# A Mennonite anarchist

## Mark Van Steenwyk's journey to radical Christian community

Mark Van Steenwyk

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**Did you grow up with a Christian identity? What were formative childhood experiences related to faith?**

My family was functionally irreligious in my childhood. I'd visit Sunday schools from time to time, but it wasn't until my early teens that I began to explore Christianity. A particular formative spiritual experience happened when I was 14 and attending a Bible camp in rural Minnesota.

Camp Joy had a campfire the final evening, right after the talent show. As the campfire blazed, a counselor led us in songs, and between them campers were encouraged to share testimonies. On this particular evening in the summer of 1990, most of the stories were depressing. Everyone shared melancholy stories of death and disappointment, of loss and regret.

In the midst of it all, I suddenly felt overwhelmed with a feeling that I had never before experienced. It was as though their pain was my pain. I felt connected to the suffering of the other campers and, even more confusing, to the suffering of the world. Nothing in my life had prepared me for that experience. It wasn't merely a feeling of empathy—it felt cosmic. It didn't feel abstract either; I felt as though I could feel the woundedness of the world. And the most painful part of that experience was that I knew, deep in my being, that I was a part of that. I was broken and incomplete. And I sobbed.

Sobbing isn't the sort of thing a 14-year-old is supposed to do in front of peers. My camp counselor noticed my tears. He took me aside. He handed me a handkerchief, and asked me, "Would you like to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?"

I didn't know what that had to do with what I was experiencing but assumed he knew more about these things than I did. I said yes. He then led me through the "sinner's prayer."

Looking back, I regret saying yes. While I love Jesus and affirm the spiritual nature of that campfire experience, I don't believe what I was experiencing can be described as "being convicted of sin." It was different—something that required discernment. However, the end result was that my mystical experience was pushed and shaped into the easy template afforded by evangelicalism.

**How were you taught to think about your identity as a Christian after that experience?**

Well, when I returned from camp, I was given a Bible. I was told to start reading in the Gospels. Since I was a bookish kid, I dove in. I read through the entire New Testament.

The strange thing is that I immediately came to a radical conclusion from the Gospels: that killing and hating and acquiring wealth were counter to the gospel.

I didn't know my conclusions were out of step with my fundamentalist charismatic congregation until one morning in Sunday school, when I offered to pray for the vets in our congregation—that God would forgive them for the killing they had done in the war.

And, shortly after that, I rebuked a youth worker who came to church driving a brand new, cherry-red Corvette. My rebuke was certainly lacking in charity, but I still think it was fair to critique the purchase, particularly because Becker County is a relatively impoverished place.

The response to all these early radical impulses was basically exorcism. Oh, they didn't call it that—they called it "deliverance." For several hours, I had the spirits of poverty and rebellion "cast out" of me. My radical instincts were cast out of me like demons. And so I became a good conservative charismatic youth.

**As you got older, did the spirits of "poverty and rebellion" return, leading to a faith crisis at some point?**

Yes. It was a combination of things that hit all at the same time of my life. Right around the year 2000, I started studying church history. I was overwhelmed by the corruption and violence found in so much of it. Around that time, I was considering seminary and enlisting with the Air Force with the intention of becoming a chaplain.

I started asking, Am I personally OK with killing? It was still an open question when 9/11 happened. I saw the Christian community capitulate to the will of a government bent on war. And I had been an adamant supporter of George W. Bush. But for some reason, it seemed obvious that the government was telling lies to justify war. Here I was, a Bush supporter, seeing obvious lies, while the church in America called for bloodshed.

All this pushed me toward pacifism. I began to realize, at the same time, that I didn't have any theological use for Jesus besides his sacrificial death. I began to question everything, which led me to re-engage the teachings of Jesus. I became convinced that what he said and taught should be at the center of my faith.

**What led up to you starting an intentional community in Minneapolis? What kinds of challenges did you face as a leader?**

In 2005, Amy, my spouse, and I formed Missio Dei (we recently changed our name to The Mennonite Worker) with a simple premise; we would simply read the Gospels and ask three questions: (1) What is Jesus saying or doing in this passage? (2) What excuses are stirring in our minds as a way of justifying why we shouldn't do likewise? (3) What is at least one thing we can do to walk in the direction of what Jesus is saying or doing?

These questions eventually led us into becoming an intentional community that centered its life around the practice of hospitality. The approach was largely experimental; there were no preset notions of what it should look like to follow the way of Jesus. Now, this was a messy process. We didn't start as an intentional community but as a "hip" urban church. And we were doing fairly well with that. However, as our church slowly grew, it was comprised primarily of commuters. Only a handful of us lived in the neighborhood.

About a year into things, I scrapped it all and started over. This was a difficult decision. It appeared so foolish; why scrap what could be a successful church plant in order to start over? The only folks who continued on with us were ones receiving hospitality at our house and a couple friends.

**Were you finding support for your community from other Christian groups as this shift was happening?**

No. Before the "shift," we were affiliated with the Baptist General Conference. Nobody there supported us becoming an intentional community. And we simply didn't know any groups out there who were exploring the same radical ideals we were.

**When did you first hear about Mennonites?**

I knew Mennonites in high school. And, interestingly enough, the pastor of the church I attended in my teens was a Mennonite who had been kicked out of his church in the wake of the charismatic movement. I was rebaptized by a charismatic Mennonite. I like to tell Mennonites that this fact makes me technically more "anabaptist" than anyone I know.

For most of my life, Mennonites were just a group of old-fashioned Christians with strange beliefs. They lived, for the most part, in history.

As my community began to feel isolated, and I felt alone as a leader, I reached out. At this point in my life—about six years ago—I knew there were Mennonites out there who were keeping the Anabaptist spirit alive. I was familiar with Christian Peacemaker Teams and had read The Politics of Jesus. I went to the Mennonite Church USA website, found out there were Mennonite churches in the Twin Cities and sent off an email. That's how it started.

**What compelled your community to seek relationship with Mennonites?**

I initiated it, but my community was on board. At first, there were a few folks resistant to the idea of joining a denomination. We tend toward anti-institutionalism. But for me, it hasn't been about joining a denomination but about placing ourselves within a tradition in which to practice mutual submission.

**What's been life-giving about connecting to Mennonites? What's been demoralizing?**

It's always amazed me how quickly Mennonites get what we're about. It can't be overstated how much this helps our sanity. When we first shifted into an intentional community, I remember trying to explain the shift to some pastors I know. After an hour, they still couldn't wrap their minds around it. The majority of Mennonites I've met understand the gist of The Mennonite Worker in just five minutes. Ethics—how we live out the life of Jesus in our world today—is at the center of what it means to be a Mennonite. That is huge. Many Mennonites share our commitment to active peacemaking; almost all of them respect our commitment to hospitality.

We enjoy our relationships with other Mennonite churches in our area. Faith Mennonite has let us use their facilities for events. We've had friends from Washington Mennonite Church in Iowa teach us how to can food. We get visitors from various Mennonite communities who want to get to know us; we love visitors.

But there have been some demoralizing pieces as well. I've met folks who have been Mennonites for decades who still feel like outsiders. We welcome folks with our words but often push them away with our actions and cultural hang-ups. To be a Mennonite, for me, means accepting the reality that I'll never be as Mennonite as other people. I can handle it because as an educated white man with Dutch ancestry, it isn't a huge cultural leap for me to bridge. And since I get invited to speak at Mennonite gatherings, I have access. But it is discouraging to me that some of the members of my community will always be on the outside of the Mennonite world.

I find it challenging trying to talk about economics with Mennonite folks. We confuse frugality with living simply. To me, living simply in the way of Jesus is about living with our basic needs met so that we can share the abundance of God with others. It's about challenging eco-

nomic injustices and living into the Jubilee. Many Mennonites don't see how their commitment to peacemaking is at odds with their acceptance of capitalism, wealth and privilege.

**What led you to change your name?**

When we started Missio Dei in 2003, we were a hip urban church with a cool Latin name. And the theological concept of "Missio Dei"—God's mission—was important to me.

Over the past eight years, we've found ourselves walking within two traditions. In addition to Mennonites, we've rubbed shoulders with Catholic Workers. We've discovered that while our theological convictions often line up with our Mennonite siblings, our politics and our practices look like the Catholic Worker movement.

Since Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin sparked the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s, communities have centered their lives around housing the homeless and feeding the hungry in ways that are direct and personal. Workers live with the folks who receive hospitality. Catholic Workers often embrace an anarchism—trying to tackle injustice directly, show compassion directly, build justice directly.

**What values or commitments guide your community? How were they chosen?**

We are committed to following Jesus' way of simplicity (seeking a sustainable life with a healthy relationship to possessions), hospitality (inviting friends and strangers to share life together), prayer (being rooted in life-giving spiritual rhythms), peace (breaking our addiction to power as we get in the way of violence and injustice) and resistance (naming and challenging oppression wherever we find it as we seek to embody an alternative).

We chose all these by consensus. Hospitality is our "mother value"—it shapes and informs the other values. And communal discernment is the practice that animates all our values.

**How many people live in your community, and how many houses do you have? Describe the rhythm of your life together.**

We have about 20 people living between two households: Clare House and Sattler House. We are a mix of members (folks who have been around at least a year and formally discerned to commit to our way of life indefinitely), long-term residents and guests. There are also six chickens. The youngest person in one of our houses, Clarence, is 9 months old. The oldest participant is Martin. He's in his 60s and has afflicted us with his penchant for puns.

We have several community meals through the week. On Saturday mornings we gather for communal discernment. It's been difficult to cultivate, but more than any other practice it has helped me learn submission and truthtelling.

On Sunday nights we gather at our Oratory–a place of prayer and worship in the space above the garage at Clare House. Our worship is a mix of singing, a short personal reflection or sermon, a healthy dose of Quaker-style silence and prayer. After our time of worship, we go downstairs and gather around the table for an Agape meal.

**In addition to community life, you do speaking and writing. Recently you've authored a book called That Holy Anarchist: Reflections on Christianity and Anarchism (see box below). What was the impetus for that book?**

For the past few years, I've given the seminar on Christian anarchism at the annual Jesus Radicals conference. I wanted to have an introduction to the subject in writing. It's hard to be a Christian anarchist. Most Christians don't think it's appropriate to be an anarchist, and most anarchists are atheists. Yet I believe the two can learn a lot from each other.

Anarchists seek to reject or undermine forms of static authority in human relations, recognizing the many forms of oppression (class, race, gender, species) that make up a system of domination.

I am an anarchist because I believe our world works best when we live with a mutuality—when we care for each other and the land without a few people ruling over the rest. I'm a Christian because I believe Jesus shows us a way to do that, and I believe this way is rooted in the source of all life. To me, to be a Christian anarchist is the logical conclusion of taking Jesus seriously when he calls us to love God and neighbor.

**Was there a time in your life when the word "anarchism" would have been jarring for you? How did that change?**

Certainly. But even after embracing what I now know to be anarchist views, I would have reacted to the word. When someone said "anarchist," my brain envisioned someone dressed in black angrily throwing bricks through windows. And there are anarchists who do that.

That changed as I read radical history. The first Anabaptists were, in many ways, revolutionaries. Most were nonviolent, but some were violent. The same is true for the liberation movements around the world. Anarchists are as complex and diverse as the early Anabaptists. And one of the fathers of anarchism, Peter Kropotkin, wrote that anarchism has its roots in the Anabaptist movement.

**How do you see Mennonite faith connected to anarchism?**

Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God has anti-domination, anarchic implications; it also assumes that only by nurturing practices centered on the presence of the living Christ can we move from domination to nondomination, from death to life, from oppression to liberation and from alienation to love.

Mennonites have a rich history of creating small communities that do the "Jesus stuff" directly without outsourcing it. I am a Christian and an anarchist because I believe Christianity can teach anarchists about love, spirituality, forgiveness and grace. And because anarchists can remind Christians of the radical political and economic implications of the way of Jesus.

If we care about homelessness, then rather than simply voting for a progressive candidate or complaining against the wealthy, we should offer someone our guest room or couch. We should become friends with folks who are homeless.

**What gifts do you think the Mennonite tradition has to offer Christians today?**

In a society grappling with economic fallout and inhospitality, Mennonites can teach about our practices of mutual aid and hospitality. Mennonites have theology and history that can help other Christians who are questioning the war machine and social injustices but lack the theology or the ecclesiology to go deeper. We have to share our success and our failures and find a way to support others engaging in a similar struggle.

Folks are emerging into convictions that are similar to Anabaptism. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, and we have an obligation to help them embrace the call of Jesus Christ to live more fully into the kingdom of God. And we should do that without trying to absorb them into our particular Mennonite story.

**What's next for The Mennonite Worker?**

We are raising funds for the purchase of a new hospitality house. We will be looking for a building with at least eight bedrooms and 3,200 square feet. We intend to name the new house Simone Weil House, after the French mystic, philosopher and activist. We've raised about $60,000 so far.

Simone Weil House will provide much-needed space for new guests and interns. The house will host several open meals a week and provide additional garden (and chicken) space.

The building serves not only as a hospitality house but also as home to the Gene Stoltzfus Center for Creative Peacemaking. (Gene was director of Christian Peacemaker Teams from its founding until 2004. He passed away in 2010).

After the new house is established, we'll look at acquiring land for a rural sister community—to provide not only a place for us to grow food for our urban households but to live more into practices of environmental sustainability.

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Mark Van Steenwyk, originally from Becker County, Minn., lives in Minneapolis with The Mennonite Worker community. The Mennonite Worker (formerly Missio Dei) has been affiliated with Central Plains Mennonite Conference since 2007. I got to know Mark when I began working with Mennonite Church USA in 2009. Since then we have worked together on a variety of projects, including The Iconocast podcast and Widening the Circle: Experiments in Christian Discipleship, to which he contributed a chapter. In this interview I was interested to learn more about the journey that led Mark to become Mennonite. His testimony offers encouragement and challenge to Mennonites today.