

Church Planting in the United Kingdom Inspired by the Anabaptist Vision

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The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century emerged at a time of societal and religious upheaval and change. They rejected the nature and practices of the church in the Christendom era: synthesis of gospel and culture, shallow discipleship and lack of missionary engagement. As western culture slowly emerges from Christendom, the Anabaptist vision offers resources, insights and experience for Christians today grappling with how the church engages with culture, tells the gospel and nurtures disciples. This article argues that from the context of the United Kingdom, it is time to take a further step from endorsing Anabaptist values towards establishing believers' communities in the re-discovered Anabaptist vision of peacemaking, radical discipleship, and love for enemies and neighbours.

Keywords

Church planting; Anabaptism; discipleship; peacemaking; UK

Introduction

Church planting today looks materially different from five centuries ago. At least in most places in Western Europe, Christians are unlikely to face the persecution and suffering experienced by their Anabaptist forebears. Critics might question whether church planting is an unnecessary dilution of limited resources, a risky endeavour with unknown outcomes, or even sectarian. In recent years there has been increasing creativity as churches from various traditions grapple with engaging with a wider range of people in the changing contexts and cultures of the United Kingdom and Western Europe.¹ In this article my purpose is to argue for the development of church plants drawing on insights from the Anabaptist tradition.² The Anabaptist vision offers

¹ See, for example, Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2016).

² By this I mean the form of church arising from the Radical Reformation of the 1500s and described in such books as C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: an Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995); George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Publications, 1992); Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1981) and reformed for a modern readership by people such as Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials for a Radical Faith* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015).

inspiration and some clear virtues and values which are a valuable resource for church planting and re-imagining the nature and purpose of the church.

Setting the Scene

Anabaptism today in Belfast, Northern Ireland sounds like Catholic and Protestant communities singing Christmas carols together next to the Peace Wall; just one initiative of *SoulSpace*,³ led by Karen Sethuramen and Gordon McDade, which works for peace and reconciliation through cross-community events, training and service opportunities.

Anabaptism today in southwest England looks like a Zoom⁴ gallery, a weekly gathering of Jesus-followers committed to a peace-centric gospel, who are creating space for exploring questions of faith, life and theology. Folks who are stressed and burdened by the complexity of life are co-creating inclusive communities characterised by ‘simplicity of life, simplicity of gatherings and simplicity of spirituality’.⁵

Anabaptism today in a Baptist church in London smells like home cooked food; like trestle tables pushed together to make a larger table as people from Kurdistan, Albania and just-down-the-road pull chairs up, hesitant, but tempted by delicious Syrian food.

Inspired by the stories, courage and passion of the early Anabaptists,⁶ people across the United Kingdom are exploring what believers’ church Christians might learn from our radical, dissenting (and persecuted) forebears. These Christians are discovering a movement characterised by reconciliation, deep commitment, whole-life discipleship, peacemaking, and hospitality as a context for mission.

Since my studies in Prague at the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS), concluded over ten years ago now, I have similarly been captivated by the Anabaptist vision, formulated in 1943 by Harold Bender, who focused on discipleship and non-violence. His approach was later

³ The Revd Karen Sethuramen is a Baptist Minister who, with Gordon McDade, launched a Celtic community in Belfast, Northern Ireland, focusing on gender equality, peace and reconciliation. In 2010 McDade and Sethuramen formed the Down Community Church seeking to move out from traditional forms of free church life and draw on Anabaptist and Celtic church insights.

⁴ Zoom is a cloud-based video technology company based in California which provides peer to peer software for video teleconferencing and has grown exponentially during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic.

⁵ Steve Jones is the founder of ‘Simply’ based in Exeter, <https://steve-jones.org> [accessed 21 October 20].

⁶ For stories of early Anabaptists see, for instance, H. Wayne Walker Pipkin, *Scholar, Pastor, Martyr: The Life and Ministry of Balthasar Hubmaier* (Prague: IBTS, 2006); C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds., *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth Century Reforming Pioneers* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996); William R. Estep Jr, *Anabaptist Beginnings (1523-1533)* (Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: De Graaf, 1976); and, a popular introduction by Keith G. Jones, *A Believing Church: Learning from some Contemporary Anabaptist and Baptist Perspectives* (Didcot, Oxon: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1998).

developed further by other scholars, including James Wm McClendon Jr. I would describe myself as an Anabaptist (small ‘b’) baptist minister, unofficial neighbourhood chaplain, and Jesus-follower currently working out my vocation in a small corner of southeast London. Part time, I also work as a co-ordinator with Urban Expression⁷ to support mission and church planting in marginalised communities in London. It is this combination of roles — community minister, pastor, enabler and organiser — that has brought me to the question of Anabaptist church planting, and why we need it.

Unfortunately, while the seeds of Anabaptism had fertile soil in which to bury themselves, I had only passing interest in Anabaptist history when I first started at IBTS. I have not retained much from the compulsory weekly Wednesday afternoon lectures from doctoral students researching seemingly obscure Anabaptist personalities or historical figures. James McClendon Jr’s ‘biography as theology’,⁸ or peacemaking ideas from Glen Stassen,⁹ fortunately, remain clearer in my memory. Academic learning at its best takes place in the context of caring, authentic relationships. The experience of living at IBTS in a community shaped by particular practices, then led and nurtured by Keith G. Jones alongside others, was the light, water and air needed for my budding interest in Anabaptism to grow roots and shoots.

During my time at IBTS, I had the privilege of working with Helle Liht¹⁰ and Tony Peck¹¹ in the office of the European Baptist Federation,¹² and I enjoyed participating in the diversity and complexity of Baptist family life in Europe and the Middle East. Whilst travelling with a group of EBF Mission Secretaries to the ‘Jesus in the City’ congress in Bristol, UK in 2007, I first stumbled across Urban Expression and was introduced to Juliet Kilpin and Stuart Murray.¹³

All these experiences, mixed now with practical pastoral work and theological reflection, have led to clearer awareness that the Anabaptist heritage has a valuable contribution to make to mission and witness in a multi-cultural and secular society. Many more different kinds of churches

⁷ Urban Expression is an urban mission agency that recruits, equips, deploys and networks self-financing teams, pioneering creative and relevant expressions of the Christian church in under-churched areas of inner city, outer estates, and marginalised communities. See <https://www.urbanexpression.org.uk> [accessed 21 October 2020].

⁸ James William McClendon Jr, *Theology as Biography* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

⁹ See, for instance, Glen H Stassen, *Just Peacemaking* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Helle Liht is an Estonian Baptist and serves as Assistant General Secretary of the EBF.

¹¹ The Revd Tony Peck is a British Baptist who has served as General Secretary of the EBF since 2004.

¹² <http://www.ebf.org> [accessed 21 October 2020]. For a history of the European Baptist Federation see Bernard Green *Crossing the Boundaries: A history of the European Baptist Federation* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1999), and Keith G. Jones, *The European Baptist Federation: A Case Study in European Baptist Interdependency 1950-2006* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2009).

¹³ Juliet and Jim Kilpin and Stuart Murray were the founders of Urban Expression. Juliet and Stuart continue to be involved in the Anabaptist Mennonite Network in the United Kingdom.

are needed to engage with changing western culture, and the Anabaptist experience is a helpful resource. Although church planting has not been a key priority for Anabaptists in the UK thus far, more Christians are beginning to nurture fellowship-type believers' communities where Anabaptist values are informing and inspiring their practice. One area where Anabaptist values have been significant is Urban Expression, a movement of small teams of Christians committed to living out the gospel on the margins.

Urban Expression Inspired by Anabaptist Values

Urban Expression is an urban church planting and mission network which was started in 1997 as a response to the concern that most church planting was taking place in more affluent areas in the UK, where there were already many established churches and where church planting efforts frequently uncritically replicated the 'mother church'.

Urban Expression works as a grassroots organisation. It is a network of people committed to radical Jesus-shaped discipleship, mission and community in neighbourhoods struggling with marginality and deprivation. After completing my studies at IBTS, I was ordained in the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 2009 and have spent the last eleven years in churches and teams connected with Urban Expression.

Urban Expression (UE) now has twenty-four teams spread across the UK (and eleven teams in the Netherlands founded by UE's sister agency there). Teams range in size and character, from social enterprises, to missional communities, table churches and retreat homes. The glue which holds the network together are the three core values of relationship, creativity and humility; and seven commitments: being on the margins, being Jesus-centred, committed to the *shalom* vision of peace, seeking the kingdom of God, nurturing uncluttered church, serving unconditionally, and building respectful relationships with all people. Urban Expression is not an explicitly Anabaptist church planting network. However, the Anabaptist vision is apparent in the core values and the seven commitments. In addition, Urban Expression is committed to work in neighbourhoods and networks that do not belong culturally or socially to the centre of society. This is similar to the experience of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. A number of Urban Expression trustees, coordinators and team members draw inspiration from Anabaptist faith and practice and some people identify their expressions of Christian community as intentionally Anabaptist.

Anabaptists in the UK

Some of the baptistic believers who are key voices in sharing Anabaptist contributions and values in the UK are connected with the Anabaptist Mennonite Network¹⁴ (AMN as it is now known, following the merger of the Mennonite Trust and the Anabaptist Network), most notably Stuart Murray.¹⁵ The Network's roots are in a student residence in the 1950s, welcoming Christians from across the world at a time of open racial hostility. Active in the work of reconciliation was the London Mennonite Centre (LMC), run by North American Mennonite¹⁶ mission workers. It was decided that instead of setting up a new denomination, which might threaten or be considered competition to local churches, the Mennonites would offer resources and insights from the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition to Christians in other traditions. Although there were no attempts to plant churches, a Mennonite church did emerge from the community of the LMC, which closed in 2013 after a number of difficult years. On a personal note, I should mention, that it was primarily through relationships with people involved in Urban Expression that I experienced first-hand the lived-out convictions of Anabaptists. However, the Anabaptist Network also played a crucial role in understanding the goals of this re-emerging radical tradition.

The Anabaptist Network, formed in 1991, adopted the same policy of not planting churches but, instead, offering resources and building relationships with Christians interested in and inspired by the Anabaptist vision. For three years from 2015, I worked with the Network to build relationships with younger adults already connected with the Network, and develop new connections with those who were interested in 'anabaptist-like' values — especially active peacemaking and reconciliation.

I had many fascinating conversations with passionate, justice-seeking Jesus-followers and activists. Many of these folks were working out their calling to be peacemakers through their professional work for organisations committed to the environment, debt relief, local and international peacemaking and mediation. Some had learned enough about Anabaptism to add elements of this tradition to their Christian discipleship but were generally not looking for more points of connection with the Network. However, I was frequently asked 'where can I be part of this kind of community?', and had to admit that I had only a very limited number of suggestions. There are currently no Anabaptist-Mennonite denominations

¹⁴ The merger took place in 2020. See <https://amnetwork.uk/> [accessed 21 October 20].

¹⁵ Stuart Murray is a prolific author. His work includes *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Waterloo, ON: Pandora Press, 2000).

¹⁶ The Mennonite Church is an Anabaptist church arising out of the Dutch Anabaptist, Menno Simons. Mennonite churches exist in a variety of denominational groupings, principally in North and South America, associating together in the Mennonite World Conference founded in 1925, and have a recognised Christian world communion of about 2.1 million believers.

active in the UK, although a number of local churches in membership with other denominations have affiliated themselves with the AMN. For example, the values of E1 Community Church in Tower Hamlets, London, inspired by the Anabaptist tradition, are to be a Jesus-centred, multi-voiced, local church committed to peacemaking. The Bruderhof community¹⁷ and one largely Portuguese-speaking Mennonite church in Eastbourne are the only explicitly Anabaptist churches in the UK. The Brethren in Christ Church¹⁸ has a number of small and mostly Zimbabwean congregations, which draw on Anabaptist, Wesleyan, Evangelical and Pietist traditions. There are also study groups and occasional gatherings of people connected with the AMN. Taking this into account, it is hardly possible to deny the need for more communities shaped by Anabaptist values and practices where people could experience distinctive, radical ways to live Christian faith and life.

The Case for Planting Anabaptist Churches

In February 2020, the AMN held a consultation to consider actively planting new Anabaptist churches. Over the years there have been conversations about sticking to the ‘no church planting’ rule, with strong feelings on both sides of the argument. This weekend gathering was an opportunity to discuss and discern with a larger group of people what the future might hold for the newly formed AMN and to explore if the ‘no church planting’ rule was still serving the aims of the kingdom of God or if it was time to reconsider and prioritise church planting.

Since that gathering, there are various experiments in the pipeline to explore this question further. The AMN has gathered resources for Christian communities linked to the Network to explore their distinctive Anabaptist identity alongside other communities in a year-long ‘learning journey’. There are proposals to form a dispersed intentional Anabaptist community; or to fund pioneers and church planters to nurture Anabaptist communities. Might something emerge from any of these ideas? If we fail to engage or take some risks, how might we respond when people ask us about community expressions of *shalom* and peacemaking? Does this require a separate movement or network of church planters and pioneers who will self-consciously identify with and nurture Anabaptist communities? Considering that there is no official Anabaptist denomination in the UK, how might these churches connect with each other? Who will provide accountability for them? There are still many questions to wrestle with, but it is my conviction

¹⁷ On the history of the early years of the Bruderhof community in the UK see Ian M. Randall, *A Christian Peace Experiment: The Bruderhof Community in Britain, 1933–1942* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

¹⁸ The Brethren in Christ Church (BC) is based in the USA. It is an Anabaptist Christian denomination rooted in the Mennonite community, shaped by radical pietism and the Wesleyan holiness tradition.

that there is a clear need for the planting of new churches in the peace church tradition in the UK; particularly at this time of political and social turmoil, where there is a deep need for active non-violence, for reconciliation between hurting people and communities, and for daily practices to sustain discipleship. The current pandemic offers the opportunity to re-imagine Christian community with less power and privilege but deeper relationships and clearer commitment to the person of Jesus. The conversation is alive and kicking.

The early Anabaptists were passionate church planters,¹⁹ committed to establishing new churches instead of reforming existing churches. Today, church planters are drawing on inspiration from the Anabaptist tradition as they reflect on how to engage in culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate mission. Although the present-day and Early Radical Reformation contexts are separated by five hundred years of history and change, the Anabaptists emerged at a time of similar cultural and social upheaval. They might offer us some insights into how we inhabit and witness to an alternative narrative to our dominant culture. The Anabaptist tradition is embodied and communal — it is most authentically and faithfully expressed in the discipleship and mission of the community of disciples, not in the gathering dust of theological tomes.

In the following, I will consider three aspects of Anabaptist theology embodied in the UK through the core convictions of the AMN which might offer a unique contribution to the current and growing enthusiasm for church planting. There are seven core convictions²⁰ in total, however as I cannot consider all seven here, I will address the first, fifth and sixth. (See Appendix 1 for the full list.)

Followers of ‘the Way’

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

The early Anabaptists²¹ were committed to following after Jesus, or *Nachfolge*, as the radical reorientation of a person’s life to the way of Christ,

¹⁹ See, for instance, Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., *Anabaptism and Mission* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1984); Wilbert R. Shenk, and Peter F. Penner, eds., *Anabaptism and Mission* (Schwarzenfeld, Germany: Neufeld Verlag, 2007).

²⁰ In 2006 members of the Anabaptist Network gathered to formulate seven core convictions which each express an essential belief and lead to a commitment. See Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials for a Radical Faith* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015) and Anabaptist Mennonite Network, *Core Convictions* <https://amnetwork.uk> [accessed 23 October 2020].

²¹ See, for instance, Werner O. Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings: Communitarian Experiments during the Reformation* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline*, especially chapter 4, ‘Cross, Suffering and Discipleship’.

articulated most passionately by Hans Denck: ‘No one can truly know Christ unless they follow him in life.’²² Becoming a follower of Jesus was an active and ongoing journey of discipleship and transformation, not only a transactional event for salvation. This Anabaptist principle applies to believer’s church ecclesiology, discipleship and mission and provides the key to understanding the rest of the Scriptures. As culture moves increasingly into post-Christendom and becomes less familiar with the structures, symbols and institutions of Christendom, we have fresh opportunities to tell the story of the upside-down kingdom, and life, actions and words of Jesus Christ.²³ Diminishing cultural familiarity with a patriarchal, hierarchical and institutionally racist church could be considered a gift to church planters today.

Anabaptist communities forming new churches will need to consider what the most appropriate ways of gathering might be — particularly now as there is still so much uncertainty and fear around how life must change in the light of Covid-19. Whilst some churches have moved further towards consumerism and passive attendance on the performance spectrum, others have discovered new ways of connecting and relating. It is here that Anabaptist spirituality may prove inspirational and serve as a model. In communities experiencing lockdown because of Covid-19, neighbours have started to recognise each other during clapping and drum-banging,²⁴ while pictures of rainbows in windows have brightened dreary streets and pavements. Churches have recognised that they were frequently not the first ones on the scene to help in their neighbourhoods, nor were they always as organised as community WhatsApp²⁵ groups burst into action. The challenge going forward is for Christians to have greater imagination about who they are and how the Jesus story is good news in their communities. No doubt, similar creativity was present among the early Anabaptists.

For Anabaptists, following Jesus is communitarian as well as individual. The meal table is a significant place of discipleship and hospitality.²⁶ Today’s commentators are emphasising that millennials and

²² William Klassen and Hans-Juergen Goertz, ‘Discipleship’, *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (June 2019) <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Discipleship&oldid=166831> [accessed 24 October 2020].

²³ See, for instance, Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

²⁴ In the early months of Covid-19 in the United Kingdom citizens were invited to come out of their homes on a Thursday evening and cheer and clap the key workers in the UK National Health Service.

²⁵ WhatsApp is an encrypted person to person, or person to group audio and audio-visual technology.

²⁶ Alan and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission After Christendom* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011).

those who are part of Generation Z,²⁷ as digital natives,²⁸ are used to consuming information, entertainment and connection ‘on demand’. Assuming that Sunday morning is not the only God-ordained time for meeting,²⁹ and in view of the increasing necessity and desire for online connection, how might Anabaptist communities find helpful online spaces and patterns to nurture relationships, welcome people, and help people to grow in their faith? As our lives have shrunk so significantly, perhaps a return to house gatherings, neighbourhood meet-ups, and everyday discipleship in the way of the early Anabaptists will nurture our faith and our witness.

It has frequently been noted that it is not Jesus that puts people off Christianity — but the church and Christians, who have arguably spent more time patrolling the perimeter fence than demonstrating and emulating the life of Christ. Taking seriously the call to discipleship and following after Christ might help Jesus-followers to navigate uncertain territory as we pay sustained attention to the way that Jesus resisted power and subverted cultural expectations and religious norms.

Developing leaders and being perpetual students

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

This principle is particularly pertinent in a time where people from both inside and outside church communities are becoming increasingly disillusioned with their political and religious leaders. Within the church this might be due to the number of high-profile Christian leaders who have been accused of serious sexual misconduct in recent years, but also more positively, there is a growing conviction that leadership is something that can be shared, developed and nurtured in a community. Asset-based community development theory, a bottom-up way of working with communities that focuses on community strengths and assets rather than on deficits and problems, is gaining traction with grassroots missional initiatives.³⁰ The membership of congregations from diverse Christian traditions in

²⁷ Generation Z are the demographic cohort succeeding Millennials and preceding Generation Alpha. Researchers and popular media use the mid-to-late 1990s as the starting birth years and the early 2010s as ending birth years.

²⁸ Digital native is a term coined by Mark Prensky in 2001, used to describe the generation of people who grew up in the era of ubiquitous technology, including computers and the internet.

²⁹ On developing alternatives see Keith G. Jones, ‘Gathering worship: some tentative proposals for reshaping worship in our European Baptist Churches today’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 13, no. 1 (September 2016): 5–26.

³⁰ Teams connected with Urban Expression use these methods of community engagement.

community organising networks like Citizens UK³¹ demonstrates that there is a growing appetite and desire for relational, collaborative and local leadership development. For those seeking to nurture new Christian communities, the theology of the *missio Dei*³² goes hand-in-hand with an asset-based mindset. If we believe that God is already at work in unknown or yet to be discovered ways, we can partner with others already engaged in that work. Christians nurturing new communities are invited to be co-learners and guests, instead of centring themselves as hosts and ‘pioneers’. Perhaps Anabaptist communities can embody and offer the gifts of their unique heritage, convictions and practices, within the wider church and culture, without competition or hostility. This heritage includes accountability between ‘brothers and sisters’, and emphasis not only on Christian beliefs, but also on Christian behaviour modelled by Jesus Christ.

Adopting a posture of vulnerability and dependence on a neighbourhood community, instead of self-sufficiency, might offer a corrective stance to the self-portrayal of the church as all-powerful and immutable. The early Anabaptists frequently met in homes and hospitality was an important element of their witness.³³ Even their hermeneutics was communally orientated.³⁴ In this context, conversation and dialogue comes naturally and these early Anabaptists often invited those gathered (sometimes even their opponents) to offer their understanding or interpretations of biblical texts. This was unheard of in the sixteenth century, and is still not a regular feature today in most Sunday morning teaching slots, where a mono-voiced sermon is the main method of communication. Twenty-first century culture places significant value on ‘experience’. People are yearning for opportunities for transformation, for adventure, and for deep community. For people unfamiliar with the Christian story, experiencing hospitality and observing the Christian community at work and play offers opportunities for learning, development, and participation as part of the journey towards discipleship.

Whilst it might be contentious in postmodern society, re-imagining the Anabaptist practice of ‘the rule of Christ’ (Matthew 18:15–20)³⁵ might be another way that new communities can foster open, honest and vulnerable

³¹ Citizens UK is a national network of institutions (churches, schools, mosques, trade unions) who work together for the common good. See, <https://www.citizensuk.org> [accessed 21 October 2020].

³² On *missio Dei* see, for instance, David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis books, 1991).

³³ See, for instance, C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds, *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, for examples of the use of homes.

³⁴ Stuart Murray sets out the case for this in his book, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Ontario, Canada: Pandora Press, 2000), especially the chapter ‘Congregational Hermeneutics’, pp. 157–185.

³⁵ See, for instance, Bridge Builders Ministries, UK for transforming conflict (<https://www.bbministries.org.uk>), or Community Justice Initiatives in Canada, working on restorative justice in communities in need (<https://cjiwr.com>) [accessed 21 October 2020].

communication. Accepting that conflict is part of being in relationship with others, an Anabaptist approach to dealing with conflict would take seriously the call to non-violent peacemaking between individuals, communities, and within and among churches. Churches inspired by the Anabaptist vision might invest time in exploring different tools, resources, and processes to resolve disagreements. One example comes from E1 Community Church. During my time in ministry there between 2009 and 2015, we set aside six months to delve deeply into how we as a church dealt with conflict. At the conclusion of this time, the church signed a written agreement detailing the steps for conflict resolution for their community. An Anabaptist understanding of ecclesiology would invite Christians to reorient our lives towards Jesus within the context of a community as we together work out how to witness to the new reality of the kingdom of God breaking in.

Committing to a radical and wholistic lifestyle of faith and discipleship

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

As concern grows about environmental degradation and climate change, together with increased awareness of structural and institutional racism in British society, the Anabaptist commitment to radical discipleship and witness might be one way of embodying Jesus-centric beliefs in intentional ways. As advertisers increasingly play on human feelings of shame, lack of self-esteem, and loneliness, a commitment to simplicity, sharing and resisting consumerism can speak prophetically to wider society. The early Anabaptists cannot be considered environmental activists or committed to 'green' issues, however there are notable examples of Anabaptist communities living simply as part of their commitment to Christ's call of discipleship. For example, the Bruderhof Community (a worldwide organisation of Anabaptists, with three communities in the UK)³⁶ reject all ownership of private property and personal possession, instead holding all things in common and trusting God fully to provide for the community's needs. Work and worship are inseparable and all forms of work are equally valued and honoured, whether that is farming, teaching, publishing or product design in one of the community's businesses. Work is understood as an expression of service and love to the community and to their neighbours. The Bruderhof Community commit to living simply so that they can be generous with their support for the poor and vulnerable. They cultivate their own produce and meat wherever possible free from chemicals, and by using

³⁶ For a public account of the Bruderhof faith, the tenets and orders common to all Bruderhof communities see The Bruderhof, *Foundations of Our Faith and Calling* (Rifton, NY: Plough, 2012).

solar and geothermal energy, continue to explore reducing their environmental impact.³⁷

Whilst recognising the many ways that Anabaptist-Mennonite churches and leaders have colluded with the cultural status quo, present-day Anabaptist communities have often been at the forefront of movements for justice, peace and non-violent resistance. Christian Peacemaker Teams³⁸ were founded in the mid-1980s by members of the historic peace churches including Quakers, Church of the Brethren, and Mennonites, on the passionate conviction that peacemaking should require the same level of investment, commitment and sacrifice for peace as governments demand in relation to war. Speaking in 1984 to the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, Ron Sider implored his listeners:

We must take up our cross and follow Jesus to Golgotha. We must be prepared to die by the thousands. Those who believed in peace through the sword have not hesitated to die. Proudly, courageously, they gave their lives. Again and again, they sacrificed bright futures to the tragic illusion that one more righteous crusade would bring peace in their time, and they laid down their lives by the millions.

Unless we [...] are ready to start to die by the thousands in dramatic vigorous new exploits for peace and justice, we should sadly confess that we never really meant what we said, and we dare never whisper another word about pacifism to our sisters and brothers in those desperate lands filled with injustice. Unless we are ready to die developing new nonviolent attempts to reduce conflict, we should confess that we never really meant that the cross was an alternative to the sword.³⁹

More recently, Juliet Kilpin and Simon Jones co-founded Peaceful Borders,⁴⁰ an organisation inspired by the Anabaptist story, to '[seek] peace in the spaces in between'. Peaceful Borders emerged at the time of the 2015 refugee crisis, when a number of volunteers (people of peace from different faith backgrounds) from the UK spent time befriending, supporting and working with community leaders in the informal migrant camps in Calais, France. The work of Peaceful Borders is focused around accompanying and equipping people responding to forced migration by supporting new arrivals to the UK, building capacity for peaceful responses to forced displacement, and advocating for displaced people.

Early Anabaptists were largely poor and marginalised people, who witnessed to their friends and neighbours in ways that were meaningful and authentic. Although we must avoid idealising their life and witness, as some Anabaptist communities could also be characterised by withdrawal from

³⁷ The Bruderhof Community, 'Living Simply' <https://www.bruderhof.com/en/life-in-community/living-simply/> [accessed 21 October 2020].

³⁸ Christian Peacemaker Teams, 'The Origins of CPT' <https://www.cpt.org/about/history/origins> [accessed 21 October 2020].

³⁹ For full text of the speech: <https://www.cpt.org/resources/writings/sider> [accessed 21 October 2020].

⁴⁰ See <https://peacefulborders.org> [accessed 21 October 2020].

society and prone to schism. However, their positive influence outweighs the negative aspects of this tradition.

Anabaptist communities today, and those inspired by the Anabaptist vision, must walk in the light of this inheritance as they seek to wrestle with the injustices of our time, including racism, which has been painfully amplified by recent deaths and the uprising of collective action. Statements and declarations about being anti-racist will need to be backed up with personal and collective work to hear more voices from various backgrounds, to learn, and to work against injustice. Christians today will need to discover and practise new disciplines as they follow Jesus and courageously break allegiances with white supremacist, classist, sexist and patriarchal hierarchies. Christian communities must enact the way of Jesus to place the last and least valued as first and foremost. As disciples, Christians must commit to sharing life with others which means ‘no longer allowing the racial hierarchy to pattern our social lives, manage our geographic movements, shape identities of superiority and inferiority, or interpret one another through white supremacist and antiblack gazes’.⁴¹ Church planting today takes place in the shadow of colonialism and institutional racism, and wrestling with these issues alongside our black and brown brothers and sisters is non-negotiable. Anabaptist theology has a particular gift to the wider church in this regard because Anabaptists affirm that peacemaking is the heart of the gospel: worship, mission and discipleship are all informed by that central conviction. Active peacemaking is needed for reconciliation and transformation to take place within each of us as we deal with our own unconscious racism (sexism, classism), and as we work for healing and *shalom* in our Christian communities, neighbourhoods and the wider world.

Peacemaking and the seeking of *shalom* is a core element of Anabaptist identity today (and one of the AMN’s core convictions). Reflecting on and exercising this distinct quality of Anabaptist identity in various contexts — interpersonal relationships, neighbourhood politics and congregational life — requires significant time and energy. Anabaptists might consider how a commitment to peacemaking extends to hosting spaces for difficult and nuanced conversations in a time of ‘cancel culture’, fear around holding counter-cultural opinions, and growing online aggression. Most people cannot commit to training with a Christian Peacemaker Team with a view to being sent into an area of conflict, but perhaps we might be inspired by other stories of ‘ordinary’ peacemaking. Like the split-second decision made by Dirk Willems, the sixteenth-century Dutch Anabaptist who after crossing a frozen lake to safety, turned around to save the life of his pursuer who had fallen through a hole and was drowning, despite the fact that he knew he

⁴¹ Drew G. I. Hart, *The Trouble I’ve Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2016).

would lose his life for saving another's.⁴² Or in more recent times, the local Baptist minister who, on seeing a restless group of young people gathering in their usual haunt near her home, quickly got baking and within thirty minutes had managed to dispel the atmosphere of intimidation and violence with her courage, conversation, and cookies. This turned out to be the beginning of an ongoing relationship of trust, support and friendship which emerged out of one brave spur-of-the-moment act of mediation. Or the example of the Amish community of Nickel Mines who immediately extended forgiveness to Terri Roberts, the mother of the gunman who killed five schoolgirls and injured others when he opened fire in their one-room school in 2006. Since then, the Amish community and Roberts have continued to offer mutual support, comfort and friendship in the midst of loss and grief.⁴³ The Anabaptist tradition has many other stories, resources and experiences to offer that can help disciples of Christ to engage in acts of 'everyday peacemaking' in our time.

Where to Now?

Urban Expression might seem to be the natural vehicle to explore a commitment to more self-consciously Anabaptist church planting. However Urban Expression has a particular call to marginalised communities which should not be compromised, and which may not be the only context where people might want to consider Anabaptist church planting. For those who are willing to take some risks and experiment, should the AMN prioritise church planting and offer targeted funding to support this? Or should there be a three-pronged approach: to more explicitly articulate the Anabaptist underpinnings of Urban Expression and the importance of these values in the Christian calling to marginalised communities; to support Anabaptist church planting in a variety of contexts; and to continue resourcing the wider church through the activities of the Network? The logistics need some working out, but the case for distinctly Anabaptist church planting in the UK seems clear to me. I would be interested to know whether there are similar conversations happening in other parts of the EBF family where there are still a number of historic Anabaptist-Mennonite denominations.

Conclusion

In a climate of fear and suspicion, Anabaptist communities can welcome people to tables of hospitality and reconciliation. In a time of isolation and

⁴² The story of Dirk Willems is from a 1660 Anabaptist martyrology compiled by Thieleman J. van Bracht, translated as *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1950), pp. 741–42.

⁴³ Terri Roberts, *Forgiven: The Amish School Shooting, a Mother's Love, and a Story of Remarkable Grace* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2015).

loneliness, Anabaptist Christians can extend friendship and community, travelling companions on the journey of faithfully following Jesus. In a context of upheaval and transition, Anabaptists today can learn from the experience of their forebears who often worked out their discipleship at the margins of society.

In this paper I set out to review how insights from our Anabaptist forebears might be used in contemporary European society, especially amongst Generation Z, but not exclusively so, to create gathering, intentional, convictional and missional communities,⁴⁴ which are shaped through the recovery of key Anabaptist insights, but reinterpreted and applied to this present age. I have sought to demonstrate by use of examples primarily from my own context of the United Kingdom, that there are viable and important developments which provide signposts of life and hope as followers of Jesus seek to engage new Europeans with the key message of Christ, but not bound up with the ecclesia of Christendom.⁴⁵

At the close of the consultation of the wider AMN community, in February this year, one young man blurted out to our group, ‘It is as if you have this treasure; gold and riches in a chest. Do you not know how valuable that treasure is? Do you not perceive what you have that you could share?’ Spurred on by this spirited encouragement, I am convinced that it is time for those who draw with gratitude on the treasure of the Anabaptist heritage, to commit boldly and courageously to the task of re-imagining church planting as a key priority for the Anabaptist family in the UK.

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⁴⁴ Keith G. Jones, ‘Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 4, no. 2 (January 2004): 5–13.

⁴⁵ See Nigel G. Wright, *Disavowing Constantine* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2007).

Appendix 1: Core Convictions of The Anabaptist Mennonite Network

1. Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. He is the source of our life, the central reference point for our faith and lifestyle, for our understanding of church and our engagement with society. We are committed to following Jesus as well as worshipping him.
2. Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation. We are committed to a Jesus-centred approach to the Bible, and to the community of faith as the primary context in which we read the Bible and discern and apply its implications for discipleship.
3. Western culture is slowly emerging from the Christendom era when church and state jointly presided over a society in which almost all were assumed to be Christian. Whatever its positive contributions on values and institutions, Christendom seriously distorted the gospel, marginalised Jesus, and has left the churches ill-equipped for mission in a post-Christendom culture. As we reflect on this, we are committed to learning from the experience and perspectives of movements such as Anabaptism that rejected standard Christendom assumptions and pursued alternative ways of thinking and behaving.
4. The frequent association of the church with status, wealth and force is inappropriate for followers of Jesus and damages our witness. We are committed to exploring ways of being good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted, aware that such discipleship may attract opposition, resulting in suffering and sometimes ultimately martyrdom.
5. Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission, places of friendship, mutual accountability and multi-voiced worship. As we eat together, sharing bread and wine, we sustain hope as we seek God's kingdom together. We are committed to nurturing and developing such churches, in which young and old are valued, leadership is consultative, roles are related to gifts rather than gender and baptism is for believers.
6. Spirituality and economics are inter-connected. In an individualist and consumerist culture and in a world where economic injustice is rife, we are committed to finding ways of living simply, sharing generously, caring for creation, and working for justice.
7. Peace is at the heart of the gospel. As followers of Jesus in a divided and violent world, we are committed to finding non-violent alternatives and to learning how to make peace between individuals, within and among churches, in society, and between nations.