

# Right Fellowship: Reactions to Lancaster Mennonite Conference's Withdrawal from Mennonite Church USA

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## Introduction

I sat sipping tea in Laurel Graham's<sup>1</sup> comfortable home in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania on a sunny day after the winter thaw. When we met in March 2016, Lancaster Mennonite Conference had recently announced its intention to withdraw from Mennonite Church USA. I asked Laurel, a local church member, to describe what happened. She explained that Mennonite Church USA failed to uphold the *Confession of Faith*, which she envisaged as a marriage covenant. "We weren't the ones who broke the covenant," Laurel, patiently (and passionately) explained to me. She continued, now speaking directly to her unseen antagonists: "You broke [the covenant] and refused to stop breaking it, but said you wanted to stay married. . . . It's a violation of the original agreement" (interview, March 16, 2016). Individual Lancaster Mennonite Conference church members often repeated this idea of a marriage covenant or divorce to explain the relationship between the conference and the denomination, but this concept was not formally used by the institutions involved in the dispute.

The ways in which individuals voiced their opinions on the institutional separation demonstrate how Mennonites in Lancaster County were practicing a form of “critical Christianity” (Handman 2015). Anthropologist Courtney Handman explains Christian critique as a social practice, wherein people evaluate their own position in a social field that is Christian (2015, 15). The Guhu-Samane people of Papua New Guinea engaged in critical Christianity soon after the first New Testament translation was produced in their language. This translation was essential for revival and opening up new ways of accessing God, and it led Guhu-Samane Christians to form new churches (Handman 2015, 7). Among Mennonites in Lancaster County, the recent church schism is a way for church members to translate their faith into new models of Christianity community. Church members, who offer their own explanations for why Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) withdrew from Mennonite Church USA (MC USA), are critiquing their religious systems and expressing their own ideas of how Mennonites should behave and what they should believe in their present American context.

For this special issue on anthropology and Mennonites, I draw from an emerging movement in the anthropology of Christianity to view Christianity as a form of social and cultural critique that involves a complex interactive process between individual actors and the Christian group (Elisha 2011; Handman 2015). When LMC withdrew from MC USA, church members said that the schism was due to a variety of factors. The diverse explanations are a form of internal critique of both Mennonite polity and organizational activity. My interlocutors went beyond the simplistic explanation that the schism was caused by “hot button” issues of the time.

I understand the separation as a matter of translation and interpretation, a moment where church members can find new ways to access God and to evaluate their own positions within the church. In this paper, I first consider the history and polity of American Mennonite churches. Next, I present two different reactions to the schism, one group advocating continued communion and the other calling for greater church discipline and accountability. I propose that both reactions are a call for unity, though they do not interpret unity in the same way. Lastly, I reflect upon how the metaphor of divorce is used as a form of internal critique. By examining personal reactions to and explanations of Lancaster Mennonite Conference’s withdrawal, I demonstrate that Christians are agents of internal critique within a religious system where individual words and actions affect all members of the group.

## Considering Church Conflicts

In his sociological examination of conflicts among American Mennonites, Fred Kniss rightly notes that it is ironic that such a peace-loving people, who call themselves “the quiet in the land,” are beset with the violence of church schisms (Kniss 1997, 2). Kniss’s book *Disquiet in the Land* contends that Mennonites must be understood as people involved in a larger cultural system (Kniss 1997). American Mennonites are not immune to the regional, national, and international social influences around them.

This tension between church and society is not limited to Mennonites. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, several prominent denominations across the United States have been split apart by debates about sexuality. The 2015 Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* required all states to grant and recognize same-sex marriages. Episcopalians had been debating the church’s stance toward LGBTQ persons for a long time. They accepted same-sex marriages within a week after the Supreme Court’s ruling (The Episcopal Church 2018). January 2020 brought a significant announcement from the United Methodist Church, one of the largest American Protestant denominations. The church has decided to split and create a “new ‘traditionalist Methodist’ denomination that would continue to ban same-sex marriage” (Robertson and Dias 2020). The plan must be approved in May 2020 at the church’s worldwide conference (Robertson and Dias 2020). The timing of the Supreme Court’s decision and the recent denominational squabbles indicate that the larger cultural system does have a significant impact upon Christian moral concerns and church structures. It is also worth noting that the 2015 United States presidential primaries and subsequent 2016 election was a divisive time in the American political scene. When I asked Mennonite church members how they experienced the church schism, several of them related it to the tensions they felt during the presidential primaries. The external social pressures appear to have heightened the divisions between Mennonites in Lancaster County.

Conflicts in progressive<sup>2</sup> Lancaster County (Pennsylvania) Mennonite churches reached a climax in 2015 when LMC announced its intention to withdraw from the denomination<sup>3</sup> Mennonite Church USA. At the time, LMC was the largest member conference of MC USA. Most of the member congregations agreed with the conference’s decision, but a few congregations and individuals dissented from the majority view. Although this was an institutional-level transition, the leaders claimed that the withdrawal occurred out of concern for individual members. The deci-

sion, in turn, caused a lot of anxiety among church members because the individuals did not want to be associated with an institution that did not reflect their religious values or ideas of Christian morality. The separation demonstrated that progressive Lancaster County Mennonites did not all have to belong to the same national organization. Instead, progressive Mennonitism could be translated into disparate institutions, and individuals could choose which translation best suited their interests.

### **Methodology**

I am writing an “ethnography of the particular,” as Lila Abu-Lughod says, to recognize the danger of making generalizations and to allow particular voices to be heard, voices which may even contain internal contradictions (1991, 149, 155). Although the schism occurred at an organizational level, organizations do not feel the anxiety and tension that individuals experience. Within Mennonite churches, where individuals choose to join or leave a congregation, LMC’s decision to withdraw forced church members to carefully consider their own allegiances in response to the organization’s actions.

In order to hear these singular voices, I conducted semi-structured interviews with sixteen individuals in March 2016. I interviewed active members of LMC congregations within Lancaster County, as well as leaders from several Mennonite organizations to learn more about the relationship between LMC and MC USA. During that month, I also attended the Celebration of Church Life, LMC’s annual gathering for all member congregations. To get a broader perspective of Mennonites in the United States, I was present at the MC USA biennial convention in Orlando, Florida, in July 2017 and, upon returning to Lancaster County, visited nearly two dozen LMC and Atlantic Coast Conference Mennonite churches. Prior to 2017, about half of the Atlantic Coast Conference congregations in Lancaster County had been part of LMC before the latter conference withdrew from MC USA.

Here, I present two Lancaster Mennonite Conference congregations within Lancaster County—Millview Mennonite Church and Central Heights Mennonite Church—that both have long histories with LMC. Each congregation has been part of Lancaster Mennonite Conference for at least seventy years and each has a membership of at least 100 persons. Their geographic surroundings are similar, but I chose these two congregations because the members

had opposing views on how they should relate to both LMC and MC USA.

### **The Withdrawal**

On July 23, 2015, a letter went out to all credentialed leaders of LMC announcing that the Bishop Board proposed the conference withdraw from Mennonite Church USA. The proposal would have to be approved by all the credentialed leaders. The Bishop Board outlined a process for approval that included regional listening meetings, followed by a series of back-and-forth discernment meetings between various leadership groups within LMC, with the result that a final recommendation would be sent to all credentialed leaders in the fall for approval (Weaver 2015d). Though a few pastors said they were blindsided by the letter, LMC had been considering its stance as a member conference for well over a year. In February 28, 2014, another emailed letter to conference leaders informed constituents that the Board of Bishops would “re-evaluate our relationship with Mennonite Church USA” (Weaver 2014a). In addition, LMC leaders were part of a consultation in Ohio that planned “to launch a new network of churches” in 2015 (Weaver 2015a). The Evana Network was announced in April 2015, and its name reflects its theological stance to be evangelistic and Anabaptist (Weaver 2015c). After the break with MC USA, Lancaster Mennonite Conference rebranded itself, likely because it gained members from outside Lancaster and some from non-Mennonite backgrounds. It is now known as “LMC: A Fellowship of Anabaptist Churches.”

After wavering in its commitments to MC USA for a decade, LMC’s process of removing itself from MC USA was fairly quick. When MC USA was organized in 2001 it took LMC two years to decide whether or not to become a member of the denomination. However, the process by which they formally withdrew from the institution took just four months.<sup>4</sup> In early 2015, the Board of Bishops formed an Affiliation Task Force (of four male bishops and two female pastors), which led the process of deciding denominational affiliation (Weaver 2015b). They held eight regional meetings in August and September, in locations stretching from Baltimore to New York City (Weaver 2015d). These meetings were “for the purpose of listening and conferring, not decision-making” (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 2015). Eventually, credentialed church leaders had to vote to approve the Bishop Board’s recommendation to withdraw from MC USA, which they did with a clear majority of

82 percent in November 2015 (LMC–MC USA Group 2017; Weaver 2015e).

At the time, LMC had over 160 member congregations, and the vast majority of them left Mennonite Church USA without hesitation. However, seventeen congregations, a mere 10 percent of the total congregations, wanted to maintain their membership in Mennonite Church USA. The only problem was that MC USA did not accept individual congregations; they had to be part of an area conference. Since their area conference, LMC, had just departed, these congregations either had to find another conference or wave farewell to MC USA. Individual members of these congregations had long-standing friendships with people in MC USA and appreciated the varying viewpoints of connecting with Mennonites from across the nation. However, each congregation's history was entirely wrapped up in LMC, and some families had been part of the conference for centuries. The congregations (and the individuals within each congregation) had two years, until December 2017, to decide to maintain ties with LMC or find their way back into MC USA through another channel.

The critical nature of Christianity becomes most salient during times of change within churches, especially when that change is brought on by internal conflict. What follows is a historical and ethnographic examination of the underlying motivations individuals gave for remaining with LMC and the reasons why others desired to maintain their station within Mennonite Church USA. These persons faced family divisions, congregational splits, leadership transitions, weariness at the process, and excitement for the future, and emerged with greater clarity for the direction they would take in affiliating with one particular institution.

I begin with an overview of the history of both LMC and MC USA, their relationship, and the different models of church polity that emerged in each organization. Following that, I focus on two main themes—concern about unity and the metaphor of divorce—that emerged from the conversations I had with church members. Each idea reflects individuals' attempts to evaluate their fellow church members, while also justifying their own positions in the midst of the conflict. After looking narrowly at these internal criticisms, I glance more generally at what individuals share within the Mennonite church, to demonstrate that these intradenominational schisms are really ways by which Mennonites affirm their commitments to a wider religious system, even while critiquing the actions of those within their group. I conclude by looking into the future for current and former LMC congregations in Lancaster County.

## History and Context

Divisions are not new in the Mennonite church by any means, and Lancaster Mennonite Conference has seen its fair share of schisms in the past three centuries. Local rumors estimate there are upward of two dozen different Mennonite groups in Lancaster County alone, and many of them would be splinter groups from LMC in the 300 years Mennonites have lived in the region. Sociologist Fred Kniss, whose own research explores Mennonite schisms, concludes: “To say that American Mennonites are a diverse group is to engage in monstrous understatement” (1997, 3).

The various permutations of Mennonites are also evident to church members, not just social scientists. Tyler Johnson, an LMC church member who became a Mennonite later in life, had people try to explain Mennonites to him: “Someone once told me . . . that if you’ve been to one Mennonite church, you’ve been to one Mennonite church” (interview, March 16, 2016). However, looking from outside the county, there are a surprising number of similarities among progressive Mennonites. Many of those commonalities come from a shared history, both a religious history and geographic history. This creates some common ground, which will be explained later.

The common story is that Mennonites migrated to North America seeking economic opportunities, religious freedom, and a new way of life. The first permanent Mennonite settlement was in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1683. In 1710 a small contingent of Swiss-German Mennonites from the Palatinate in Germany settled in Lancaster County and invited their friends and relations to join them. The following year more Mennonites joined the small party, and a large number of others followed in 1717 (Smith 1981, 366). From this location and through continued immigration, Swiss-German Mennonites began to spread south to Virginia, north to Upper Canada (now Ontario), and eventually westward to Ohio. A significant number reached Indiana and Illinois in the mid-1800s (Smith 1981, 374–82). They eventually formally organized into a group that became known as the (Old) Mennonite Church. These individuals were mainly Swiss-German Mennonites who migrated directly to North America from Germany and surrounding regions.

A second stream of Mennonites, mostly of Dutch-North German descent, shares this migration narrative to North America, although they first migrated to Russia beginning in 1789 (Redekop 1989, 19). Per the conditions of their migration, the Mennonites in Russia enjoyed much more local autonomy than surrounding Russian communities, creating what Redekop calls a “‘commonwealth’

form of settlement” (1989, 19). Their main internal priorities were to preserve social boundaries and pass their faith on to their children (Smith, 1950, 413–415). In the 1860s and 1870s the Russian government introduced a series of reforms that eliminated many of the special privileges that Mennonites and other foreign colonists had enjoyed (Dyck 1993, 183–185). Faced with the possibility of being forced into military service and unwilling to submit to the Russian education system, Mennonites began making inquiries in the United States and Canada about immigrating (Smith 1950, 440, 444). About 18,000 people emigrated to North America between 1873 and 1884 (Dyck 1993, 206; Smith 1950, 445). In each location, they continued to maintain the German language and Mennonite traditions (Smith 1950, 474). After the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and after World War II, Mennonites again emigrated from Russia, Poland, and Western Europe, settling mainly in Canada and South America (Dyck 1993, 208–11).

Both streams of Mennonites contributed to the founding of the General Conference Mennonite Church in North America. The popular story is that a young minister, John Oberholtzer, wanted to create a more formal church organization, promote higher education, form a publishing company, and establish a strong mission program (Roth 2006, 154). Oberholtzer’s cultural reforms were not accepted by the established leadership of the (Old) Mennonite Church, and, in 1847, he established the East Pennsylvania Conference (Smith 1950, 598). In 1860, at the invitation of Mennonites in Iowa, the East Pennsylvania and Canada-Ohio conferences met together and formed the General Conference (GC) of Mennonites in North America (Smith 1950, 599; Dyck 1993, 258–61; Roth 2006, 154–55). The General Conference was a separate but parallel organization to the (Old) Mennonite Church (later simply Mennonite Church or MC). Though the former group has origins among Swiss-German Mennonites, the influx of Mennonites from Russia bolstered its membership (Roth 2006, 155; Smith 1950, 670). The General Conference has been described as “the most heterogeneous union of all Mennonite conferences in America” because it is composed of Mennonites with histories in Switzerland, South Germany, Poland, Prussia, and Russia and also includes members from other Anabaptist groups such as Hutterites and Amish (Smith 1950, 671).

Understanding this brief history of Mennonite migrations is essential to understanding the current tensions among members of Mennonite Church USA. With each migration, Mennonitism was translated into new forms, based on the availability of pastors and bishops, the number of Mennonites in the region, and the laws of



each nation-state that encouraged or limited Mennonite cultural practices. Throughout my interviews, people continually emphasized that the current conflict within the larger church is a result of differences between “MCs” and “GCs” (interviews with Daniel Frey, Doug Groff, Vince Herr, Dean Shirk, and Keith Weaver, March 2016).<sup>5</sup> Mennonite Church USA as an organizational body was formed in 2001–2002 through a merger of two Mennonite organizations, the General Conference of Mennonites in North America (GC) and the Mennonite Church (MC) (Bender and Hostetler, 2013). Next, I will examine the pertinent differences between these two distinct groups.

Though there are many reasons why people continually referenced the GC and MC divide, the most relevant piece here relates to the polity of each organization. Among the (Old) Mennonite Church conferences, Lancaster was one of the more episcopal or hierarchically structured conferences (interview with Vince Herr, March 14, 2016). An early model of the Bishop Board was formed to “keep house rightly,” and other ordained men, as well as all church members, were expected to comply completely with whatever the board decided (Ruth 2001, 256). Though their direct power has lessened, the Bishop Board continues to be an influential force in Lancaster Conference and is responsible for making decisions for all member congregations. It was the Board of Bishops that led the process that ultimately decided LMC’s withdrawal from MC USA in 2015 (Weaver 2014b).

In contrast to Lancaster’s heavy reliance on the Bishop Board and hierarchical structures, other Mennonite Church USA conferences tend to operate with greater congregational autonomy, as the General Conference congregations used to function before MC USA was formed. These conferences do not have a Bishop Board and instead are guided by delegates who represent a variety of perspectives from within each congregation. Several people attribute this autonomy to their long history in Russia where many congregations were relatively isolated from one another and forced to define their own ways of living (Smith 1950, 420). These congregations are led by elected delegates who make decisions on behalf of the church. Mennonite Church USA was organized using this less-hierarchical delegate model, and it was this different structure that created some of the tension with LMC.

## Reasons for The Withdrawal

In the summer of 2015, Lancaster Mennonite Conference announced its intention to withdraw as a member conference of Mennonite Church USA. This announcement became public (possibly leaked) in the midst of Mennonite World Conference, an international gathering of Anabaptists held every six years (interview with Dustin Penner, October 24, 2018). Only three weeks earlier, MC USA held its biennial convention, during which delegates voted on church matters. At that convention, delegates voted to uphold marriage as a union between one man and one woman, but they also voted to exercise forbearance with members who acted in contrast to that stance. Forbearance meant that the denomination would not take disciplinary measures against persons at variance with the *Confession of Faith*. That convention highlighted the fact that a significant number of congregations, not just those within LMC, were dissatisfied with the denomination. Many sources explained that LMC's withdrawal was due to differing views on same-sex relationships. In conversation with a local newspaper staff writer, Lancaster Conference Moderator Keith Weaver "said that while the church is wrestling with a number of issues, the LGBTQ issue has become a flashpoint" (Cornelius 2016).

It would be wrong to say that sexuality was the only reason the conference withdrew.<sup>6</sup> Barb Wenger, a member of Central Heights Mennonite, explains that LMC was never fully aligned with MC USA: "There were churches that weren't really happy with being part of [Mennonite Church USA] 10 and 20 years ago, even, but this was kind of like the icing on the cake" (interview, March 17, 2016). She spoke in reference to MC USA's decision not to formally censure a member conference that had licensed a pastor in a same-sex relationship, a practice at variance with the denominational polity and 1995 *Confession of Faith* (Nafziger 2015). Daniel Frey, also from Central Heights, said that he has most often heard that LMC withdrew from MC USA because there was "a failure of discipline at the denominational level" (interview, March 15, 2016). LMC thought that MC USA was not remaining true to the *Confession of Faith* and called on MC USA to be accountable but felt like they were not heard (interviews with Aaron Charles, Laurel Graham, and Dean Shirk, March 2016). In sum, LMC, which is more hierarchically organized, was not pleased with the autonomy other members conferences held within MC USA, and they chose to no longer formally associate with those conferences. The history of different church polities from centuries before is still relevant in the church's actions today.

## Divergent Priorities

In a personal interview, Keith Weaver, LMC moderator, stated succinctly that LMC and MC USA have divergent priorities, and it was easier to separate in order to focus more energy on those priorities. The differences between the two institutions are not apparent when visiting a local congregation on a Sunday morning or for a weekday event. I only came to understand Keith Weaver's comment more fully after attending two different events, one hosted by LMC and the other by MC USA.

Each spring, LMC holds a gathering for all member congregations. The Celebration of Church Life often includes times of singing, a state of the conference address, seminars, and a keynote speaker. In March 2016, the attitude was celebratory. Though some attendees alluded to a few lost members and connections, most of the people present were looking forward to continuing in their missional work. The missional church movement has several iterations, but LMC members meant that missional work was a way of spreading the influence of the church further into the local community (interviews with Daniel Frey, Ben Haverstick, Laurel Graham, and Keith Weaver, March 2016).<sup>7</sup> Many of the seminars included strategies for acting on behalf of God, doing God's "mission" in the local community in order to grow the church. Speakers also talked about work in local prisons or supporting people with mental illness. All of these were ways in which they thought the church could change people's lives through Jesus Christ. The keynote speaker, the director of Evana Network, told people that transitions have times of fear and pain, but they can also be times of creativity and enthusiasm. He encouraged people to see God in a new way and see how God is transforming difficult experiences to bring new growth. In fact, the theme of the weekend was "We See New Life."<sup>8</sup>

Mennonite Church USA holds biennial conventions where people of all ages are invited to learn and worship together. During this time, member congregations also send delegates who are responsible for processing and voting on the business of the church. Delegates at the 2015 Convention in Kansas City, Missouri, upheld the 1995 *Confession of Faith* and also approved the statement on forbearance. LMC announced its withdrawal shortly after that decision. In 2017, the convention was held in Orlando, Florida. The mood was both somber and expectant. One speaker addressed the whole group and reminded them of what they had to celebrate since 2015. But then the speaker also listed losses and allowed people time to lament members who had left, and to mourn the

racism, discrimination, and abuse that were present in the church. Some of the seminars also addressed these issues, talking about the harm of patriarchy, the presence of racism in white-majority congregations, and addressing why people are leaving churches permanently.<sup>9</sup> The 2017 Convention was also structured so that delegates could meet together and process the future structure of MC USA. The entire week was a time of both looking back to learn from the past and looking forward to pour energy into acting out Christian faith as individuals and as a denomination.

From these two experiences, I noticed that the greatest difference between the two gatherings was that each one had a different interpretation of how the church should act within the surrounding society. LMC was internally focused and wanted to bring individuals into the church as an institution. The keynote speaker even encouraged people to think personally, to give up their own desires so that God can work through them as individuals to bring other individuals to the church. Tanya Luhrmann explains how evangelical Christians work to hear God speak to them and train their minds to notice events in the world as God-orchestrated (Luhrmann 2012). LMC reflects the same attitudes as these evangelicals who understand that religious faith is a personal commitment that takes hard work to begin to see God as an active being in the world. MC USA, in contrast, was less concerned with a personal idea of salvation. They focused less on the internal work individuals should do and instead encouraged people to be active in undoing the structural problems of racism and discrimination that existed around them. They also wanted to understand how the church as an institution had contributed to social ills. They sought to address both individuals and institutional wrongs by considering how the past affected their work in the present and their direction for the future. Though people at both gatherings spoke about God's love and creating the kingdom of God, they interpreted the call to action as either the need for personal salvation or a call to address social wrongs. Each group translated the ideas of God's love and God's kingdom in ways that contributed to the schism between LMC and MC USA.

### **Evaluating Unity: Millview Mennonite Church**

Members of both congregations I interviewed were concerned about unity in the church, invoked biblical teachings as foundational for their beliefs, and talked about the need to be a missional church so that their positive actions would influence their social realm. Despite shared language and principles, church members

interpreted the word “unity” in various ways and they translated unity into different practices. The discussions of unity were another way that Mennonites critiqued church members’ actions. Personal beliefs and religious teachings must be enacted in order to be evaluated. Though Mennonites talked about unity, they imagined that the unity would be performed in distinctive ways.

All of the members of Millview Mennonite church I interviewed approved of LMC’s decision to withdraw from MC USA, and they agreed that their congregation did not need to discern their affiliation. They were firmly committed to LMC. They continually emphasized the importance of having leaders who enacted discipline, and they championed individual and institutional accountability. By discipline, they were not referring to punishment but rather to the need for order and clearly defined rules and structures. They often framed LMC’s withdrawal as a consequence of MC USA’s failure to appropriately enact discipline when a member conference did not uphold the shared *Confession of Faith* that prohibited same-sex partnerships. They felt a strong sense of relief that LMC was no longer connected to MC USA.

Since these church members were eager to depart from MC USA, it does not appear that they wanted unity, but it is important to understand how they defined unity. They expected unity in thought and practice, not necessarily unity as members of the same institution. In discussing the history of the (Old) Mennonite Church and the General Conference of Mennonites, I explained how the Mennonite Church had a more hierarchal polity. Lancaster Mennonite Conference was the only conference in MC USA that retained a Board of Bishops at the time of LMC’s withdrawal. In the 1960s, the bishops were strict about enforcing plain dress codes and forbidding radios and televisions for church members (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 1968). This was not unusual for American Mennonites at the time (Franconia Mennonite Conference 1942; Ohio and Eastern Conference 1938), but, while other conferences had moved toward a congregational form of governance, LMC retained the Bishop Board. The power of the bishops has lessened since that time, but, for people like the members of Millview Mennonite Church who have grown up in Lancaster Conference, they still *perceive* that bishops hold great influence over church members. In a hierarchical model of church leadership, unity comes when church members align themselves under the direction of their leaders.

When I asked about her reaction to LMC’s decision to withdraw, Marie Burkholder, who attends Millview Mennonite Church, remarked, “I was really relieved that our leaders stood up for what

was right” (interview, March 15, 2016). Gary Hostetter, another member of Millview, recognized that the Bishop Board had a difficult task, not only in navigating their position in MC USA but also in listening to the diverse voices within LMC. “I fully support their decision,” Gary concludes, “because I know they’ve wrestled with it” (interview, March 15, 2016). Several members of Millview reiterated this trust in the Bishop Board. The bishops continue to wield power because church members legitimate their authority by showing support for their leaders’ decisions.

Now that LMC has taken a clear moral position, by rejecting affiliation with a church leader in a committed same-sex relationship, Ben Haverstick believes that LMC wants to be clear in its Christology and emphasize the salvific, transforming power that people can find in Jesus Christ (interview, March 14, 2016). These LMC members believe that the Bible outlines clear standards for moral living, including in terms of sexual practice, and they believe MC USA is compromising those morals by allowing a conference to license a person in a same-sex relationship. They do not want the church to be swayed by the latest “hot button issue” (interviews with Tim Burkholder, Jesse Hershey and Gary Hostetter, March 2016), but rather believe that Jesus can change people’s lives anywhere, at any time. They prefer to focus on Jesus’ ability to bring transformation to all people, no matter what issue they face. After attending LMC’s 2016 Celebration of Church Life, it is clear that the church members agree with LMC’s optimistic view of the future and the missional work of the church.

For many Millview members, the problem with MC USA was that its leaders did not have the authority to lead and were thus robbed of the power to discipline a member conference that was not aligned with MC USA’s membership guidelines. They expected all members of MC USA—conferences, congregations, and individuals—to live in harmony with the denomination’s membership guidelines. They understood the church according to the strictest Durkheimian definition of “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things . . . which unite into one single moral community,” though they emphasized the *unified system of beliefs and practices* part of that definition more than the idea of a single community (Durkheim 1995, 62). Millview member Laurel Graham recognized that forced institutional unity can be harmful and coerce people into associating with ideas that they do not believe.

Millview Mennonite Church and others formed their own united community, remaining with LMC, the conference that they had been part of since the congregation’s inception. They believed that the church should be unified in its stand against sin in the world.

As a missional church, they should be a countercultural organization that brings Jesus's salvation to their communities. By giving congregations the option to withdraw from MC USA, LMC enabled a number of congregations to remain unified and feel a sense of freedom after being associated with a body that had different priorities. Millview members critiqued MC USA's failure to uphold unity, the unity of behavior, and they enthusiastically joined LMC in withdrawing from MC USA.

### **Evaluating Unity: Central Heights Mennonite Church**

In a very different vein, members of Central Heights Mennonite Church wanted to maintain institutional unity, while also recognizing and accepting the diverse beliefs and practices of others within Mennonite Church USA. Members of this congregation did not express a unanimous position toward LMC's withdrawal from MC USA. They often spoke of the need for Mennonites to respect one another. Instead of relief at LMC's withdrawal, they felt a deep sense of pain and sadness at the loss of relationships and at Lancaster Conference's failure to continue in relationship with other area conferences in the midst of conflict. Central Heights member Barb Wenger voiced the distress these individual church members experienced: "This is a lose-lose kind of thing, in my book, just because you're going to have a lot of people that are unhappy." No matter what decision the congregation made, people would leave the congregation, causing pain for them and for the members who stayed.

Central Heights church members often spoke about remaining together in the midst of diversity. They recognized that unity would require some members of the church to exercise forbearance, especially when they disagreed with others on moral issues. Central Heights was one of the seventeen congregations that went through a discernment process to determine whether or not they would remain with LMC or leave LMC and rejoin MC USA. It was a congregation where individuals came from many different geographic and faith backgrounds. Barb Wenger said that being part of such a theologically, politically, and ideologically diverse congregation encouraged respect, even though she also recognized the challenges it presented: "I've appreciated the diversity and have felt like, for the most part, that there's a respect for the differing views." However, she and others remarked that the congregation would be torn apart no matter what decision was made (interviews with Daniel Frey, Jesse Hershey and Barb Wenger, March 2016).

If LMC remained within MC USA, Central Heights would not have to be torn asunder. Division in one part of the church led to further schisms in other areas, and members of Central Heights lamented the grief this separation was causing them as individuals and as a congregation.

Several members of Central Heights Mennonite Church used the Bible as a foundation for their call toward unity, even if that required forbearing with other members who held opposing beliefs and who practiced their Christianity differently. They cited Jesus' words in John 17 where Jesus said, "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:20 NIV). For Jesse Hershey and Daniel Frey, Jesus' prayer was a clear call to group unity, and any Christian who advocated separation was disobedient to Jesus' appeal. Jesse Hershey explicated why it was important for the church to remain united in the midst of differences. He began, somewhat sarcastically, by explaining how the church could be an example to non-Christians who would see it and say, "Oh look, Christian unity. I didn't know that still existed." He continued, more seriously, "And it's not, again, unity for unity's sake. It's from John 17. When we live that way, then we're giving proof of the gospel" (interview, March 15, 2016).

The concept of unity resonated throughout the Mennonite church in July 2015, when participants at the biennial MC USA Convention sang these words by pastor and songwriter, Nathan Grieser: "I will sing with you my rival/ will you sing with me/ Difference is a place where God is found/ In seeking peace we're walking onto holy ground/ Lord we surrender/ Bring us together" (Grieser, 2015). Though the song was not written with the church tensions in mind, it became an anthem for some who attended the denominational gathering. By choosing this song for the 2015 Convention, the song leaders indicated their own belief that unity meant remaining together as a group, even if other church members acted in ways that did not agree completely with the membership guidelines.

For some members of Central Heights, the denomination's decision to practice forbearance was not a lack of accountability or discipline, but rather a way to reserve judgment while working through differences as a group. Central Heights members were critical of LMC's willingness to leave MC USA so quickly instead of remaining united with a national body of Mennonites and working through conflict in a productive fashion. They criticized LMC for causing more pain by leaving instead exercising forbearance in united fellowship.



### Divorce: A Critical Metaphor

When LMC withdrew from MC USA, all member congregations automatically withdrew with the conference. Since congregations cannot be part of MC USA without an area conference, individual congregations would have to decide if they would like to continue to remain part of MC USA (Mennonite Church USA 2001, 2013). The majority of congregations happily left MC USA and maintained their membership in LMC. However, seventeen congregations wanted to continue to be affiliated with both LMC and MC USA (Weaver 2015f; LMC–MC USA Group 2017). These congregations, including Central Heights Mennonite Church, had two years to decide where they wanted to affiliate, to either leave MC USA or withdraw from LMC and find another conference in order to remain part of the national denomination (Weaver 2015f). For individuals within the seventeen congregations, this was a difficult decision because their entire church history was wrapped up in LMC. “Whoever won the [November 2015] vote . . . got to keep the house,” Central Heights member Tyler Johnson elucidates. “You either get to keep the strongest claim to that history or you have to give it up” (interview, March 16, 2016). For many people in Lancaster County, where Swiss-German Mennonites have been settled for over 300 years, and where some families have attended one congregation for generations, maintaining a historic connection to the conference is an important aspect of Mennonite identity.

Respondents often compared LMC’s withdrawal from MC USA to a divorce between the organizations. Just as in a marriage, the parties involved had agreed to a shared covenant. However, MC USA’s failure to hold member conferences accountable to their shared commitments was treated as a breach of the marriage covenant, as Laurel Graham explained at the beginning of this article. Members from Millview and other congregations I visited explained that LMC was forced to withdraw because MC USA had failed to uphold the membership guidelines, the marriage covenant. In order to retain its institutional integrity as an organization that upheld its moral and ethical standards, LMC was forced to separate itself from MC USA.

Some church members used the metaphor of divorce in a different way. Instead of concern about the marriage covenant, they compared themselves as individuals to children caught between two parent institutions. Daniel Frey, from Central Heights Mennonite Church explains, “Lancaster Conference has chosen to divorce from Mennonite Church USA. And then I say, most times when there’s a divorce, there’s a fight over the kids. But in this case it

feels like the divorce is going to happen, and the kids are being told, 'Find your way. Figure out a way. It's up to you.'" This comment reveals that some Mennonites not only criticized LMC's decision, but they were also disappointed by its process for withdrawing. Their reaction is a critical evaluation of hierarchical governance models that expect members to trust the leaders' decisions without question. Though they felt like children in the midst of a divorce, Central Heights members and others wanted to be empowered to decide their own future and to be a part of the decision-making process because the institutional decision affected them personally. For most LMC congregations, it was a relief to be out of a bad marriage, while, for a few others, it was as if they had been tossed out of the house by parents who were too concerned with their own priorities to listen to the diverse voices of their children.

While I was visiting a sizable LMC church after the schism, I mentioned the divorce metaphor to one person who is a committed and engaged member of LMC. I was shocked by his effusive outburst that LMC had certainly not divorced from MC USA! Rather, it was MC USA who had chosen to divorce from LMC. I tried to explain that my interlocutors had said that MC USA broke the marriage covenant (membership guidelines), which LMC viewed as grounds for divorce, but that it was LMC who took action for divorce (withdrawal). However, this person seemed offended by the idea that LMC had done anything improper, and the conversation took a different turn. I share this story partly to show that any metaphor must break down at some point, but also because I want to explore why mentioning "divorce" elicited such a strong reaction.

The Mennonites of North America have always taken a strong stance against divorce and continue to discourage divorce as a practice, though the progressive Mennonite churches no longer place restrictions on divorced members. From the late 1800s through the 1960s, Lancaster Conference produced a small booklet called the *Statement of Christian Doctrine and Rules and Discipline*, simply known as *Rules and Discipline*. These were the rules the bishops used to keep church attendees united in their behavior, and most bishops meted out discipline, if necessary, to noncompliant members. Disciplinary action varied according to the situation, but it could take the form of refusing to serve communion or not welcoming a person into church membership. The *Rules and Discipline* underwent another revision in 1968, and a number of bishops withdrew from Lancaster Mennonite Conference and formed their own organization because they thought the new standards were too lenient. The power of the bishops within LMC was waning

at this time. The 1968 rules for marriage state, “Anyone married to and living with one divorced cannot be received into church fellowship” (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 1968). The *Confession of Faith*, which now guides church members, instead of the *Rules and Discipline*, continues to speak against divorce, but it does not prohibit church membership, and it makes allowances for situations where divorce might be reasonably justified (1995).

Despite the guideline changes, church members continue to believe that there is a strong stigma attached to persons who are divorced. To illustrate, one man who was raised in a Mennonite church shared that he told a group of other Mennonites that he was divorced and the room immediately got silent, and they did not address the topic.<sup>10</sup> I was present in this group and interpreted the silence to mean that the other group members could not relate to his experience. I think perhaps some of the fear of sharing his marital status was due to his own inhibitions regarding divorce. As another example, I met a woman at a church’s women’s gathering. She began attending a Mennonite church later in life and admitted that it took years for her to tell some people in her Sunday school class that she was divorced. She had heard that Mennonites do not accept people who are divorced. But, once she shared this information with her friends, they did not treat her any differently, and she realized that her fears were unjustified among friends. These stories reflect the fact that whether or not there is shame attached to divorced persons, people still perceive that a stigma exists.

Using the divorce metaphor to explain LMC’s withdraw from MC USA is an effective way for Lancaster County Mennonites to critique the institutions involved in the schism. In saying that MC USA broke its marriage covenant, church members who left MC USA are ridiculing the nature of an organization that appears to have nothing to hold it together. If, they reasoned, the marriage covenant could be taken so lightly by another member conference, and that conference was not disciplined, then it should be easy for LMC to withdraw without any trepidation. Once MC USA had failed to uphold the marriage covenant (membership guidelines), LMC considered the covenant null and void, and so they left.

Other church members used the divorce metaphor to critique LMC and its actions. By saying that LMC had chosen to divorce itself from MC USA, these Mennonite individuals were saying that the Bishop Board was doing exactly what it had once told church members they could not do. The metaphor criticizes the Bishop Board for not holding itself to the same ethical standards it expected of its members. If this Bishop Board can relax its restrictions on divorce and change its position over time, then it

should exercise forbearance in the present case and remain within MC USA and learn from the broader church's example of humility and patience.

For those individuals who thought that LMC had initiated the divorce, their choice of remaining within LMC or staying within MC USA was really a choice between two offending parties. They may not have agreed with MC USA's decision to withhold discipline for a member conference, but they were willing to forbear with the denomination. On the other hand, they could not remain within LMC when it taught different ethical standards for the conference and for individuals. In this way of thinking, LMC acted worse than MC USA. It is precisely this idea that LMC deserved more of the blame for the schism that insulted the one LMC church member I met that Sunday morning. He was not ready to criticize the conference in that way. His reaction, and the opinions of all the people I met, demonstrate that church members take their congregational and conference affiliation very seriously. This is not true for all people who attend Mennonite churches, but the people I interviewed were committed to their particular congregation specifically because of its position either within or apart from MC USA.

### **Space to Breathe Again**

In her study of evangelical Vineyard churches in the United States, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann demonstrates how individuals' intentional religious practices shape their perception of the world, "Each faith—to some extent, each church—forms its own culture, its own way of seeing the world, and as people acquire the knowledge and the practices through which they come to know that God, the most intimate aspects of the way they experience their everyday world change" (Luhrmann 2012, 226). Even before its formal withdrawal from MC USA, LMC had been forming a different culture. LMC's organizational polity was different and its priorities were more overtly evangelical and less concerned with large-scale social issues than other members within MC USA. For this reason, it has become an attractive landing place for other congregations and conferences from the United States who also decided to disassociate with MC USA. In 2018, Lancaster Mennonite Conference rebranded itself as "LMC: A Fellowship of Anabaptist Churches," a name that indicates its constituent base now includes congregations from all over the United States (Schrug 2018).<sup>11</sup> These congregational refugees from MC USA have joined

LMC since 2015, a move which means that LMC has the critical mass needed to become a denomination in its own right.

Of the seventeen congregations that had formally declared their intention to continue with both LMC and MC USA for the two-year liminal phase, nine decided to continue their history within LMC, while eight congregations transitioned to another Pennsylvania-based member conference of MC USA (LMC–MC USA Group 2017). For those congregations that remained within LMC, they continue to practice communal forbearance at the conference level. Even if they do not agree with all the decisions of the conference, they prefer to forbear with the polity and some of the priorities of LMC for the sake of their church members who agree with particular LMC priorities and do not want to give up their long cultural heritage within the conference. For the congregations that left LMC, all joined Atlantic Coast Conference, which was the best option at the time, despite proposals for beginning new conferences (LMC–MC USA Group 2017). Almost all of these congregations agreed to withhold judgment on issues of sexuality during the 2015–2017 transition period and, in 2019, some congregations have still not had a conversation on sexuality, indicating their willingness to forbear with ideas and practices in the wider church that may not align with their individual perspectives. By forming new alliances, these individuals and congregations move “between critique, division and the reconstitution of unity” (Handman 2015, 267).

All individuals are thankful to be out of the liminal phase of organizational affiliation, and are ready to put energy toward focusing on the future. Congregations within LMC are glad to not be bogged down by national church concerns that distracted them from their local missional priorities. Congregations who changed their conference affiliation to remain with MC USA are grateful to have found a new home, a parent who wants them. Several church members said they could breathe again and were glad that the air felt clearer away from the uncertainty of the transition process.

## **Conclusion**

The anthropology of Christianity provides a helpful perspective to understand the productive nature of church schisms and to show how individuals are agents in critiquing and contributing to the future of the church. For Lancaster County Mennonites, the church continues to be an important institution, even if they have different ideas of how the church should be structured and governed. I want

to conclude by considering what individuals have in common, that is, their concern for the church, the body that translates God's love into human practice.

Summarizing the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, author, pastor, and rhetorician Michael King says that two parties in disagreement must have something in common that makes their differences so contentious (King 2001, 51). A common phrase among Pennsylvania Mennonites is the importance of "maintaining the right fellowship" (Ruth 1984). However, this shared priority causes tension, King clarifies, when congregations must "decide whether maintaining the *right* fellowship or the *right fellowship* [is] more important" (King 2001, 64). It is only because LMC members value the institution of the church and the gathering of a community of believers that they felt the separation so intensely.

The main concern in the schism between LMC and MC USA was that each group had different priorities, based on its history, its church polity, and the individual experiences and views of its church members. LMC operated under a more hierarchal church polity, where the Bishop Board guided the future of the conference. Those who were unhappy with the Bishop Board's decision criticized this governance model by saying the Bishop Board was too paternalistic. MC USA, with its congregational form of governance, advocated forbearance, instead of discipline, when a member conference did not uphold the membership guidelines. LMC and its members criticized MC USA's laxity by withdrawing from the denomination. In introducing *Critical Christianity*, Handman writes that "schism is an integral part of Protestant religious practice." She says division is not always what Christians want, but it is "fundamental to producing moral Christian worlds" (Handman 2015, 3). The separation between LMC and MC USA allowed each group to focus energy on new priorities instead of facing distractions from intradenominational conflicts. LMC and its members could continue their missional activities and focus internally on the organization and the local communities in which people lived and worked. MC USA and its members could pour their energy into restructuring the denomination and encouraging each other to continue the work of overcoming systemic evils within their social spheres.

When I asked about the future of the Mennonite church, people recognized the discomfort and uncertainty of the present, but were also very optimistic about the future. Central Heights Mennonite Church member Daniel Frey remarked, "Here's my hopefulness. It's not my church. It's Jesus' church. . . . I rest in that truth, it's his church." Frey's desire to see the church continue, and his em-

phasis on Jesus, indicate that he shared values with Millview Mennonite Church members, despite their differences. In the same vein, Terry Shue, Director of Leadership Development for MC USA, who appeared to have much invested in MC USA, confidently declared, “I am so unworried about the church. . . . The church is going to go on, and when the dust settles from this little crisis in our little denomination, I think we’ll find a different way to be church” (interview, March 22, 2016). As these personal narratives and the incorporation of historical references reveal, Lancaster County Mennonites are in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing new ways of “being church,” of defining and critiquing what it means to be Mennonite in the contemporary the United States by navigating the intersections between historical narratives, cultural realities, and Anabaptist principles that guide people in integrating belief and practice. With each schism, Mennonites evaluate the current church structures, refocus their priorities and allow Mennonitism to be translated into new forms, lived out by individuals in their diverse worlds.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> With the exception of Keith Weaver, Moderator of Lancaster Mennonite Conference, and Terry Shue, Director of Leadership Development for MC USA, whose official roles necessitated recognition, all the names of individuals and congregations are pseudonyms. All interviews were conducted by the author in Lancaster, PA.
- <sup>2</sup> “Progressive Mennonites” is the term some social scientists use to distinguish Mennonites who freely interact with the non-Mennonite world from the conservative Mennonites or those who mostly interact with other Mennonites (Kraybill and Hurd 2006; Kanagy 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> Among the Mennonites I spoke to, the word “denomination” refers to a distinct, autonomous Mennonite religious body. In this sense, there are multiple Mennonite denominations with different names, though all fall under the broader category of “Mennonite.”
- <sup>4</sup> Even in 2004, when LMC decided to join MC USA, 35 of LMC’s 190 congregations retained a special provision to be members of LMC and have a non-participating relationship with MC USA (Lancaster Mennonite Conference 2004).
- <sup>5</sup> This history is told more completely in the following: Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (1993); William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (1996); C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* (1950); James Urry, *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789–1889* (1989).
- <sup>6</sup> For a more thorough explanation of the reasons Lancaster Mennonite Conference withdrew from Mennonite Church USA, see *Mennonite World Review*, July 26, 2015 or *The Mennonite*, November 19, 2015. Interlocutors

gave mainly two reasons for the withdrawal, citing that neither was a complete reason: (1) disagreement about sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation, which was usually glossed as differences in biblical interpretation, and (2) incongruent church politics, as explained in this paper. However, since the withdrawal was in process, it was not productive for respondents to discuss *why* it happened but rather *what* they were now going to do in the face of their new reality.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the missional church, see the following: David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (2011); Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (1998); Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (2006); Timothy Keller, "The Missional Church" (2009), <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-missional-church/>; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989).

<sup>8</sup> Author's notes from March 19, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Author's notes from July 4–8, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Author's notes on group interview, April 11, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Even before this move away from MC USA, Lancaster Mennonite Conference was a diverse conference, with most of its congregations covering the geographic region from New York City to Virginia, with member conferences in several other states. Since 2015, with the addition of congregations from other areas of Pennsylvania and the United States, the geographic centre of the conference has shifted, and the name was changed to more accurately reflect the present realities. Though this research focused largely on Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, some of the congregations concerned in the withdrawal were from outside Lancaster County.

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