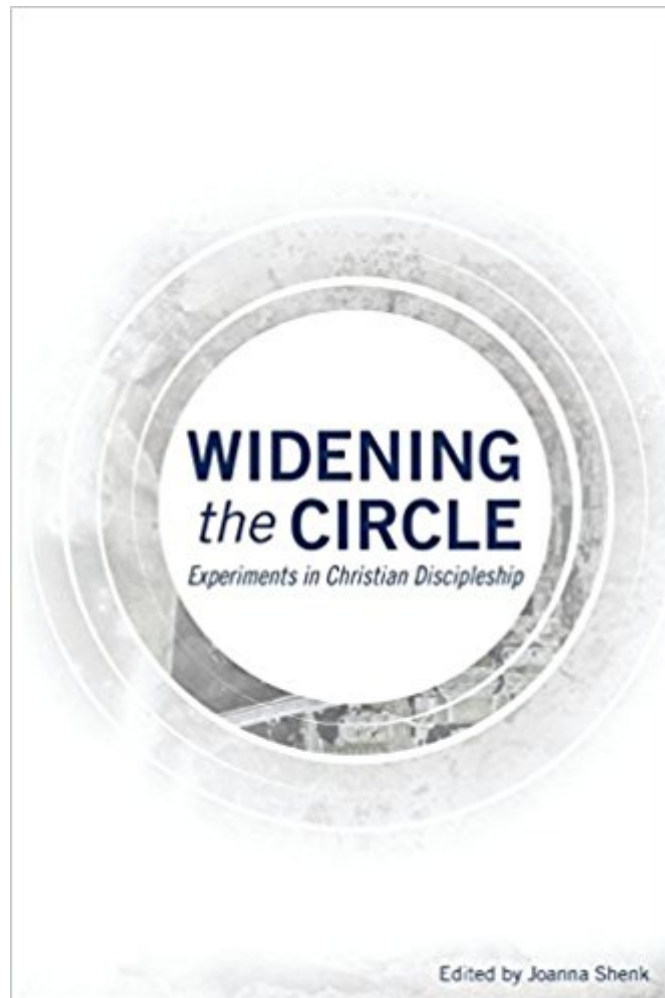




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Widening The Circle: Experiments In Christian Discipleship



Synopsis

In the last half-century, a growing number of North Americans have been smitten with an Anabaptist-Mennonite vision of church and mission. Often coming from outside the Mennonite mainstream, they've formed communities with others of like mind and sought to live out their radical faith. But in the process, they often bump up against the institutional church that has housed the radical vision for generations. The stories and reflections offered in *Widening the Circle* explore that creative tension. The result is a rich showcase of Jesus-centered discipleship-windows into what the future church can look like. Contributing authors are Vincent Harding, Rosemarie Freeney Harding, Rachel Elizabeth Harding, Sally Schreiner Youngquist, Celina Varela, Regina Shands Stoltzfus, Hedy Sawadsky, Andre Gingerich Stoner, Peter Sprunger-Froese, Mary Sprunger-Froese, Dawn Longenecker, Tim Nafziger, James Nelson Gingerich, Sarah Thompson, Bert Newton, Mark Van Steenwyk, Andrea Ferich, Seth McCoy, Jamie Arpin-Ricci, Anton Flores-Maisonet, Calenthia S. Dowdy, Jesce Walz.

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Customer Reviews

Widening the Circle is a provocative collection of anecdotal reviews by participants in various intentional communities throughout North America. The result is a fascinating and wide-ranging insight into the experience of following Christ in community. The stories are written with unusual transparency, recounting successes, but not shying away from acknowledging painful disappointments. [...] I recommend this book for anyone interested in stories of real life experiences

of following Christ in community. --Henry Friesen, from March 2012 issue of The Messenger

Widening the Circle gives a voice and platform to these grassroots workers for peace and justice who were and are willing to pursue Christian discipleship in a very real way in order to embody the Kingdom of God rather than seeking to be the next poster-children for post-modern hipster Christianity. The church can benefit from hearing from and understanding the various discipleship movements presented in Widening the Circle; from knowing that they are happening, they do exist, and our American culture is direly in need of them. --Alex Dye, Associate Pastor at Oak grove Mennonite Church, published on Englewood Review of Books website

In the end, Widening the Circle is an important work and I am grateful to Joanna Shenk and Herald Press for undertaking it. It gives a voice and platform to these grassroots workers for peace and justice who were and are willing to pursue Christian discipleship in a very real way in order to embody the Kingdom of God rather than seeking to be the next poster-children for post-modern hipster Christianity. The church can benefit from hearing from and understanding the various discipleship movements presented in Widening the Circle; from knowing that they are happening, they do exist, and our American culture is direly in need of them. --Alex Dye, Associate Pastor at Oak grove Mennonite Church, published on Englewood Review of Books website

Widening the Circle features intentional communities or movements that put flesh on the principles of discipleship articulated by Anabaptists through history. It "traces new and continuing expressions of this discipleship vision within, at the margins of, and wholly independent of the Mennonite Church in North America over the last half century," Elaine Enns and Ched Myers write in their introduction (p. 13). This anthology deserves to be widely read in and beyond Anabaptist circles because it highlights Christian interconnectedness as the church remembers together. It shows how to live with tensions:

- * Members of the Urban Village in Pasadena, California, long to work together on one central neighborhood project but remain committed to their work individually.
- * Christian Peacemaker Team members oppose oppression while acknowledging their work is often possible because of their privilege as United States citizens.
- * Calenthia Dowdy, an anthropologist coming to the Mennonite tradition as an adult, sees a clash between the American Dream and Christian discipleship.

Widening the Circle groups community stories chronologically into three sections. In the "First Wave (1950s and 60s)" Civil Rights pioneers Vincent and Rosemarie Harding recount early interracial living, Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland offers its journey to diversity, peace activist Hedwig Sawadsky questions why Mennonites remain the quiet in the land in a violent world, and Celina Varela describes her involvement in Reba Place community, founded in 1957. The

"Second Wave (1970s and 80s)" contains the seasoned community wisdom of Sojourners in Washington, D.C.; Bijou Street in Colorado Springs, Colorado; Christian Peacemaker Teams; and Maple City Health Care Center in Goshen, Indiana. The "Third Wave (1990s to Present)" introduces newer communities impacted by diverse influences: Mennonite Voluntary Service, Catholic saints, megachurches, undocumented immigrants and environmental waste. It also addresses the recent popularity of radical living, the difficulties of communal life, exclusion by established Mennonites, and the pain of leaving a New Monastic community. In the foreword, Canadian Catholic Mary Jo Leddy says many of the book's communities had "spiritual insight into the 'original sins' of empire: racism, violence, war, and the abuse of the environment and the outsider" (p. 11). Editor Joanna Shenk is a staff person with Interchurch Relations of Mennonite Church USA. Her interviewing skills, energetic networking, and careful editing are evident. Chapter notes are helpful and concise. Mark Van Steenwyk and Jesce Walz's poetic reflections (chapters 13 and 19) are a welcome addition. I would have liked a list of authors' suggestions for further reading. The book's stated scope is North American but only two of the nineteen chapters feature Canadian communities. In his interview in chapter 1, Vincent Harding says it is "important for there to be some strange people around who are saying through their lives, 'There is another way to be'" (p. 34). This book is a fine tribute to some of these "strange people." "Not all these experiments succeeded or survived," Harding says, "but they each cast a measure of light and hope in their time." Sharon Kraybill
Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage, July 2012
pmh@lmhs.org

In a time when the church is in great need of re-creation and re-membling its call and vision, this book invites us to look at how in the last decades, faithful women and men have chosen to stand up for peace and justice even at times when there were no models to follow. Using their Spirit-given imagination, they dared to go back to the essence of the teachings of Christ and embody them in a way that spoke to and transformed not only their hearts but also the reality around them. Widening the Circle inspires you to believe that Christ's disciples have what is needed to transform and heal our world today. Rev. Nancy Rosas UCC (United Church of Christ)

A few months ago I attended a book discussion at Lancaster Mennonite High School that revolved around the book "Widening the Circle: Experiments in Christian Discipleship" which was put out by Herald Press and edited by Joanna Shenk. The topic of the book revolving around discipleship and new forms of being church intrigued me and so I took my friend Jeff and we went, even though I am not Mennonite. A few weeks later I got the chance to receive a copy of the book from Herald Press

to review it and blog about it. It didn't take long for me to read it but it has taken me some time to digest it and also have time to write about it. The first thing that I will say about this book (and it is in jest) is that they didn't widen the circle enough to include other experiments in Christian discipleship from an Anabaptist perspective. I say that in jest because I know Herald Press is a Mennonite Book Publishing House and so I should not be surprised that all the of the experiments mentioned are all from the Mennonite perspective. I would have liked to seen other experiments that are thoroughly Anabaptist but not necessarily Mennonite. Maybe some day someone could compile some stories from communities who are planting new faith communities and are experimenting in Christian Discipleship and are part of the wider Anabaptist movement (Brethren in Christ, Church of the Brethren, Mennonite, etc...) So being a part of the Church of the Brethren (I couldn't bring myself to call myself Brethren) I was interested to read this book from an "outsiders' perspective. The thing about that "outsider" perspective is that it only lasted a few pages, as I could thoroughly identify my experience in the Church of the Brethren with what I was reading. I realized again that Mennonites and Church of the Brethren are so closely related. The things that were shared, struggled with, embraced, "fought over" and the values that underlined each chapter are the same regardless of being Mennonite or Brethren. I would have to say that the chapter that has stuck with me the longest and had the most profound impact we me was Chapter 15 called `ThirdWay Community: From MegaChurch to Mennonite" written by Seth McCoy. The reason that it struck me the most was because the similarity in my journey with the journey that Seth is on (though I have never worked in a Mega Church). Seth was a Youth Pastor, so was I. He began reading "Anabaptist" books from the likes of N.T. Wright, John Howard Yoder, and also Greg Boyd (who he then went to work for at Woodland Hills). I came into Anabaptist thought and theology much the same way, but also had the benefit of being part of a Youth Group and a Community which embodied the values and theology so that it became the air I breathed and I became Anabaptist almost by osmosis. The quote that resonated the strongest with me and was almost like Seth got into my head and into my thoughts is this quote from Page 178: "Three churches have been planted in our neighborhood in the last year, all using `seeker sensitive' models. Honestly, I am a bit jealous. After all, it would not be difficult for ThirdWay to do the same thing. But since most of us have experience with rapidly growing churches, we recognize that the Sunday morning service can easily become the main focus. This still leaves folks feeling lonely and making discipleship difficult." I also loved that Seth got to answer questions like "What has been hard about planting a new faith community?" and "What has been joyful about planting a new faith community?" I loved his answers and his openness and authenticity behind them. We are in much the same place as Veritas, and it helped to know that there are other

people planting new faith communities from an anabaptist and missional perspective out there and that we aren't alone in this journey. (So thanks Seth) The other two chapters that spoke to me the most was Chapter 13 entitled "Letting Go of the American Dream" by Mark Van Steenwyk and also Chapter 16 about the Little Flowers Community written by Jamie Arpin-Ricci. The one quote, which stood out to me and hit me square in face, from Chapter 13 was, "To turn toward God, one must turn from Empire. The Kingdom of God and the American Dream are essentially incompatible." OUCH!!! That is a hard pill to swallow, but I believe it is true. And the one quote from Chapter 16 that struck me, revolves around the idea that we seek to play out in Veritas, is in relation to the importance of Scripture and Community. "The historical and practical foundations of Anabaptism, where community is the central place to interpret Scripture, have been critical to our continued formation as Little Flowers Community." The one issue that I struggled with a great deal, not only in this book but also in my dealings within the Church of the Brethren, and also in wider dealings with those in the Anabaptist circle is best summed up by a quote from Chapter 14. In this chapter the author says, "The Mennonite Church taught me to pursue justice." Now at first glance, it looks great. We are definitely supposed to be about justice and making the world a more just place. But when we look deeper, this, to me, is a sad statement. That justice has replaced Jesus as the primary focus of a faith community. If something replaces Jesus, no matter how good, right, and worthy it is, it is still idolatry. If the author would have said, "taught me to pursue Jesus who led me to pursue justice". (which I believe He does) then all is right. But unfortunately justice has, in my opinion, taken the central place where Jesus should be. This issue, I believe, is common not only in the Mennonite Church, but in other Anabaptist communities, as well as the wider Christian community. Overall, I was appreciative of the chance to read and review "Widening the Circle: Experiments in Christian Discipleship" and want to thank Herald Press for the review copy of the book. It was good to read about new faith communities exploring discipleship from an Anabaptist perspective and it was good to know that we aren't alone in this experiment in Christian Discipleship. (I should also thank Joanna Shenk for the hard work she did in compiling all the stories in the book.)

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