' cross—but also

the whole life that preceded it—and take that life as an exemplar. Indeed, Jesus himself said, “And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. . . . whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:27, 33; NKJV).

Those are hard words. As Bender (1944) notes, “The Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity which made regeneration, holiness, and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief, or of subjective ‘experience,’ rather than one of the transformation of life. They demanded an outward expression of the inner experience” (p. 20), or they doubted the inner reality. They assumed that if belief did not result in some outward transformation, it was not real or vital. “We shall not believe, they said, that the Sermon on the Mount . . . Is only a heavenly vision meant but to keep His followers in tension until the last great day, but we shall practice what He taught, believing that where He walked we can by His grace follow in His steps” (Bender, 1944, p. 36).

There are parallels in the most recent *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Miller et al., 1995), “We believe that Jesus Christ calls us to discipleship, to take up our cross and follow him. Through the gift of God’s saving grace, we are empowered to be disciples of Jesus, filled with his Spirit, following his teachings and his path through suffering to new life” (p. 96). But this transformation, this focus on discipleship, was not individualistic or solitary. It was not a person trying to be holy on his or her own.

The Church

Second, the central principle of newness of life and applied Christianity or transformation of life led to a new concept of the church, one populated by persons who choose to join. Remember the historical context of Anabaptist origins. In the context of the established state church, people were born into families and baptized automatically as infants and therefore were members of the state church. Mennonites said, no, making a commitment of faith, making the choice to follow Jesus, is something only adults can do and so only those who choose to follow Jesus constitute the church. That fundamentally changes the way you think about what the church is. The problem with infant baptism, from their perspective, was that infants cannot respond to God by pledging their lives and so to baptize an infant would be premature and misleading. The Anabaptists were called Anabaptist, meaning re-baptizers, based on their commitment

to discipleship and their rejection of automatic membership in the state church. This led them to baptize those who personally chose to follow Christ, regardless of their previous baptism as infants.

To flesh out this distinctive view of the church, I will draw on some work from John Howard Yoder. Yoder (1994) makes the claim that Jesus had four options presented to him at the beginning of his earthly ministry. People longed for a Messiah, and expected him to do something dramatic. One option was the route of realism or the status quo, accepting the situation “as it really is” and trying to work in it. Second was the zealot option. There were people in Jesus’ time pressing him to choose revolutionary violence to overthrow the Romans and to bring about a new political order in Israel. Another option was more monastic, to go to the desert and withdraw, to be separate and holy and set apart. Finally, the pharisaic option was to choose proper religion, to choose religious law, to try to keep the law and therefore be faithful.

Yoder argues that Jesus rejected all four of these options and instead introduced and pursued a fifth option. Jesus created around himself a society like no other society mankind had ever seen. Yoder argues that Jesus sought to create an alternate society, one that would show what was to come, a society that would be now what we look forward to and long for in the future. This new society would be voluntary, based on personal repentance and pledging allegiance. It would be mixed in composition by race, culture, religiosity, economic status, and so on. It would be given a new way of life to live, a way of forgiving, suffering, sharing, serving and relating. That, Yoder (1994) argues, was Jesus’ idea for this new society, the church.

Jesus did not bring to faithful Israel any corrected ritual or any new theories about God. He brought them a new peoplehood and a new way of living together. The very existence of such a group is itself a deep social change. Its very presence was such a threat that he had to be crucified. But such a group is not only by its existence a novelty on the social scene; if it lives faithfully, it is also the most powerful tool of social change (Yoder, 1997, p. 177).

Yoder argues that the church, if faithful, can be an engine for social change in the world, for a different way to be. Part of the challenge posed by the Anabaptists for me is to actually live out what we believe rather than preach it so much and tell other people how to do things.

Go do. If there is a different way to be, perhaps we should emphasize showing people more than telling them.

That's what Anabaptists and Yoder mean by the concept of the church as the body of Christ. It is intended as a new community. From the *Confession of Faith* (Miller et al., 1995):

We believe that the church is the assembly of those who have accepted God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the new community of disciples sent into the world to proclaim the reign of God and to provide a foretaste of the church's glorious hope. It is the new society established and sustained by the Holy Spirit (p. 95).

The church, as this new society, is to be "here now" for a world that is "not yet" but "is to come."

You may wonder what this conception of the church as new community or alternate society implies for individual Christian lives of discipleship. Recently, I came across this provocative comment that seems relevant: "Being formed in the Christian virtues is not a matter of choosing the right community, but rather acknowledging the fact that Christ is revealed in those with whom we have the great good fortune to be stuck" (Cavanaugh, 2001, p. 18). Sometimes this talk about churches as alternate societies, and awareness of how our own do not measure up, may prompt us to think, "Maybe I should go join a different one." Maybe, but God may be calling you to be faithful where you are.

To be creating that new world right where you are and suffering in whatever ways are necessary to do that, to be different and faithful where you are now. In fact, it's often our close relationships in families and congregations that have the most power to expose our weaknesses and sinfulness. Thus, these relationships often also serve as the crucibles for God's efforts to transform us and our relationships. Discipleship—both individual and corporate—provides the means for implementing a new concept of the church.

Love and Nonresistance

According to Bender (1944), the third Anabaptist essential is love and nonresistance. Anabaptists understood that following Jesus required them to adopt his way of peace, no matter the cost. The fundamental mo-

tive was one of self-giving love. To give away the cloak, to turn the other cheek, that's what Jesus taught. Even though this was sometimes costly, it was part of following Jesus. An ethic of love and nonresistance in all human relationships "meant complete abandonment of all warfare, strife, and violence, and of the taking of human life" (Bender, 1944, p. 31).

But it also meant foregoing the use of violence and force in interpersonal relationships, more generally. Let me tell a great story about Dirk Willems, a classic in Anabaptist history from the 1500s (Toews, n.d). As the story goes, Willems was literally running for his life, pursued by the local constable because his Anabaptist beliefs and practices violated the law. As they crossed a thinly frozen lake, part way across, the heavier constable broke the ice and fell through. Dirk Willems heard him hollering, turned, and saw him sinking into the icy water. He could have thanked God for a great escape, but he didn't. Out of love for his pursuer, Willems returned and pulled him to safety. The constable promptly arrested and incarcerated him, and Dirk Willems was martyred a short time later.

That's a classic story in Mennonite congregations and families. When you think about loving enemies, even to the point of dying, the reasoning goes like this: If I know God and he doesn't, then I should save his life because I'm ready to go but he's not. Centuries later, Mennonites still affirm: "We believe that peace is the will of God. . . . Led by the Holy Spirit, we follow Christ in the way of peace, doing justice, bringing reconciliation and practicing nonresistance, even in the face of violence and warfare" (Miller et al., 1995, p. 97). Submit to bearing crosses, not retaliating but turning the other cheek.

Service

Bender suggested that these are three essentials for Mennonites: discipleship, a new model of church, and love and nonresistance. I want to suggest that these three lead quite directly to another powerful notion among Anabaptists and Mennonites, that of service. The basin and towel is the classic image here. Quoting Jesus, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15; ISV). That's a quite explicit instruction from Jesus. It has always puzzled me that churches worldwide, across denominations, celebrate communion, Eucharist, or the love feast but

so few practice foot washing. When you read the text, it sounds like Jesus intended we should do that. Of course, we don't routinely dirty our feet from walking in sandals, but many of us have stinky feet that would bear washing. But perhaps foot washing, as a practice, is not important in and of itself.

Matthew states that Jesus "came not to be served but to serve" (Matthew 20:28), which was clearly borne out by his life and teaching, symbolized by the washing of the disciples' feet and supremely dramatized on the cross. Neither the washing of the disciple's feet nor the cross was a mere object lesson in humility; they were powerful demonstrations of how God works in history (Dyck, 1970, p. 263).

Do you see the connection between washing feet and the cross? The Anabaptist claim is simply that these are the ways God gets things done. That's what Jesus showed us. That's how Jesus got things done, by serving and not dominating, by loving and not resisting, by not fighting back. We, in contrast, tend to think of those as pretty ineffective methods. That's not the way we behave in much of our family life, and much less of our organizational life, but that's what Jesus did.

The point I'm suggesting here is that that's actually the way the world works, not the world as we know it but the world God intends and will one day bring to pass. Maybe the God who created us made our world that way and intends it to work that way. If so, emulating Jesus in that way would be "working with the grain of the universe" (Yoder, 1994). From the *Confession of Faith*, "We believe that in washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus calls us to serve one another in love as he did. Thus we acknowledge our frequent need of cleansing, renew our willingness to let go of pride and worldly power, and offer our lives in humble service and sacrificial love" (Miller et al., 1995, p. 95).

Because the practice of foot washing is so unfamiliar for many Christians, let me tell several stories to illustrate it. I grew up in a fairly conservative Mennonite congregation that faithfully practiced foot washing twice a year in conjunction with communion. As a child, that was one Sunday you cared about trimming your toenails. I remember the awkwardness of foot washing. It wasn't something that we did anywhere else; like most people, we weren't accustomed to seeing or handling other people's feet. But there was always something powerful,

something leveling, about standing in line for the foot washing ceremony and wondering who was in the other line and who you were going to get matched up with. It was a very powerful symbol of service to each other—old and young, longtime friends and neighbors, people with and without money, and the usual variety of personalities—mingling around the basin.

A few years ago at our current congregation I was in charge of organizing a men's retreat and proposed that we include a foot washing ceremony. That was powerful in yet other ways because our congregation is about half black and half white. This is the Deep South, remember. Furthermore, some of the people who attend our church are homeless men enrolled in a drug rehab program at the local rescue mission. In this context, the foot washing ceremony was especially powerful—young and old, black and white, rich and poor, longtime and recent friends, with a range of educational and employment backgrounds—serving and being served by washing feet.

I'm also reminded of what my wife, Regina, did faithfully while we lived at a Mennonite Voluntary Service Unit in Mississippi. Our neighborhood was all black except for a handful of white elders who had not left with white flight. One of these women, in her late 80s, could not bend over to trim her toenails and had no family members to assist her. So she asked Regina to trim her toenails a number of times. That struck me as a contemporary version of washing feet. It was just a practical, unpleasant thing that needed to be done. Like washing feet, it represented following Jesus in the way of service and obedience.

True Evangelical Faith

Writing in 1539, Menno Simons explained that “true faith or true knowledge [of God] begets love, and love begets obedience to the commandments of God” (Simons, p. 246) He went on to define true evangelical (i.e., good news) faith as follows:

True evangelical faith is of such a nature it cannot lie dormant, but spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love;
it dies to flesh and blood;
it destroys all lusts and forbidden desires;
it seeks, serves and fears God in its inmost soul;

it clothes the naked;
 it feeds the hungry;
 it comforts the sorrowful;
 it shelters the destitute;
 it aids and consoles the sad; it does good to those
 who do it harm;
 it serves those that harm it;
 it prays for those who persecute it;
 it teaches, admonishes and judges us with the Word
 of the Lord;
 it seeks those who are lost;
 it binds up what is wounded;
 it heals the sick;
 it saves what is strong [sound];
 it becomes all things to all people, Gal. 6:3-4.

The persecution, suffering and anguish that come to it for the sake of the Lord's truth have become a glorious joy and comfort to it (Simons, cited in Dyck, 1995, p. 88).

An abbreviated version of this statement is common in Mennonite circles, often in the form of wall hangings. While these tend to cherry pick some of the more humanitarian parts, I prefer the complete version because it conveys a full bodied sense of faith, mission, and service, all quite practical and theologically significant things (Lewis, 2009).

Jesus as Lord

These Anabaptist conceptions of discipleship, church, love and service, together start to give us a different sense of Jesus as Lord. If we are going to follow Jesus as disciples in congregations, doing this work together, trying hard to love enemies (and other neighbors), Jesus becomes our Lord. Following Jesus in that way, he is not just our savior but also our Lord. Those of us in social work gravitate to some of these ideas about service, may even be inspired by them. But because of their theological foundation, we must keep them in proper perspective. "We must locate service within salvation history" (Schlabach, 1991, p. 53). Service is not just a good thing for its own sake. It's not just a way to be nice or helpful. "Looking back, we must remind ourselves through story and liturgy, that the source of our service is God's saving love" (Schla-

bach, 1991, p. 53). That's why we serve. We have been loved, rescued, served. Schlabach continues, "Looking forward, we must dream God's dream of new heavens and new earth where justice reigns. [That's why we serve, this dream, this vision of what could be and how we could bring it now.] And to bring past and future into our present, we must incarnate both in servanthood communities" (Schlabach, 1991, p. 53). Once again, we have this idea of enacting now what is to come.

We can't do this alone, we must do this in community, and it's important that we understand ourselves in the long flow of salvation history. Schlabach also argues for an Abrahamic model. He observes that the children of Abraham were meant to be "a blessing to all peoples, a creative minority for the whole" (Schlabach, 1991, p. 54). That's how we should think of ourselves. Recently, I think, more Christians are getting this. When Christians were culturally dominant it was easy to play church, to try to make society like the church, to try to make things right. In contrast, Abraham was sent out to a place he did not know. He didn't know where he was going but was to be faithful on the journey. What was his purpose? Why did God do that? God promised to make him a blessing. To bless him, yes, but to make him a blessing for all people. He was supposed to represent a minority on behalf of the whole. "Our own stories should stand within the Abrahamic story of salvation history. . . . Let us begin simply, and simply begin" (Schlabach, 1991, p. 54, 55).

Connecting Word and Deed

One of the themes that may be becoming clear here, and which I wish to highlight, is the connection between word and deed. One of the things that our Anabaptist and Mennonite forbears have done fairly well—often, not always, but often—is try to connect word and deed, to live out the things they have been taught and that they teach. Practicing what we preach or "living up" to our words gives them content and heft, anchoring them in the real world. You know, it is so easy to attend church (and NACSW conventions), to sing the praise and worship songs and hear the devotions in church mode but not consider how it applies with my spouse, my co-workers, my boss, and my clients. The challenge for us is to try to translate that language, to apply that language and those ideas, and try to live it out and embody it. As theologian Nancey Murphy said, "We do not know what our words mean if we do not know how to put them into practice" (cited

in Yoder, 2001). If we can't live them, then they remain vacuous. That's the real test of our faith, I think.

Anabaptist and Mennonite Practice

That was a brief overview and some key ideas from Anabaptist theology. Next, I will present brief accounts of some practical models that have sprung from this Anabaptist theological soil.

Mennonite Central Committee

Because most Mennonite service innovations can be traced to Mennonite Central Committee, that organization's own story is a good place to begin. A number of Anabaptists fled Europe as a result of religious persecution and went into the Ukraine and Russia, and then fled Russia during the Communist revolution. When those who remained in the Ukraine encountered famine, Mennonites in North America decided to provide material assistance to their brothers and sisters. That was one of the first formally organized efforts of mutual aid among Mennonites and it led to creation of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). MCC was formed in 1920 at a meeting in Chicago, and early on adopted the slogan: "caring in the name of Christ" (Miller, 1970). Now sponsored by several Mennonite and Brethren in Christ denominations in North America, MCC has a diverse portfolio of relief, development, and peace work (Mennonite Central Committee, 2010). MCC provides aid and services in some 70 countries around the world, often by partnering with local non-government organizations (NGOs). It also places volunteers—most but not all of them Mennonite—in 56 countries around the world.

In MCC's theological foundations you will recognize concepts from the previous discussion. MCC started with the concepts of mutual aid (i.e., assisting fellow Mennonites) and extending compassion to people following disasters. Over time, MCC began to extend service beyond emergency situations. Always in the name of Christ, it sought to promote social and economic development, to promote peace making and justice to create peace. For Mennonites, MCC has offered a middle way between the extremes of fundamentalism ("emphasizing individualistic salvation" without social implications) and social gospel (i.e., "mere humanitarian reform to the neglect of the gospel of Christ") (Hershberger, 1970, p. 226). Interestingly, Mennonites across the theological spectrum—from

culturally conservative Amish to liberal urban Mennonites—all tend to be supportive and proud of MCC. It's not a proper Mennonite attitude to be proud, but they are nevertheless proud of MCC.

It's really quite remarkable that people with such theological and cultural diversity find commonality in the service arm of the denomination. Among Mennonite institutions, MCC has been unique and significant because it has come to shape and even symbolize Mennonite identity (Kraybill, 1996). Furthermore, it combines word and deed: "participation in MCC fuses ideology and praxis, idealism and service" (Kraybill, 1996, p. 56). It provides important ways to embody faith, providing outlets and encouragement for youthful idealism. It's a tangible embodiment of shared faith among Mennonites and, as you will also see, it has been an incubator for a number of other initiatives. Some have suggested that MCC is the most important Mennonite institution (Redekop, 1993), and specifically identified it as an educational institution because of its profound role in shaping Mennonite identity and practice over the years (Krieder, 1970). In fact, most of the initiatives discussed below have a MCC connection. I relate these stories with hope that they might inspire each of us to be faithful, to recognize and seize the opportunities at hand.

Mennonite Mental Health Services

I'll start with an example especially relevant for social workers. There are not many church-related psychiatric hospitals in the United States, but over half of them are Mennonite affiliated or related (Ediger, 1983). The story of Mennonite Mental Health Services—recently renamed Mennonite Health Services to include physical as well as mental health—explains how that happened (Neufeld, 1983; Sareyan, 1994). Throughout their history, most Mennonites have been nonresistant and generally refused military service. It was not until World War II, however, that the United States government agreed to accommodate them by creating a category for conscientious objectors. During World War II, the federal government passed a law that allowed for conscientious objectors. If you could prove you were a conscientious objector and not just a new one (i.e., this was consistent with your life up to this point), you were allowed to work in designated civilian settings rather than in the armed forces.

At first, conscientious objectors were assigned to work on farms and in forests. But within a year or so, government officials decided

there was a significant worker shortage in state psychiatric hospitals. Remember the old state psychiatric hospitals, massive institutions, with thousands of patients? During World War II, they were severely understaffed and underfunded, much worse than usual. In fact, you may also remember that the state hospitals were a response to Dorothy Dix's reform efforts in the 1800s. State hospitals were a solution to previous problems but, like many human solutions, they deteriorated and became the new problem.

During World War II, some 1,500 Mennonite conscientious objectors were assigned to work in state psychiatric hospitals. Most of these men had grown up on farms, had never met a psychiatrist, and did not know much about mental illness, but they were assigned to work as orderlies on psychiatric wards. As a result of that experience, some asked, "If God has exposed us to this need and we don't do anything, how can we expect anyone else to do so?" (Ediger, 1983, p. 27). As these Mennonite men went home to their communities, some said they had just seen something that troubled them and needed to do something about it. It was as a result of that experience that Mennonite Mental Health Services was born under the sponsorship of the MCC. That's what gave rise to the Mennonite psychiatric facilities scattered around Maryland, Kansas, California, Indiana, and a few other states (Ediger, 1983; Neufeld, 1982) and also contributed more broadly to the rise of the community mental health movement in the United States (Taylor, 2003).

Mennonite Disaster Service

Mennonite Disaster Service emerged more recently, from the tradition of providing mutual aid in the name of Christ (Mennonite Disaster Service, 2007). Anabaptists have a long history of providing mutual aid, often in response to the persecution of their communities (Hershberger, 1970). Fraternal assistance was modeled on the early church as recorded in the Book of Acts but also important for the group's early survival. Amish barn risings are a well-known and dramatic example of group response to individual crises. Harvest bees are another example. If a farmer got sick and couldn't harvest his crops, some of the neighbors would show up and do the harvest for him.

In the 1950s, at a Sunday school picnic in Kansas, some Mennonites were talking about how they could respond to natural disasters they had heard about. They decided to hop in a car and check things out, in

order to assist in some way. Those discussions eventually turned into Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS). Although MDS was not founded by MCC, it eventually came under the MCC umbrella before being re-launched as a non-profit organization. Currently, MDS handles disaster response in the United States and Canada, while MCC handles disaster response internationally. MDS provides immediate and especially long-term assistance in the wake of natural disasters.

In general, these efforts are predominantly staffed by long- and short-term volunteers with coordination by MDS staff members. Recent efforts responded to forest fires in California and flooding among native peoples in Alaska. More than six years post-disaster, MDS continues work in New Orleans on Hurricane Katrina recovery. That's one of the things somewhat distinctive about Mennonites and MDS: they tend to continue working when the Red Cross and most other organizations have moved on.

Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section

Throughout MCC's history, the Mennonite emphasis on nonviolence and peace has provided impetus for a number of initiatives. The MCC Peace Section was established in 1942 to advise conscientious objectors and arrange alternatives to military service. Over the years, it has also worked on "war and preparation for war, industrial relations, church-state relations, 'class strife,' racial strife, litigation, capital punishment, war taxes, conciliation ministries (reconciliation), and women's concerns" (Bender & Peachey, 1987). Besides advocacy and educational work, it has spun off a variety of formal initiatives including Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs, Christian Peacemaker Teams, and Circles of Support and Accountability. MCC has also provided the initial impetus for several economic development initiatives. Though not directly related to peace, these initiatives attack the problems of poverty and economic injustice which are understood as root causes of violence and obstacles to peace. Two of the best known examples are Ten Thousand Villages and Mennonite Economic Development Associates.

Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

Increasingly, social workers are familiar with Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs. Their story begins in 1974 with a Mennonite probation officer from Ontario, Canada (Zehr, 1990; see also Kelly, n.d.).

He was dealing with two vandals. They were caught after vandalizing twenty-two buildings, and he wondered whether the vandals could meet their victims. This seemed like a crazy idea, however, his MCC supervisor said, “Oh, maybe it’s not so bad, maybe it could happen.” With this bit of encouragement, he took the proposal to the judge in the case. The judge refused. He thought having victims meet offenders was quite inappropriate. But when it came time for sentencing a few months later, the idea had apparently stuck in the judge’s mind and he sentenced them to meet with victims and work out restitution. The judge concluded this was a non-violent crime and decided to put the victims and the offenders together to see whether they could achieve resolution. It was a few years later that a similar program was started in Elkhart, Indiana.

Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs (VORP) promote encounters between offenders and their victims to discuss the offense and its resolution (Classen, 1996). They bring victims and offenders together to help them get past stereotypes, to help them get to know each other— “Why did you do that? What did it feel like?—and to work on restitution. There are now more than 1,200 VORPs around the world (Victim Offender Reconciliation Program of the Central Valley, 2011). This program has had the further effect of encouraging restorative justice approaches in other arenas. For example, restorative justice approaches are increasingly popular in school bullying programs. These all started with the concept of Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs, rooted in the Anabaptist refusal to use violence and instead seek justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Christian Peacemaker Teams

Many *Social Work & Christianity* readers will recognize the name of Ron Sider, founder and current president of Evangelicals for Social Action. He played a pivotal role in another initiative. In 1984, at the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France, Sider challenged Mennonites to “willingly risk their lives doing nonviolent peacemaking in the same way that soldiers risked their lives in combat” (Miller, 2000, p. 25). In his speech, Sider (n.d.) noted that millions of people have died because “idolatrous nationalism, religious bigotry, racial prejudice, and economic selfishness turn people against people in terrifying orgies of violence” (p. 1). He argued, “Never has the world needed our message

[of peace] more. Never has it been more open. Now is a time to risk everything for our belief that Jesus is the way to peace” (p. 1).

Within a few years, Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) emerged as an organizational response to his challenge. With a goal of reducing violence in international conflict, CPT sought to “get in the way” by literally stepping between aggressors and victims, accompanying those threatened by violence, talking to police and government officials on behalf of individuals, reporting on events to people and newsmedia outside the particular country, and otherwise practicing nonviolence as taught by Jesus (Brown, 2005). To date, CPT has intervened in far-flung trouble spots like Haiti, Palestine, Iraq, Mexico, Colombia and more (Brown, 2005). In 2005, you may recall that four CPT members were taken hostage in Iraq and held for nearly four months. One member was eventually killed before the others were released (Brown, 2008). According to Satterwhite (2006), “CPT was not the first such initiative, and Sider’s vision was not original, even though CPT has evolved to become one of the better known of such programs” (p. 224).

Circles of Support and Accountability

The preceding initiatives are each at least several decades old. More recently, MCC has assisted some Mennonite congregations in development of a community- and congregation-based program for convicted sexual offenders (Groff, 2009). In 1994, after serving his sentence, a repeat child molester was released from an Ontario prison. His release provoked public outcry, picketing, and around-the-clock police surveillance (Wilson, Picheca & Prinzo, 2005). In response, Mennonite pastor Harry Nigh volunteered to assist the offender by gathering a small group of volunteers from his congregation to help reintegrate him in the community. A few months later, a Toronto pastor decided to try the same approach.

Subsequently, the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario contracted with the Correctional Service of Canada to pilot test Circles of Support & Accountability (CoSA), a program designed to address “the fears of victims, to reduce the risk of re-offence, and to ease offenders’ transition from institutional to community settings” (Wilson & Prinzo, 2001, p. 68). The project has been replicated in every Canadian province, the United Kingdom and several states in the U.S. An outcome evaluation concluded that “trained and guided community volunteers can

and do assist in markedly improving offenders' chances for successful reintegration," leading to significant reductions in recidivism (Wilson, Cortoni & McWhinnie, 2009).

Ten Thousand Villages

In 2008, I co-authored an article about Ten Thousands Villages (TTV) for the special issue of *Social Work and Christianity* on radical Christian innovations in social welfare (Wolfer & del Pilar, 2008). It was great fun. We learned, for example, that TTV is the original fair trade organization, the first one in the world and also the largest. Here's how it got started. Edna Byler, a Mennonite pastor's wife, was visiting some MCC volunteers in Puerto Rico and saw them trying to help the local women develop businesses and sell their crafts. Because most of the women's neighbors made their own crafts and did not need to buy from them, they had few market opportunities. Byler had the bright idea of taking the craft items home for sale as gifts. So she brought some home to Pennsylvania and began selling them out of the trunk of her car.

One thing led to another. She started organizing some large sales, and eventually opened stores. There are now nearly 400 TTV retail locations scattered throughout the United States and Canada. TTV operates on the basic concept of buying directly from artisans in the developing world, paying them a living wage, and developing stable, long-term relationships with these artisans so they can plan on more sales next year and build businesses to support their families. Currently, TTV purchases from more than 120 artisan groups in 37 developing countries (TTV, 2010).

Mennonite Economic Development Associates

Mennonite Economic Development Associates is an organization of service-oriented business people focused on "market-driven economic development programs that improve the livelihoods of millions of people living in poverty around the world" (MEDA, 2011). It was founded in the 1950s by a small group of businessmen as a type of mutual aid for another community of Mennonites in crisis. Following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, thousands of Mennonites sought religious, political and economic freedom in Paraguay, an impoverished country with open doors but few resources to aid their resettlement. Because the refugees

needed more than relief, these businessmen risked financial loss to help them get a new start. They offered loans and technical assistance to help the refugees establish economically viable business ventures, repay the loans, and provide a modest return on capital (Yoder, Redekop & Janzti, 2004).

Subsequently, this successful project expanded to provide similar assistance to Native Americans in Paraguay. MEDA now provides financial services, market linkages, and investments for poor entrepreneurs in 44 developing countries. MEDA-sponsored organizations reach an estimated 2.8 million families (MEDA, 2011).

Discussion and Conclusions

What can we take from this discussion of Anabaptist theology and practice? First, one of the ways in which Mennonites and Anabaptists may challenge us is on the importance of action giving meaning to our words. In today's world, there is an abundance of religious talk. But when it is grounded in action it has heft. It is more likely to turn heads, to bear witness.

Second, these stories from the Mennonite tradition demonstrate how much we need each other and how much we need the church. Although some of these accounts emphasize the role of particular individuals, they also suggest that various initiatives would likely not have occurred or not survived apart from a Mennonite church context. That context—part theological and part communal—provided fertile soil for stimulating these creative responses and then for nurturing and sustaining them. Part of the essence of Anabaptism is the idea about the church as the body of Christ. We need each other. We can't be Christian alone, not at universities, not at work, not in families. We need each other for challenge and accountability, for encouragement and support. We especially need churches. I am a great fan of the NACSW, but this is not my church and it cannot replace my church. There are important ways in which I need my church week in and week out.

Third, these accounts suggest the radical and potentially transformative nature of the Christian gospel. They remind me of G. K. Chesterton's (1910) comment, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried" (p. 48). When Mennonites have attempted to take Jesus at his word—about bearing crosses, being disciples, loving neighbors and enemies, serving

others—they have often discovered innovative solutions to age-old problems.

In this paper, I have not written much about social work, but I would like to make a couple of comments. Being part of the profession of social work is no substitute for following Jesus. Following Jesus goes much further than that. We may have chosen social work because of our Christian faith, but we can't wash our hands at the end of the day and say, "Been there, done that. Put in my time at the office." Following Jesus must pervade our lives in families, neighborhoods, work settings, and churches. And in all those other parts of our lives, it requires much more of us than does our profession.

Further, a bit more provocatively, I'd like to suggest that social work may be a rival to following Jesus. Social work often defines my experience and my thinking, and God's kingdom comes in second. When I'm trying to integrate the two, social work values often trump kingdom values. I think many of you would agree that that's not right, if it's true in your case, but you don't know what to do about it or at least you haven't done much about it. I intend this paper to challenge us to think more deeply about this issue and to act more courageously.

"The way of the Cross" is Working with the Grain of the Universe

I'd also like to suggest that "the way of the cross" is working *with* the grain of the universe. By "the way of the cross," Mennonites mean not only that Jesus died to atone for our sins but also the way Jesus lived en route to the cross. Jesus was on his way to the cross throughout his ministry and Mennonites understand that the way of the cross was a way of going. When Jesus calls us to take up our crosses daily and follow him, it's for no atonement purpose on our part. We're to follow Jesus in the way of the cross. We do so not by hating and retaliating but loving, not by dominating but serving. That's the way of the cross and that goes with the grain of the universe.

Several years ago, I was working on a paper about self-determination in relation to Anabaptist theology. Why do we respect client self-determination? As social workers, it is consistent with professional ethics and what we know about persons. As Christians, we may have a theological basis for this fundamental value. Jesus presented clear demands of various sorts to people, and then let them choose freely, even to their own detriment. Given his divinity, that's a stunning model. Jesus

calls us to himself and lets us refuse and go our own way. Accordingly, that must be the way the universe works, the way God intends it.

Jesus as Lord

Furthermore, if God created the world, that means we're not in charge. As John Howard Yoder (1997) suggested, we're called to be followers and servants, to do everything God tells us to do, but we are not ultimately responsible for how things turn out. We are called to be faithful, but we are not responsible for making things turn out right. We can't control the way things go. Jesus is Lord. Whether I acknowledge him as Lord over my life or whether we recognize him as Lord over our profession, he is Lord. Every knee will bow sometime, maybe not now—maybe I don't, maybe you don't—but we will sometime (Philippians 2:10-11). The truth of the gospel is that God wishes to reclaim us, God wants us to love him, and God wins in the end. "To confess that Jesus Christ is Lord makes it inconceivable that there should be any realm where his writ would not run. That authority, however, is not coercive but nonviolent; it cannot be imposed only offered" (Yoder, 1997, p. 25).

Jesus, at this point in history, does not insist that we follow him as Lord. He offers to be our master. "The real issue is not whether Jesus can make sense in a world far from Galilee, but whether—when he meets us in our world, as he does in fact—we want to follow him. We don't have to, as they didn't then. That we don't have to is the profoundest proof of his condescension, and thereby of his glory" (Yoder, 1984, p. 62).

I offer these concluding hopes. I hope that the things considered here will challenge and encourage you to faithfulness, and may stimulate you to recover and convey other theologies for social work. I focused on Anabaptist theology because that's the theological tradition I know best. But perhaps this little journey will challenge you to do some of the same work with your own theological tradition. Finally, I hope I have encouraged you to acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

Let us end with a final quotation from John Howard Yoder (1994): "Vicit agnus noster, eum sequamur. Our lamb has conquered, let us follow him" (p. 242). The paradoxical image is of God as a lamb, a lamb who won by dying, and who wants us to follow. √

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