

---

# Give Us the Courage to Enter the Song

## Reckoning with Mennonite History and Theology through Public Action

Jonathan Smucker, Tim Nafziger, and Sarah Augustine

*What is our peace witness when we live as citizens of the nations that make peaceful revolution impossible?*

—Vincent Harding

It's a cold January morning in Washington, DC. One hundred thirty-five Mennonites are walking through the Cannon House Office Building, part of the United States Capitol complex. Those gathered are here to call for a ceasefire in Gaza and demand that the United States stop its unconditional supply of weapons and military aid to Israel. On a pre-arranged signal, they all sit down. They display large, colorful banners styled to look like Mennonite quilts, and they begin singing hymns in four-part harmony, until they are arrested by Capitol police.

“How can we be silent,” they sing together, “when we are the voice of Christ, speaking justice to the nations, breathing love to all the earth?”<sup>1</sup>

Over the past year, a vibrant new grassroots movement called Mennonite Action has gained remarkable momentum in mobilizing Mennonites in the wake

---

*Jonathan Smucker has worked for over twenty-five years as a political organizer, campaigner, and strategist. He is the cofounder of Popular Comms Institute, PA Stands Up, Lancaster Stands Up, Common Defense, Beyond the Choir, and Mennonite Action. He is a sociology PhD candidate at University of California, Berkeley and author of Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017). He and his family attend Blossom Hill Mennonite Church (Lancaster, Pennsylvania). Tim Nafziger (he/him) lives in the Ventura River watershed on the traditional lands of the Chumash people in Southern California. He has been organizing for peace and justice in Mennonite communities for twenty-seven years. He enjoys writing, board games, and photography. Sarah Augustine is a Tewa (Pueblo) descendant and self-identifies as an internally displaced person. She is the cofounder and Executive Director of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, a national coalition with global reach.*

*Note: Emily Hershberger, Pete Dula, and Sheri Hostetler also contributed to this essay.*

1 Michael Mahler, “How Can We Be Silent,” verse 1 (Chicago, IL: GIA, 2003).

of Hamas’s brutal October 7 attacks against Israel last year, and Israel’s horrific and ongoing attacks on Gaza. Thousands of Mennonites across the United States and Canada have now participated in the novel movement—attending protests, meeting with their elected representatives, writing letters to the editor, attending skills trainings, joining committees that carry forward the work, and organizing their fellow congregants to take action.

The movement’s short-term focus is an immediate ceasefire, with a long-term commitment to working for a political solution that ends Israel’s illegal military occupation of Palestine and brings about a lasting peace in Palestine-Israel. To date, local Mennonite Action groups have organized upwards of one hundred protests and vigils across North America and showed up for countless more public events with allied organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace, If Not Now, and Christians for a Free Palestine. This summer, Mennonite Action organized the “All God’s Children March for a Ceasefire”—an 11-day, 135-mile march from Harrisonburg, Virginia, to Washington, DC, where they joined with allies to counter the annual conference of Christians United for Israel (CUFI) and to confront US lawmakers who embrace CUFI’s agenda.

The movement’s call for fellow Mennonites to “take action together and *publicly as Mennonites*”<sup>2</sup> is provocative. By the early twentieth century, the prevailing North American Mennonite understanding of “nonresistance”<sup>3</sup> implied an avoidance of an active role in politics and protest. Even as US and Canadian Mennonites began engaging more with the wider world mid-century, we tended to focus our energies and resources on service work, humanitarian relief, and mutual aid—and to shy away from direct engagement in political fights and protest.<sup>4</sup>

---

2 Mennonite Action, “How Can Mennonites Be Public Peacemakers in This Moment?” MennoniteAction.org, accessed October 30, 2024, <https://www.mennonite-action.org/call-to-action>.

3 “Nonresistance” is a nineteenth-century English term that has its roots in earlier Anabaptist theological ideas. For a deeper history, see Guy F. Hershberger, Ernst Crous, and John R. Burkholder, “Nonresistance,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989, <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Nonresistance&oldid=166097>.

4 Throughout this essay, we use Jonathan Smucker’s encompassing definition of politics as “any contest between competing interests. . . . To be *political* is not merely to hold or to express opinions about issues, but to be engaged with the terrain of power, with an orientation towards changing the broader society and its structures.” Here politics and political action includes but extends beyond elections and voting, and beyond the conflicts and maneuvers of official political actors. We see challenger social movements and “outsider” protest tactics as belonging to this larger terrain, even if these challengers typically enter this terrain as underdogs. For these reasons, we prefer the term “political action” over the contemporary term “activism,” and “collective actors” over “activists,” finding political

In the 1960s when Vincent Harding, a Black Mennonite pastor, exhorted his fellow Mennonites to play a more active and vocal role in the Civil Rights Movement, the foot-dragging and pushback he encountered often came wrapped in the theological language of Mennonite nonresistance. Harding's deep and continual frustrations eventually led him to part ways with the Mennonite church (even as he maintained many important relationships with Mennonites for the rest of his life) and focus his work for social justice mostly in non-Mennonite institutions.<sup>5</sup>

But looking back on the decades that followed, we can see a slow and uneven shift toward Harding's vision of a publicly engaged Mennonite church that seeks to be, in Harding's words, a "front light"—instead of a "rear light"—in the social justice struggles of our time.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Mennonite Action stands on the shoulders of other Anabaptist-rooted organizations and collective efforts—like Pink Menno, Community Peacemaker Teams, and On Earth Peace—that, especially over the past three decades, have gone beyond conscientious objection to work actively for justice and peace. Mennonite Action also builds upon and seeks to complement a long history of Mennonite work related to Palestine-Israel, including the work of Mennonite Central Committee, MennoPIN, and Mennonite Church USA. The work of the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, in its call for accountability from the Christian church for complicity in genocide against Indigenous peoples and seeking repair, has also been key in laying the groundwork for Mennonite Action. We'll look more closely at this connection later in this piece.

In our view, the new wave of explicitly Mennonite protests focused on Gaza marks both a continuation of a long "transformationist stream"<sup>7</sup> of Anabaptism

---

terminology more precise and instructive. See Jonathan M. Smucker, *Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 257, 266.

5 Joanna Shenk, *The Movement Makes Us Human: An Interview with Dr. Vincent Harding on Mennonites, Vietnam, and MLK* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 48.

6 Board of Christian Service, *The Church Facing the Race Crisis* (Newton, KS: December 4, 1963), AMC, CESR papers I-3-7, Box 5, Folder 168.

7 We see Mennonite Action, along with the movements and organizations mentioned above, as part of what Rodney Sawatsky called the "transformationist" stream of Anabaptism. Sawatsky elaborated a model of four streams of Anabaptism: (1) the "separationist" stream emphasizing social and cultural nonconformity; (2) the "establishment" stream emphasizing biblical nonresistance and personal holiness; (3) the "reformist" stream emphasizing discipleship and service to the world; and (4) the "transformationist" stream emphasizing political and ideological nonconformity to the political powers. For purposes of this essay, we will not dive into the distinctions between the establishment, separationist, and reformist streams other than to point out that they are more comfortable co-existing with the dominant political and economic culture than the transformationist stream is. We see a dynamic tension between the transformationist stream of Anabaptism and the

and an important next phase, further shifting the public and self-perceived relationship of Mennonites to collective political action.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of Mennonites across the United States and Canada are finding our full-throated protest voice, bringing elements of our Christian faith and Mennonite traditions into the public sphere, and seeking along the way to reconcile who we are—our values and our ways—to the times we are living in and the suffering we are witnessing in a broken world.

As so many Mennonites across the United States and Canada are now joining in public protests, we have an opportunity to deepen our understanding. To understand the longer-term context of this shift, we want to look at decades of grassroots organizing among Mennonites that have laid an important foundation. We will also take an honest look at the consequences of what we call Mennonite “quietism” on political matters, especially concerning social, economic, and political structures that Mennonites have benefitted from throughout our history—complicity in colonization and genocide, for example—while also celebrating those Mennonites who refused to be passive and silent.

## Elaborating Quietism

By “quietism,” we mean the tendency to keep quiet and stay out of the way when it comes to political issues and world affairs—essentially, to abstain from politics.<sup>9</sup> Mennonite quietism is complicated, full of contradictions, and quite uneven over time and geography. We (the authors of this article) have, nonetheless, each experienced it as a *real thing*—a still lingering *force* that impacts Mennonite life, culture, and actions to this day.

To elaborate on what we mean by the term quietism, we want to first construct an intentionally oversimplified and exaggerated picture of it—what sociologists

---

other three streams, which we see as having significantly obscured the transformationist for most of the past three centuries in North America. An earlier draft of this article centered on Sawatsky’s framework, but we opted ultimately to use other language to make our argument for Mennonite and Anabaptist political engagement that takes responsibility for the social, economic, and political structures that we are embedded within, as opposed to the pattern of quietism that we elaborate in the next section. See Rodney J. Sawatsky, “The One and the Many: The Recovery of Mennonite Pluralism,” *Anabaptism Revisited* (1992): 141–54.

8 We are building on Janna Hunter-Bowman’s work on third-wave peace theology, which connects reckoning with the past with attention to questions of power and organizing for liberatory, justice-oriented peace action.

9 For a deeper historical look at “Old” Mennonite Church and General Conference shifts from quietism toward active nonviolence over the past century, see Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1994).

call an “ideal type”—in order to identify its features. In our ideal type, a committed “quietist” believes that Christians should be “in the world, not of the world,”<sup>10</sup> concerning themselves with the things of God’s kingdom, not the kingdom of this world. Following the Apostle Paul’s admonition in Romans 13, they acquiesce to state authority in most matters, *except* if the state compels them to violate core tenets of their faith, specifically military conscription. Jesus’s words “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” (Matt 22:21, RSV) are interpreted to mean that people should pay their taxes without protest. Along with refusing military service, quietists also eschew public office and likely even abstain from voting. Protest and lobbying are unfamiliar to them, part of the kingdom of this world. Rather than demanding that the state act to uplift (or stop oppressing) others, they directly serve others and pray for them.

Each of the authors of this article has personal experience with fellow Mennonites who fit this ideal type to a T. We want to be clear, however, that we are not suggesting this ideal type of a quietist is an accurate general description of all Mennonites. Instead, it represents a pole at one end of a complex spectrum of Mennonite political engagement (and lack thereof). Historically, different lineages of Mennonites and Anabaptists had very different relationships to politics and the state. Eighteenth-century Dutch Mennonites, for example, actively participated in a revolutionary movement and held public office. In terms of contradictions, Mennonites in the United States who ostensibly eschewed worldly engagement regularly found themselves (or their leaders) advocating for their own interests vis-a-vis the state (e.g., for the right of conscientious objection).

This is important to parse in our understanding of historical Mennonite quietism: The rhetoric did not match the reality. Indeed, this hypocrisy was at the heart of Harding’s frustration about Mennonites sitting on the sidelines of the black freedom struggle. Mennonite leaders argued that active involvement in the nonviolent, but assertive and confrontational, Civil Rights movement did not fit with Mennonite nonresistance theology. Harding saw clearly that Mennonites had been politically engaged in all sorts of ways but that their engagement was typically limited to asserting Mennonite interests. This pattern extended back to the first North American Mennonite settlers, who mostly turned a blind eye to the genocide that effectively awarded them the fertile lands upon which they could keep quiet.

Our critique of Mennonite quietism follows Harding’s: We want Mennonites to take political responsibility for the social, economic, and political systems we are part of and that we benefit from. While we want to be careful to not over-generalize about quietism, we have seen firsthand how it permeates Mennonite self-understandings in our churches. Many fellow Mennonites we talk to are

---

10 Derived from John 17.

impatient with their own churches, which they see as having been “quiet in the land” for too long. We want to explore together what it means to be Mennonite while also being citizens of first-world nations (and, in the case of the United States, a global military superpower), or to be white Mennonites who live in a white supremacist social system.

Our purpose here is not to litigate the past or harshly judge our ancestors—or to adopt a “relentlessly triumphalist” progress narrative<sup>11</sup>—but rather to evaluate together what our political engagement might look like today, as well as how we understand that engagement in relation to our history and theology. We are focusing our reflections primarily on Mennonite Church USA and related communities, where all three of us are situated. We hope this essay will serve as one small contribution in that conversation.

## The Radicals: Early Anabaptists

Early Anabaptists were anything but quiet. They lived, breathed, and actively engaged in an extraordinary historical epoch. In the sixteenth century, the Radical Reformation era saw peasant revolts and the gradual crumbling of the feudal order across Europe. The relatively recent invention of the printing press led to dissent spreading much more quickly than before. This was compounded by the European “discovery” of the Western Hemisphere, and rapid expansion of global trade and economic development. This historical context profoundly shaped the early Anabaptists, informing and constraining their choices.

Many of us who were taught Mennonite theology and church history learned a somewhat decontextualized version of both in our growing up years. The story goes something like this: Reading the Bible for themselves, the early Anabaptists discovered they had been misled by church authorities. Central among their theological disputes was the issue of infant baptism, which the Anabaptists found no evidence for in scripture. So strongly did they believe in their interpretation of this specific faith ritual that thousands of them refused to back down—to the point of torture and death.

This oversimplified story misses the context of the early Anabaptists. It suggests they were motivated completely by theological concerns and that church and state authorities’ brutal persecution of Anabaptists was exclusively religious,

---

11 Robert Charles reviews Driedger and Kraybill’s history and two other histories of Mennonite peacemaking and offers important historiographical, theological, and sociological context. He critiques the way Driedger and Kraybill view less educated “rank and file” Mennonites as backwards and in the way of the doctrine of progress. Auguste Comte, who named the new discipline of sociology, explicitly saw sociology as a “mistress of the sciences.” This is the same doctrine of progress (“manifest destiny” in the US) that went hand in hand with colonization and genocide. See J. Robert Charles, “The Varieties of Mennonite Peacemaking: A Review Essay,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76, no. 1 (2002): 105–20.

as opposed to political, in nature. This story can remove the early Anabaptists from their unique time and place. By reading back in their social and economic context, however, we can better understand how to relate to our own times.

While concerns about an everlasting world beyond this temporal one did animate the actions of many radical reformers, they were also very much attempting to shape *this* world. The reality is not only that early Anabaptists *did indeed pose a threat* to existing religious and state authorities but also that they *meant* to do so.

A robust chronicle of early Anabaptism's many branches and details of their subversive aims is beyond the scope of this essay, but we can briefly summarize a few major themes. First, the reason Anabaptists earned their name was subversive: State-church authorities, which frequently collaborated, saw re-baptism of adults and refusal to baptize babies as theologically heretical and politically seditious, as infant baptism was the primary ritual of religious and civic initiation in that context. Similarly, early Anabaptists' refusal of oaths threw a wrench into the political and legal gears of feudal society. The practice of local congregational autonomy and the idea of a "priesthood of all believers" was a clear affront to centralized church authority, undermining both Catholic and Protestant ecclesiastical hierarchies. The challenge to centralized power was not merely incidental to Anabaptists' new theology; movement leaders were frequently unrestrained in their scorn and derision for whole categories of authority, as well as for specific leaders.

And then there was the remarkable challenge to the feudal economic order. Many Anabaptists embraced a "community of goods," rejected private property, and sought to enact a radical redistribution of resources. Indeed, some strands of the early Anabaptist movement were deeply intertwined with the Great Peasant Revolt of 1524 to 1525.<sup>12</sup> The revolting peasants launched an unruly challenge to the feudal social order that spread across a large region of Central Europe. They interpreted Acts chapters 2 and 4 as an injunction for a radical egalitarian redistribution of land and wealth. The movement suffered a crushing defeat, with upwards of one hundred thousand peasants, farmers, miners, and townsfolk killed by the better trained and more heavily armed military forces employed by the aristocracy.

---

12 A more accurate description than "revolt" would be a social movement inclusive of a wide range of expressions of discontent, from a few peasants roughing up the local monastery to more organized confederations. According to historian James Stayer, Anabaptism was connected to peasant movements in Switzerland, South Germany and Austria, and Central Germany. There were no peasant movements in the Netherlands or northern German territories where Anabaptism also developed. See James M. Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

The radical Anabaptist movement also suffered incredible repression and persecution across much of Europe over the next two to three centuries—for roughly half of Anabaptism’s entire history.

## Mennonites in Early Colonial America

Early Anabaptists upended the social, religious, and political order of their day, and they paid a terrible price for their defiance and nonconformity. Persecution made it difficult, if not impossible, for Anabaptists to pursue their radical aims beyond their own (increasingly withdrawn) communities. For many, especially in Switzerland and southern Germany, relative isolation in agricultural communities became the norm. This collective survival strategy led to enclave cultures among many Anabaptists; a pattern of rural quietism arose in settings such as Prussia, the Russian Empire, and the Americas as Anabaptists sought new land and freedom from military service.

In the early 1700s, Mennonites began arriving in the British colonies in the Americas. Some of them carried fresh memories of their persecution by state authorities in Europe. In contrast to Anabaptist refusals of the 1500s, many of these settler Mennonites attempted to ingratiate themselves to the colonial government. Aware that their unwillingness to fight in wars was a problem for civil authorities, they tried to prove their worth by building a reputation as good farmers. According to historian John L. Ruth, this strategy worked so well that William Penn and his agents settled the Mennonites in prime farming land.

Penn’s men pushed poor Scots-Irish immigrants off this same land and settled them closer to the frontier with the Delaware and Shaunee.<sup>13</sup> Because of this, the Scots-Irish bore the brunt of attacks from Delaware and Shaunee during the French and Indian War. In 1763 during this war, a mob of Scots-Irish settlers called the Paxton Boys channeled their rage at the Quaker and German political leadership in Philadelphia into two massacres of Conestoga Indians outside Conestoga, Pennsylvania. This completed the ethnic cleansing of the last intact community of Indigenous people in Lancaster County, as Mennonite prosperity and land ownership grew.<sup>14</sup>

Colonial Pennsylvania was not the only place Mennonite settlers farmed land where Indigenous people were recently removed, while turning a blind eye to the colonial violence they benefited from. This pattern played out over and over again, including, for example, Mennonite settlement of the Ukraine under Catherine

---

13 John L. Ruth, *The Earth Is the Lord’s: A Narrative History of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference* (Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History), (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2001), 197–98.

14 Tim Nafziger, “Mennonites and the Conestoga Massacre of 1763,” *The Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery*, February 3, 2016, <https://dismantleddiscovery.org/2016/02/03/mennonites-and-the-conestoga-massacre-of-1763/>.



the Great in the 1700s when Mennonites settled land taken from Cossacks and others,<sup>15</sup> and in Mennonite settlement of Saskatchewan that displaced Cree people in the late 1800s and early 1900s.<sup>16</sup> This pattern has continued among some Mennonites even up to the present: As recently as 2023 in Mexico, old colony Mennonites are threatening the life ways of Mayan peoples.<sup>17</sup> In all of these examples, Mennonites bought into the settler story that they were making land “productive” that Indigenous people were not adequately exploiting. Generations of Mennonite wealth is built on agricultural land taken from Indigenous peoples.

Mennonites’ relationship with slavery was arguably more complicated. In 1688 the first written protest against slavery in the new world was signed by four individuals in a home in Germantown, Pennsylvania. While the document was written by Quakers and for a Quaker audience, three of the four signers had a Mennonite affiliation.<sup>18</sup> There is also documentation of Mennonite individuals aiding the Underground Railroad. We can celebrate those Mennonites who opposed, defied, or worked to end slavery, but we should understand clearly that, by and large, Mennonites were not meaningfully active in the Abolitionist movement, especially in any institutional or group-level ways.

We could cite many reasons for Mennonite quietism in this era. Perhaps the crux of it is that the gradual cessation of active persecution, combined with new economic opportunities (especially in agriculture), led to a hand-to-the-plough mentality and an enclave culture prevailing among Mennonites in early colonial America. If early Anabaptism constituted a world-challenging intervention, the life and land in North America provided Mennonites with a relatively cloistered enclave to live their distinct theology in peace, comfortably and in private.

Again, it is important to be clear about the reality—and hypocrisy—of Mennonite quietism. Mennonite settlers did engage with the terrain of power (“politics” in our earlier definition above) in order to protect and secure the economic interests and religious freedoms of their settlements. Indeed, prior to the Revolutionary War, early Mennonite settlers were quite active in local and

---

15 Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

16 Elaine Enns, “Facing History with Courage: Towards ‘Restorative Solidarity’ with Our Indigenous Neighbours,” *Canadian Mennonite Magazine* 19, no. 5 (2015), <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/facing-history-courage>.

17 Anika Reynar, Tina Fehr-Kehler, and Lars Åkerson, “Maya Seed Guardians Seek Well-Being in Mexico with Mennonite Colonies,” *Anabaptist World*, March 20, 2024, <https://anabaptistworld.org/mennonite-colonies-farm-practices-threaten-may-a-ancestral-land-in-mexico/>.

18 For a discussion on why the signers’ Mennonite affiliation was significant, see Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683–1790* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1985), 43.

regional politics, as a matter of self-interested common sense and service to the settler colony. What they did not typically do is acknowledge or engage with broader political responsibilities that accompanied their involvement in the economic and political systems they benefited from.

## Mennonite Re-Emergence in the Twentieth Century

It was only in the mid-twentieth century that Mennonites began to even consider racism as a problem for the church. That consideration occurred within a larger process of Mennonite emergence onto “the political scene.” In many respects, we can understand Mennonite experiences of this long century sociologically. Like other similar distinctive cultural enclaves, many Mennonites went with the flow of economic development and assimilated into mass society while struggling to hold on to cornerstone values and beliefs and maintain particular cultural practices. As Mennonites moved away from livelihoods based in agriculture and craftsmanship and began urbanizing over the course of this century, they inevitably integrated into modern society, politics included.

At first Mennonite political activity was limited to securing specific exemptions—the struggle at the beginning of World War II to win conscientious objector status for conscription-age Mennonite men and, later, the possibility of alternative service. Given the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust, there is reason for retrospective embarrassment that US and Canadian Mennonites seemed concerned, above all else, with securing their own ability to conscientiously object to military conscription and were otherwise mostly silent about the unfolding atrocities across the Atlantic.

Add to this reality that some Mennonite enclaves were openly antisemitic and even sympathetic to Hitler and Nazism, illustrating the ethno-nationalist infection to which some Mennonites have succumbed.<sup>19</sup> Even if explicit Nazi sympathizers constituted a small minority of Mennonites, their unearthed existence stands as a worse indictment because of the absence of a significant Mennonite collective voice opposing antisemitism and Nazism as Hitler rose to power.<sup>20</sup>

---

19 Tim Nafziger, “A Window into Antisemitism and Nazism among Mennonite in North America, Part 1,” *Anabaptist World*, July 30, 2007, <https://anabaptistworld.org/window-antisemitism-nazism-among-mennonite-north-america-part-1/>.

20 One might reasonably ask—as one of our reviewers did—what “a collective voice opposing antisemitism” would have looked like, as Mennonites had not yet developed much capacity for or practice in speaking out publicly about social or political issues (at least about issues that didn’t directly concern their church members). Our aim here is not to harshly judge the actions or inaction of our forebears by contemporary standards but rather to gain a clearer understanding of how, regardless of their intentions and historical limitations, they were often functionally complicit. Our purpose in this is to use the understandings, tools, and capacities now available to us for challenging and breaking from our own complicity.

However, these developments proved pivotal in the Mennonite church's long-term shift from quietism toward greater, transformation-oriented engagement. As one example, Mennonite conscientious objectors were exposed to awful conditions in mental hospitals and became advocates for patients, eventually starting their own mental health facilities that treated patients with respect and dignity.<sup>21</sup> More broadly, service programs for conscientious objectors and the birth of Mennonite Voluntary Service exposed young people to life outside of Mennonite enclaves (as well as to Mennonites from other communities). This period was part of a wider growth of Mennonite churches in urban areas around the United States.

Following World War II, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) began sending service workers around the world. Many of these workers saw the negative impact of US militarism and imperialism and began seeking ways to work for peace and justice more widely in the world. Many Mennonites in the United States were deeply impacted by the Civil Rights Movement and the peace movement to end the war in Vietnam. The MCC peace section was one important place for these conversations. It began as advocacy for conscientious objectors but grew into wider advocacy opposing war and promoting peace and justice in US foreign policy, including in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup>

From World War II into the 1960s, an emergent vision about active Mennonite engagement in world affairs gained momentum. MCC opened an office in Washington, DC, in 1968 to work on policy issues “after a decade of study and discernment concerning Mennonite witness to government.”<sup>23</sup> A similar office opened in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada in 1974.

The 1960s saw tensions come to a head regarding competing visions about how Mennonites ought to be in the world. Vincent Harding, a collaborator of Martin Luther King, Jr., sought to move the Mennonite Church from quietism to active engagement in contemporary social justice struggles. At the Mennonite World Conference in 1967 he challenged Mennonites to listen closely to the revolutionary movements around the world: “We [Mennonites] usually have no hesitation about seeking justice for ourselves . . . what do we have to say to others

---

21 Louise Stoltzfus, *As Long as Grass Grows and Water Flows: The Story of Philhaven* (Mt. Gretna, PA: Philhaven, 2002).

22 Harold S. Bender and Urbane Peachey, “Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1987, accessed October 30, 2024, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite\\_Central\\_Committee\\_Peace\\_Section&oldid=163120](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Central_Committee_Peace_Section&oldid=163120).

23 See “Historical Note” at [https://archives.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/resources/scpc-cdg-a-mennonite\\_central\\_committee](https://archives.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/resources/scpc-cdg-a-mennonite_central_committee).

who seek justice? How shall our ‘peace witness’ be valid if it refers only to their quest for justice and not ours?”<sup>24</sup>

Harding exhorted Mennonites to be a “front light”—instead of a “rear light”—on pressing social struggles like the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and global movements for liberation (against imperialism and colonialism). While finding many allies to his vision within the Mennonite church, he was repeatedly met with institutional resistance from MCC and other Mennonite institutions at the time.<sup>25</sup> Drawing attention to how white American Mennonites benefit from a white supremacist social order and first-world Mennonites benefit from US imperialism, Harding argued that Mennonite attempts to stay above the fray were dishonest and self-serving. What was needed, he advocated, was for us to take responsibility for our place in the world, and specifically to take action on the side of the oppressed.

Vincent Harding’s conversation with Mennonite institutional leaders was a microcosm of a wider conversation between Mennonites who were increasingly asking questions about justice and those committed to an understanding of nonresistance that separated them from the world. Continually frustrated by Mennonite leadership, Harding ultimately moved away from active involvement with the Mennonite church and continued his commitment to justice through other avenues, including by working more closely with the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>26</sup> In 1966 he summarized black colleagues who were asking him, “Are you going to stay with those nice white Mennonites, Anabaptists, Christians? Are any of them going to join the fight, Vince? Where do they stand, Vince? Where do they stand?”<sup>27</sup>

---

24 Vincent Harding, “The Peace Witness and Modern Revolutionary Movements,” in *The Witness of the Holy Spirit: Proceedings of the Eighth Mennonite World Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, July 23–30, 1967*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite World Conference, 1967), 341–42.

25 Sarah Kehrberg, “From Fort Peachtree to Atlanta: The Mennonite Story,” *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee, accessed October 30, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080530214616/http://www.mcusa-archives.org/mhb/Kehrberg-Atlanta.html>.

26 It may not be possible to neatly disentangle Harding’s disagreements and frustrations with Mennonite leadership from his own personal struggles in accounting for the process of his break from specific Mennonite institutions. His departure from MCC coincided with, and may have also been related to his public confession of, marital infidelity. At the time, he stepped back from public roles and a heavy travel schedule in order to focus on healing his marriage. Tobin Miller Shearer gives more attention to this period of Harding’s life in his forthcoming biography of Harding.

27 Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 126.

Harding wrote Dr. King's famous "Beyond Vietnam" speech.<sup>28</sup> He might have played an important decades-long role in leading Mennonites' emerging work for peace and justice. His departure was a huge loss for the Mennonite church, even as he continued to see his work as Anabaptist-rooted for the rest of his life.<sup>29</sup>

But Vincent Harding was also something of a prophet, pointing in a direction that other Mennonites would continue to follow, and to push.<sup>30</sup>

From 1968 to 1973, the Minority Ministries Council was a group of black and brown men who worked to explicitly challenge white supremacy in the (Old) Mennonite Church (one of the two precursor denominations to Mennonite Church USA).<sup>31</sup> In 1976 gay and lesbian Mennonites who had been forced out of the church founded Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT interests to advocate for inclusion within the Mennonite Church. In the 1980s, Mennonites, peace Catholics, and other peace church folks founded Community Peacemaker Teams as part of an effort to more deeply explore creative nonviolent direct action as a tool for working for peace and justice around the world. This movement was also connected to the anti-nuclear movement of that era. In 1995 Regina Shands Stoltzfus and Tobin Miller Shearer, anti-racist educators within MCC, founded Damascus Road (which later became Roots of Justice) as a program for deepening the racial justice work of Mennonites within their majority white organizations.

These and other efforts were part of a developing understanding of Mennonite practices that took into account power imbalances within our communities and institutions, and our place and responsibility to act in the wider world.

## Toward a Public Political Turn

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the stream of transformational Mennonite political engagement has continued to widen and flow more forcefully.

In 2009, a younger generation of queer Mennonites organized ahead of the Mennonite Church USA convention in Columbus, Ohio, to encourage queer

---

28 Steve Chawkins, "Vincent Harding Dies at 82; Historian Wrote Controversial King Speech," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-vincent-harding-20140524-story.html>.

29 Shenk, *The Movement Makes Us Human*, 48.

30 Tobin Miller Shearer, "Moving Beyond Charisma in Civil Rights Scholarship: Vincent Harding's Sojourn with the Mennonites, 1958–1966," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82, no. 2 (2008): 213–48; Tobin Miller Shearer, "A Prophet Pushed Out: Vincent Harding and the Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* 69 (2015), <https://mla.bethelks.edu/ml-archive/2015/a-prophet-pushed-out-vincent-harding-and-the-menno.php>.

31 Mennonite scholar Felipe Hinojosa covers the work of the council in depth in *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

Mennonites and allies to wear pink. They used hymn sings to joyously claim their space in this Mennonite gathering and in the church.

In 2014, the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery was created by three Mennonite women: one Indigenous organizer and two Mennonite pastors. This coalition focuses on challenging laws and policies, calling congregations and Christian denominations to join Indigenous-led movements for liberation, and resourcing Christian congregations and denominations with materials designed to change popular culture.

In addition to influencing national and international policies, the coalition has built a network of congregations focused on seeking repair with Indigenous communities at the community level. Familiarity with decolonization and environmental justice at the denominational level has deepened within Mennonite Church USA congregations over the past decade as a result of the coalition. While MC USA, MCC US, MCC Canada, and Mennonite Mission Network have partnered at various times with coalition activities, the coalition has intentionally remained independent of institutional church structures. It sees itself as a messenger, sounding a clarion call to the Christian church, beginning with the Mennonite church. While the coalition was created in the Anabaptist context, over its first decade it has grown to include multiple Christian denominations and traditions, building networks within them and encouraging Episcopalians and Methodists to engage in Indigenous liberation. Harnessing denominational identity has been a key strategy of the coalition.

Through all these efforts, there has been something of a dance of movements on the edges of the church, pushing Mennonite institutions to better embody Jesus's heart for the marginalized and oppressed. Some of those doing the "pushing" have wondered where to go next. Even in sympathetic congregations, it often feels like social justice is relegated to a small peace and justice committee or the congregation's one or two "usual suspect" activists. How might we give work for justice a more central role in our congregations?

With this challenge in mind, the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery's network of Repair Congregations seeks to engage *everyone* in working for justice for Indigenous peoples in a variety of ways: accompaniment, structural change, and cultural change. The coalition engages congregational budgets as well, challenging congregations to include reparations in their financial planning. Congregational budgets are moral documents, after all, which express congregational values. This model built upon the Supportive Congregation Network organized by Brethren Mennonite Council on LGBT interests to work for same-sex marriage and LGBTQ inclusion more broadly.

This is the historical backdrop that has led up to the current moment and the new movement, Mennonite Action, which has intentionally sought to create more opportunities for Mennonites to show up together in the public sphere *as Mennonites*. Thousands of Mennonites have participated in this movement,

bringing their voices and energy into a larger movement for peace and justice in Palestine and Israel and against genocide and colonization everywhere in the world.

Mennonite Action didn't have to invent its approach from scratch. The Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery has been holding events in the public sphere for a decade, calling on Mennonites to march and caravan with Indigenous land and water protectors, engage in public vigils, and write and negotiate with legislators in groups large and small. The coalition engaged in its first national legislative campaigns in 2015, mobilizing Mennonite delegations to visit US senators, the State Department, and the US Treasury with and on behalf of the Miskitu People of Nicaragua, resulting in the Nicaraguan Human Rights and Anticorruption Act of 2018.

The coalition further organized congregations across the nation in dozens of public demonstrations to uphold the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA),<sup>32</sup> culminating in a delegation that was present at the court when the landmark Brackeen case was heard. ICWA was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2023, the announcement of which was celebrated in Mennonite congregations across the nation. In addition to sending Mennonite delegations to the United Nations in New York and Geneva, the G20, and other global forums, the coalition has also sent multiple Mennonite delegations to Mexico to bridge the relationship between Mennonite colonists and Indigenous communities impacted by the environmental degradation caused by Mennonite colonists' farming practices.

The urgency of the unfolding genocide in Palestine has been something of a whirlwind moment<sup>33</sup> that has provided an opportunity for Mennonite Action to use similar strategies and tactics to organize thousands of Mennonites in public actions very quickly. The movement stands on the shoulders of other Mennonite social justice efforts, and it seems to us that it also signals an important moment in a longer-term shift—one that is worth noticing and discussing.

---

32 The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) was passed in 1978. It strengthened the legal rights of Indigenous families and children. Up to that point, adoption had played a key role in continuing cultural genocide of Indigenous children, who were often taken from their parents and placed with settler families to be raised with no knowledge of their traditional lifeways, language, or cosmology. In 2017 Chad and Jennifer Brackeen, a white evangelical couple, sued the federal government after a Navajo boy they had fostered and hoped to adopt was instead placed with a Navajo family. In 2018 a federal judge in the case ruled ICWA was unconstitutional, threatening the forty-three-year-old law. For more on efforts by the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery to stop ICWA from being overturned, see Sarah Augustine, "These Students Prove I Am Not Alone," *Anabaptist World* (June 11, 2023), <https://anabaptistworld.org/these-students-prove-i-am-not-alone/>.

33 Mark Engler and Paul Engler use this term "whirlwind moment" to describe moments when mass protests change "the political weather." *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016).

The tactics of attending protests, meeting with elected representatives, and writing letters to the editor, to name a few, may not be new to many Mennonite Action participants. But the way that Mennonite Action articulates doing those things *as a Mennonite collective* feels relevant and noteworthy. Providing a way for more Mennonites to take collective action visibly and vocally alongside fellow Mennonites as an extension of their faith tradition has resulted in the activation of many new participants. For a significant portion of Mennonite Action participants, this is their first time attending any kind of protest or being involved in a social movement.

Their participation is opening up all kinds of questions—for themselves and their fellow congregants—about how we understand being Mennonite in relation to public political engagement. How do we understand our history and theology in relation to notions of social responsibility and citizenship? How do we understand our faith as challenging genocide, colonization, and injustice in our own communities? How do we understand the long streams in our history of quietism, on the one hand, and transformational political engagement on the other? And can we somehow reconcile them? Many versions of these questions have been alive in Mennonite Action trainings, meetings, events, and online message boards. We hope that this essay can contribute to forging new understandings.

## To Not Be Silent, to Shape the Future

None can stop the Spirit burning now inside us. We will shape the future.  
We will not be silent.<sup>34</sup>

There are myriad reasons why, for much of our history, Mennonites have attempted to stay on the sidelines of politics and world affairs. Here in our conclusion we wish to name and recap a few of these reasons and to respond to them.

### Mennonite Quietism #1: Economics and Self-Preservation

One reason for Mennonite quietism, emphasized by Vincent Harding, boils down to economics and self-preservation: Mennonite emigrants from Europe and their descendants benefited bountifully from the colonial order in early America. In short, white Mennonites have been privileged by a white supremacist social

---

34 Mahler, “How Can We Be Silent,” Refrain.



system.<sup>35</sup> Harding called this the “shield of whiteness.”<sup>36</sup> First-world Mennonites have derived material benefit from US global dominance. In each case, it has been safer and more convenient to not meddle in a situation that was working well enough for us. And it’s easy to see how the notion of “nonresistance” could be employed to lend theological justification to what was really just taking the path of least resistance (i.e., a copout).

However, it would be a mistake to reduce Mennonite quietism to a fully conscious and calculated strategy for self-preservation. Without trying to justify the complicity of our forebears, it is worth trying to understand them, their lives, and how they understood and navigated the wider world. The aforementioned hand-to-the-plough mentality was hardly an elective choice. Early Mennonites were escaping persecution and trying to survive and get by. They didn’t have access to the level of information and education we have now, let alone the political agency and rights we take for granted. And this is central to our point: With the more abundant information, education, and historical hindsight we now have at our disposal, as well as with the power and privileges we now possess, comes a greater responsibility. While early Anabaptist and Mennonite theology and practice was forged in a historical context where movement participants were *political subjects*, today most of us are *citizens*. Even if this has been the case for a considerable period of time, we are still wrestling with how to “update” our theology and practice to fit our contemporary political context.

## Mennonite Quietism #2: Conflict Avoidance and Enemy Avoidance

Another reason for contemporary Mennonite quietism that we want to name operates more at the dispositional, psychological, and group-culture levels—our desire to *avoid conflict*. Our culture of conflict avoidance overlaps with our desire to avoid having enemies. It’s important to remember that Jesus didn’t call us to not *have* enemies. He called us to *love* them. In her book *How to Have an Enemy*, Mennonite Pastor Melissa Florer Bixler points out that Mennonite calls for unity often come at the expense of the marginalized. In telling us to love our enemy, Jesus was clear about who his enemy was—the oppressive religious and political establishment who ground the poor into the dust. Florer Bixler says that “enemy love offers to tear apart broken systems and rebuild a world with an imaginative architecture that emerges from lives stayed on liberating love.”<sup>37</sup>

---

35 Vincent Harding, “The Christian and the Race Question,” *Gospel Herald* 56, no. 31 (August 6, 1963): 669–71; Vincent Harding, “Reflections on a Visit to Virginia,” *Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section* (Harrisonburg, VA: November 9, 1962), AMC-IX-7-12, #2 Box 6, entitled “Race Relations 1955–70.”

36 Shenk, *The Movement Makes Us Human*, 48.

37 Melissa Florer-Bixler, *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2021), 98–99.

Conflict avoidance and enemy avoidance often pass for peacemaking, in spite of Christ's example as a disruptor. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword," Jesus said. "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother."<sup>38</sup> Pleas for peace often cover an impulse to side with the powerful and the status quo. Martin Luther King, Jr. understood this very well when he said, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice." In this spirit, the Black Lives Matter track of the 2017 Hope for the Future gathering (an annual gathering of Mennonite Black, Indigenous, and People of Color leaders) laid out a new definition of a peace church:

A peace church recognizes the *imago dei* in all humanity. It not only prays, it takes action. A peace church responds to violence inside and outside its doors. A peace church stands with Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, LGBTQ people, immigrants and against all forms of violence. A peace church empowers disenfranchised and marginalized people. It understands multi-faceted forms of violence—systemic, educational and environmental. It is more than the absence of war or the protesting of war.<sup>39</sup>

As authors involved in organizing both with Mennonite Action and the Coalition to Dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery, we honor the many Mennonites who have stood up for justice and the marginalized over the course of Mennonite history. We also recognize a long history of Mennonite complicity in genocide and social injustices. We believe that the path to a real reckoning with our history is forged by the action we take now.

### Mennonite Quietism #3: Wait for a Better Time

With the current genocide unfolding in Gaza, there are once again voices advocating that we stay on the sidelines, while other voices urge us to wait, to show wisdom by not giving in to urgency. Taking a side in a messy conflict is fraught with potential problems and pitfalls. What right do we have to insert ourselves into "someone else's fight"? If Mennonites have been complicit with antisemitism, shouldn't we first reckon with that part of our history before criticizing Israel? Perhaps the best course of action is to organize a study group, or host a forum that features both Palestinian and Israeli perspectives?"

Similarly, white allies sometimes misinterpret the stance of Indigenous leaders who refuse to be pressured by those allies demanding immediate action without Indigenous leadership. Indigenous people who appear to be de-stressing urgency

---

38 Matthew 10:34–35a, NRSVUE.

39 Tim Nafziger, "Treating the Illness of Trumpism and Ending White Silence," *Anabaptist World*, June 23, 2017, <https://anabaptistworld.org/treating-illness-trumpism-ending-white-silence/>.

may, in fact, be resisting white allies taking over an Indigenous-led movement. These allies then draw the conclusion that “Indigenous leaders do not give in to urgency so we, too, should wait for a better time, when all of us are ready, before taking action.”

We do not wish to be dismissive about valid questions and concerns. Indeed, we believe we have not only a responsibility to engage visibly and vocally on the issues of our day but also a further responsibility to do everything we can to make sure our actions are as effective as possible, and to minimize unintended harmful impacts. However, raising genuine concerns in order to better inform, strengthen, and improve our collective action is very different from raising concerns in order to slow down or stop action. As Dr. King urges us, justice deferred is justice denied.

### Compelled to Act: Being a Front Light

The unfolding genocide in Gaza is not the same as the genocide against Indigenous peoples across North America; these are distinct historical situations, involving different actors, oppressors, victims, and harms. But two important things they share in common are that (1) unspeakable horrors are being carried out in an asymmetrical conflict, and (2) the oppressor is acting in our name, with our tax dollars, ostensibly to protect a political order that we are embedded within and benefit from. Looking back at Mennonite inaction concerning genocide and settler colonialism on this continent, many of us feel shame, wishing our forebears had done something. How will our descendants look back on Mennonite action or inaction in this moment?

In his July 1967 address to Mennonite World Conference, Vincent Harding described Mennonites as “huddled behind the barricades of the status quo.” At a second address at the same gathering he said: “We cannot escape such questions by saying that we do not believe in violence when we participate in the violence of the status quo.”<sup>40</sup> Mennonites have wrestled with organizing for political power for a long time now. We believe it is possible to organize as Mennonites in solidarity with those most impacted by the triplets of militarism, poverty, and racism that Harding and King pointed us to in King’s “Beyond Vietnam” address at Riverside Church in 1967. Working publicly for social justice is not something

---

40 Vincent Harding, “The Beggars Are Marching . . . Where Are the Saints?,” in *The Witness of the Holy Spirit: Proceedings of the Eighth Mennonite World Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, July 23–30, 1967*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck, (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite World Conference, 1967), 128–29; Joanna L. Shenk, “Beggars & Saints: What Needs to Be Burned Away So That We Can Hear Vincent Harding’s Enduring Call to Revolutionary Nonviolence?,” *Anabaptist World*, February 12, 2021, <https://anabaptistworld.org/beggars-saints/>.

separate from our Christian faith and our Mennonite theology, traditions, and history. For us, it flows from these sources, like an ever-flowing stream.

Thus, we are compelled to act—to make the future, and to heal the past. We are compelled to stand with land and water protectors, defending Mother Earth and her sacred waters. We are compelled to challenge settler colonialism in all its manifestations, both here on this continent and around the world.

In this particular moment, we are compelled to act publicly, to add our Mennonite voice to the larger global chorus calling for an immediate ceasefire and a just peace in Palestine-Israel. There are no words to describe what we feel seeing the images—daily—of dead children and grieving mothers and fathers, and hearing the horror stories from our friends and associates in Gaza, knowing that these horrors are wrought with weapons supplied by our government and our tax dollars. We must act. To refrain from action is to side with the status quo, which is to side with the powerful—precisely the complicity that Vincent Harding prophetically warned Mennonites against.

Today we have new opportunities to take meaningful public action on the side of the oppressed and to do so visibly as Mennonites. We grasp that we cannot fix all the world's problems on our own. But, like Harding before us, we want the church to show up for the struggle, to be a front light.